



Helping Businesses Write:

Our guide to copywriting, writer's block
and the writing process

A writer is someone for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people. The best writers write much more slowly than everyone else, and the better they are, the slower they write.

- William Deresiewicz
(quoting novelist Thomas Mann)

Copywriting is an underrated skill in the business world, and we wanted to bring it to the fore, to sing about it. To acknowledge that copywriting isn't just down to the copywriters or content writers, but to the marketers, the sales people, and the business owners who can all have a hand in writing messaging, whether that is emails, social media posts or business proposals.

And we know it isn't always easy. Yet you look for advice on writing and the bulk of it is for people who are striving to be novelists, rarely relevant to the corporate world. But what about the marketing executive who struggles with writer's block? The copywriter who doesn't have the belief they can write about a topic? Or the sales person who's trying to write an out-reach email? This guide is for them.

Written by Carol Butler, our in-house Content Writer and writing enthusiast, this guide will help you take your copywriting to new levels. Filled with inspiring quotes it explores the following:

- **Why your business needs to take copywriting seriously**
- **How to make your writing stand out**
- **The four draft process**
- **Overcoming writer's block**
- **Books to improve your writing**



Carol Butler
Content Writer

What separates good content from great content is a willingness to take risks and push the envelope.

- Brian Halligan, CEO & Co-founder,
HubSpot

Why your business needs to take copywriting seriously

This is a plea to all organisations – please start taking copywriting seriously!

Why? Well, think of the brands or organisations you trust. The ones you get excited about. Think of the adverts, the emails, the social media posts that they put out there – what jumps to mind? Why do you like them?

Now think of ones you don't like. Social media posts that have rubbed you up the wrong way, or just don't make sense. Messaging or blogs that make it clear that they really don't understand who their audience is. What is it about them?

I'll hazard a guess: it comes down to the messaging. Maybe the words they use. The way they communicate.

That's the copy, and like it or not, copy represents your business. We always think of our visual brand as representing us, and it does, it draws the eye, but it's the copy that convinces us it's worthwhile (or not worthwhile, if they don't have it right). It's the copy that really sells. Hopefully, it's what builds trusts.

So, whether you like it or not, it is part of your brand. It helps you tell your story. It conveys the business's benefits, making sure to connect an audience with the solutions they need. It sets the tone for who you are, for what you are. It draws the reader in. Connects with them. Makes them think, feel and respond. It conveys how valuable your content is. It lets your audience understand that you understand them, that you're here for them. That you want to help them.

You get the picture. All in all, it can make or break your brand, so let's start taking it seriously. Let's make it stand out.

I really love language. I love it for what it does for us, how it allows us to explain the pain and the glory, the nuances and delicacies of our existence. And then it allows us to laugh, allows us to show wit... We need language.

- Maya Angelou

How to make your writing stand out

Copy encompasses anything and everything you write – emails, blogs, social media posts, call outs to potential customers, even internal messaging.

Everything you write needs to reflect your company's brand, values and messaging. If this all sounds like a big ask, don't worry, you don't have to be a natural writer; there are tweaks that can help make your writing stand out and work for you. Here are some things you can do.

Keep in mind your brand's tone of voice

Have a consistent tone of voice. This will differ from company to company (at Virtual College, for example, it's human, simple, smart and confident), but make sure that it's consistent across the business. Also make sure that everyone knows about it and are on the same page! There is nothing more jarring and off putting than seeing a smiley, cheery, friendly social post asking you to join a webinar and then receiving a cold, impersonal rejection email telling you it's full (believe me, I'm talking from personal experience). It comes across as disjointed, totally inauthentic and as if it had been written by two different people (it probably had). It shows a complete disconnect.

Demonstrate that you understand your audience

Show that you know who your audience is. Talk to them on their level. Acknowledge their challenges, fears, motivations. Your audience might consist of different personas, so make sure you tailor your messaging to the right persona. Don't just take a 'one size fits all' approach. This isn't only relevant when you're writing external communications, but needs to be considered when you're writing internal comms too.

Avoid jargon

You may know what your company's jargon and terminology means, but does your audience? Don't alienate them. This goes back to knowing your audience, so talk on their terms, at their level. If you're certain they'll know, then great. But if they don't? Then don't turn them off by boring them or drowning them in jargon. Introduce it later when you've got them hooked and when they'll have an idea of what you're referring to.

Draw on emotions

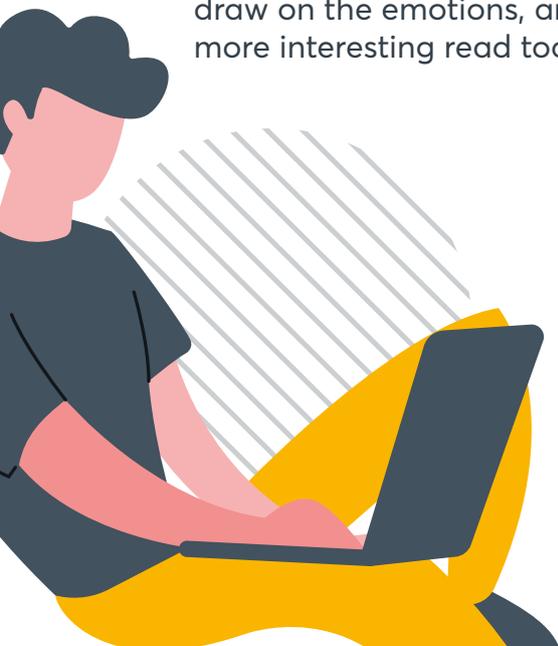
Emotions help people remember things. Make them smile. Acknowledge their fears, challenges and then show them how you can help. Be quirky, make them laugh. It'll help your message stick.

Tell a story

A story hooks the reader in, gives them something to relate to. It often puts the topic into perspective. Look at how I started off the section on why businesses should take copywriting seriously – I got the reader to think. I didn't just delve into why copy is important, I put it into context, presenting a scenario that the reader could understand and then used that to dive into the topic.

Going back to the previous point, stories also

draw on the emotions, and make it a more interesting read too.



Be human and authentic

Talk to them like the humans they are. Google now ranks pages on how 'human' web page copy is. Boring lists written for SEO purposes? Not needed anymore.

Think about sentence length

My personal favourite – vary your sentence length (and it's summed up perfectly in this [blog](#) about Amazon's leaked email template.) Varying sentence length makes a piece sing. It makes it flow. It takes the reader gently through the piece. Don't underestimate its power.

Hook them in from the beginning

It's the classic copywriting advice – get them to read the first line, and the next and the next. Hook them in from the beginning, it's the only chance you have to keep them reading.

Be bold. Be creative. Have fun.

Writing is your chance to be creative, to push the boundaries. Try something new. And have fun with it. If you aren't enjoying what you're writing, then your audience probably won't either.

Put the time in

Everyone always thinks that writing should take no time at all. But believe me, good copy will not be rattled off in a matter of minutes. It probably won't even be rattled off in one attempt. As the writing guru John McPhee says 'The way to do a good piece of writing is three or four times over, never once.' That takes time.

This is how you do it: you sit down at the keyboard and you put one word after another until it's done. It's that easy, and that hard.

- Neil Gaiman



Getting Writing Right: The 'four draft' process

"The way to do a piece of writing is three or four times over, never once."

John McPhee

Writing is daunting. This 'four draft' approach* demonstrates how you can break down the writing process, allowing you to develop your piece one step at a time.

*inspired by John McPhee's essay "Draft No. 4"



FIRST DRAFT

It's all about the **IDEAS**

Figure out:

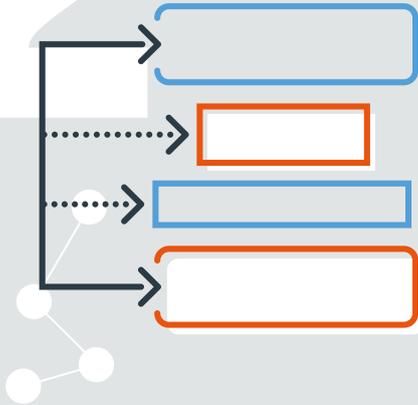
- what you want to write
- who you want to write for
- what the angle is

Don't worry about the words or writing style:

- Fling words down
- Write 'stream of consciousness' style
- Put it in a list

Put it to the side and leave it.
Let your mind mull it over.

2



SECOND DRAFT

It's all about the

STRUCTURE

Get it closer to what you're aiming for. Turn your thoughts into full sentences, then into paragraphs.

Figure out the narrative, the order, the flow.

Again, forget about the words, and write without concern.

THIRD DRAFT

It's all about the **WORDS**

Focus on the words. The flow of the piece. Do the sentences read well together? No? Add variety.

Make your piece sing.

Highlight words that could be improved. Phrases that don't ring true. Anything you think could be transformed.

Then transform them. Make it something you want people to see. **Read it again. Does it meet your aims?**



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FOURTH DRAFT

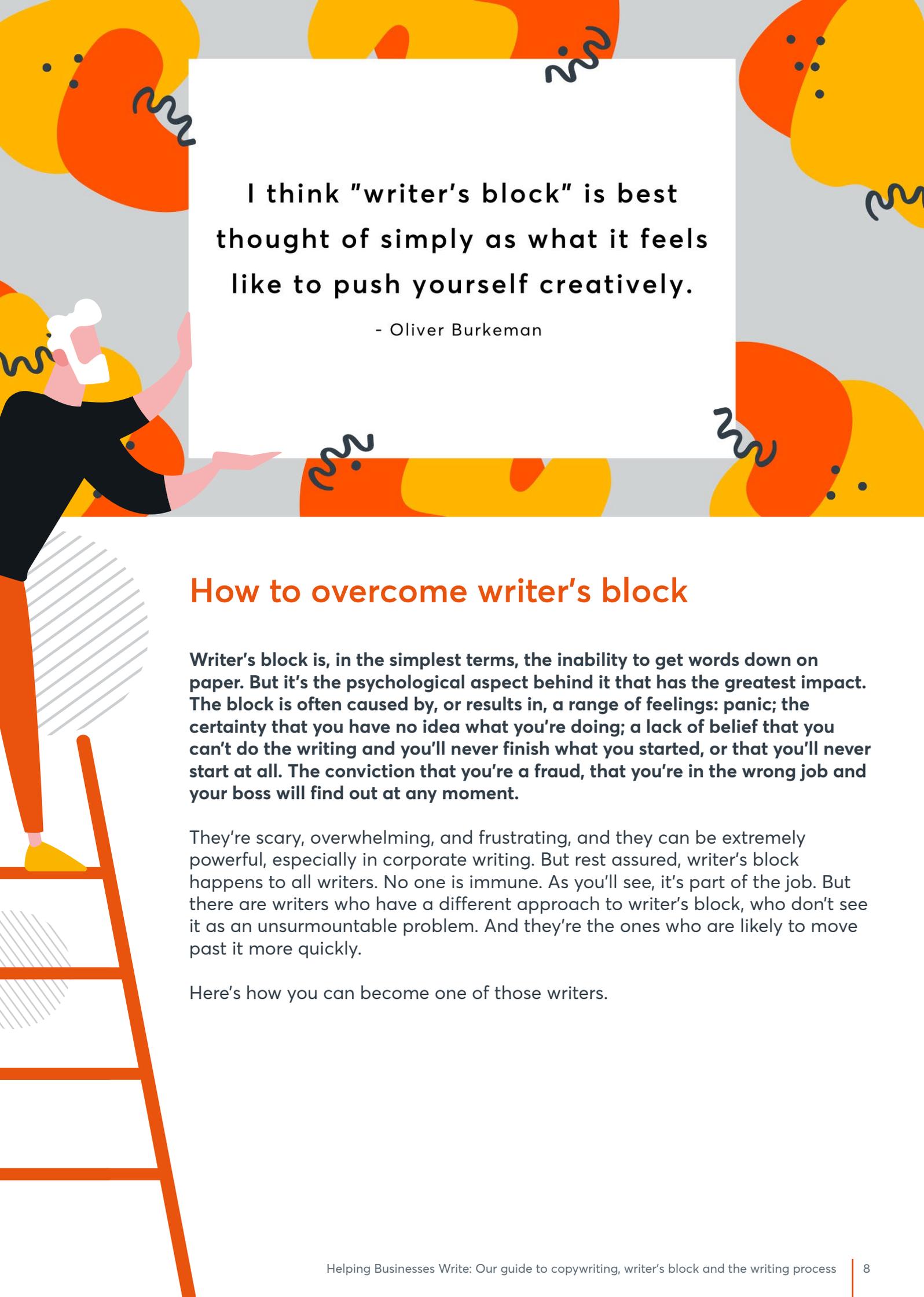
It's all about the **POLISH**

Give it one last read.

You have something that resembles what you're looking for. You like the way it sounds.

- But are there any typos?
- Is the grammar correct?
- Have you missed out any words?

In an ideal world, this draft is a **final check** before handing it over to someone else to proofread.



I think "writer's block" is best thought of simply as what it feels like to push yourself creatively.

- Oliver Burkeman

How to overcome writer's block

Writer's block is, in the simplest terms, the inability to get words down on paper. But it's the psychological aspect behind it that has the greatest impact. The block is often caused by, or results in, a range of feelings: panic; the certainty that you have no idea what you're doing; a lack of belief that you can't do the writing and you'll never finish what you started, or that you'll never start at all. The conviction that you're a fraud, that you're in the wrong job and your boss will find out at any moment.

They're scary, overwhelming, and frustrating, and they can be extremely powerful, especially in corporate writing. But rest assured, writer's block happens to all writers. No one is immune. As you'll see, it's part of the job. But there are writers who have a different approach to writer's block, who don't see it as an unsurmountable problem. And they're the ones who are likely to move past it more quickly.

Here's how you can become one of those writers.

What causes writer's block?

The first step to overcoming writer's block is to try and understand what lies behind it. What causes it. The reasons will vary from writer to writer and even from task to task, but here are some common ones:

- I'm not the expert, I don't know what I'm talking about.
- I'm bored.
- It's hard. I haven't got my head around the topic yet.
- I'm not really a writer. I have no idea what I'm doing.
- I'm afraid
- I'm a perfectionist
- I'm not in the mood, the inspiration hasn't hit yet.

Are any of these familiar? Yes? So, what can we do about it?

How to overcome writer's block

This is a misleading title, but I know it's what you want to hear. But let's be upfront, writer's block is always going to be there. It's part of the process. But, despite that, there are definitely ways to help ease it or move through it.

Do your research

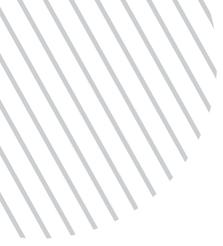
As we saw in the list, one of the main causes – and from talking to writers in the corporate world, it really is a significant one – is the belief that we don't know what we're talking about. And that belief might be correct! We can't write about things we don't know about. But that is where the research and brainstorming ideas comes in. Many people want to skip the research and just get straight in to writing, thinking they're not making progress unless they're actually writing. But it's in the research and brainstorm stage that it all happens. Do that thoroughly and you'll be well on your way.

Want some tips on research? Read this [fantastic blog](#).

Don't worry about the words (at least not to begin with)

We often start writing believing we should know exactly what to say and that every sentence should be perfect at the first attempt – or at least the second! This isn't the case. That's not how writing works. But doesn't knowing that give you a feeling of relief? It means you can now start writing without concern. You can focus on simply getting your thoughts and ideas out of your head and on to your paper or screen, and working on what ideas you're trying to get across. In the writing world, it's called 'the shitty first draft'.

It's only once you've done that should you start focusing on the words and sentence structure. Those 'spot-on' words and perfectly formed sentences will not come straightaway, so there's not point waiting for them to.



Accept that writing is boring (at times)

Another cause of writer's block is boredom. This is understandable as writing is boring at times, so we need to accept that. It's tedious. It's hard. It doesn't always go the way we want. It can feel like such a slog, which is uncomfortable and your body and mind can scream out to want to do anything but that (oh, hello, social media).

But this is all part of the creative process. And we need to learn how to deal with the discomfort, and recognise that the only way to get through it is to actually go through it. If we procrastinate and try and avoid these feelings, we're just kicking the problem further down the road.

Pick up some writing techniques

If you don't see yourself as a writer, or feel you have no idea what you're doing, there are lots of resources out there that can help you improve your technique, and give you a confidence boost. Whether it's online classes, books, blogs or webinars – the internet is filled with them! To name a couple, here is a blog I've written, and one book – pocket-sized and so easy to read – which I can't recommend highly enough: [100 Ways to Improve your Writing by Gary Provost.](#)

Just show up

Another cause is the lack of inspiration. But let's face it, we often don't have time to wait for inspiration to hit. So, try and use all the time you have. The writing won't always be great, but you just have to show up and do it. That's how you keep the work moving. You can always go back and improve something that is subpar, but you can't improve something that doesn't exist.

Break it down into manageable chunks

If the task is daunting or overwhelming, breaking it down into manageable chunks can be helpful. This is where the 'four draft process' is brilliant. It helps you see that writing is almost always made up of a number of tasks: brainstorming, researching, structuring, editing, polishing. So, instead of thinking 'I have an article to write', you take it one stage at a time. It's much easier.

But sometimes that isn't enough. Sometimes you may need to break your time down into manageable chunks – anything to get you writing. I often try this when I'm really tired or especially anxious about what I'm writing. It might be as small as 15, 20 or 25 minutes, but knowing you only have to write for a few minutes helps you focus, and you'll be surprised at what you can achieve. It'll be better than nothing anyway! When I do this, I always reward myself with a 5 minute break at the end before moving on to the next one, it's a nice motivator.

Take a break

Sometimes we just need to re-group, and taking a small break can help do that. But I think it's important to try and make it a meaningful break. That could be taking a short reading break, going for a short stroll, or reading some inspirational quotes. Maybe it's having a coffee break, or getting a snack, or simply taking a break from a screen. But a key point here is to prevent it from spiralling out of control. Set yourself a time limit and then go back to your work.

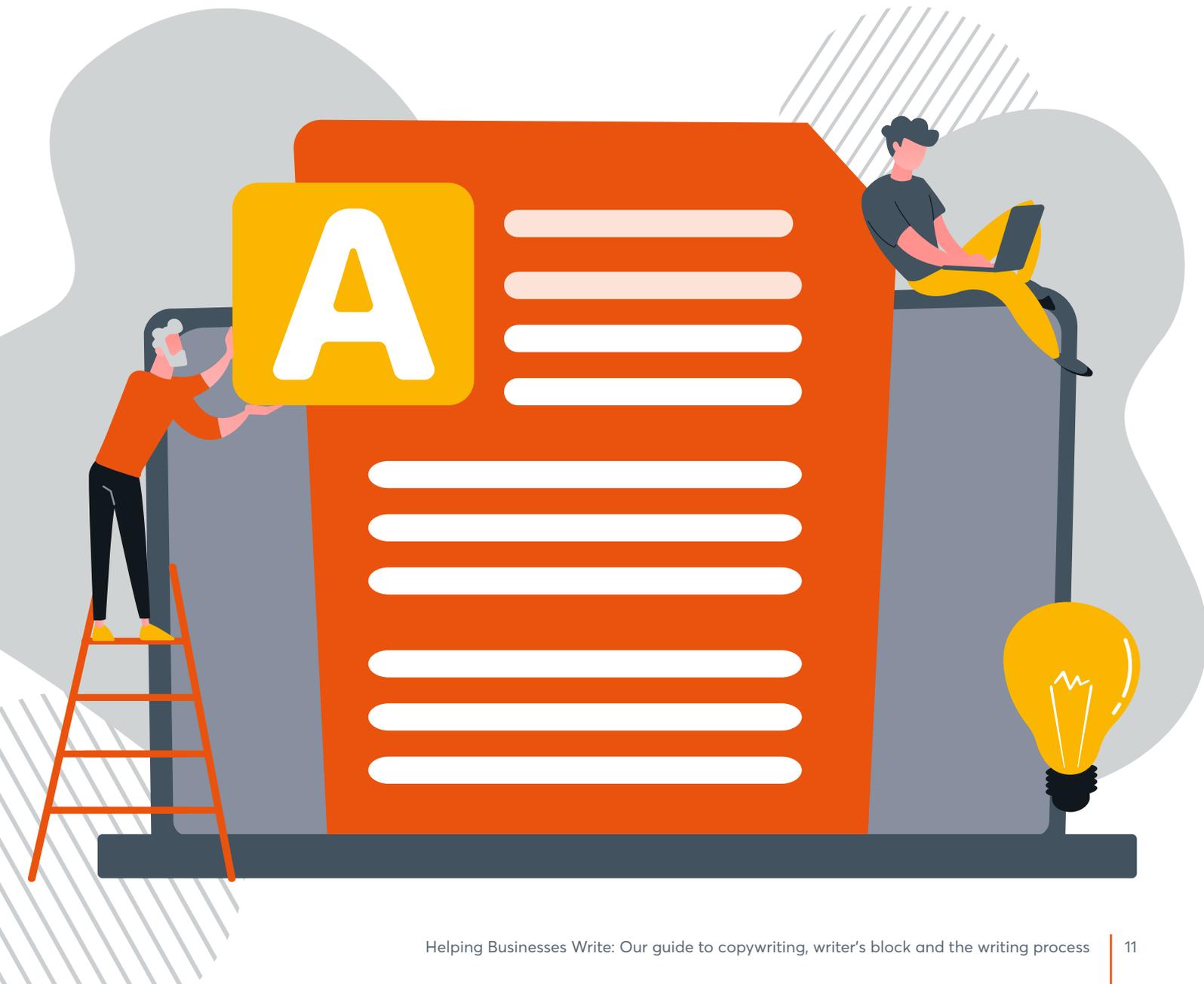


Writer's block and procrastination

I want to end with some thoughts on procrastination. Writer's block and procrastination go hand in hand, it can't be denied. And we often see procrastination as the villain – we berate ourselves and feel guilty if we give in to it. But it can have many benefits and can actually teach us something, if only we stop berating ourselves and listen.

What benefits can it have? It's often relaxing. It's much nicer to read, scroll or do anything but the hard task you're avoiding, right? It also allows our minds to wander, especially if doing a physical task like cleaning. This is actually pretty useful, as we can discover some pretty creative answers during this time.

But, I think most usefully it can be a warning to us. A sign that something isn't right – that we're stressed or in need of a break. Or that we're stuck. Maybe we're thirsty, tired or in need of some air. It's a sign that [we're in some discomfort](#). So, listen to it. Don't be hard on yourself, instead try and see what it's telling you and then act. The quicker you get to the root of it, then the quicker you'll get back to your writing.



A creative life is an amplified life. It's a bigger life, a happier life, an expanded life, and a hell of a lot more interesting life.

- Elizabeth Gilbert

Books to improve your writing

I believe there's always room to learn more about your craft – any craft. With that in mind, here are my favourite books on writing; the ones I always turn to for insights, techniques or a creative boost.

Draft no. 4: On the writing process by John McPhee

This book single-handedly changed the way I approach my writing. Thanks to this, I finally understood that a piece of writing has to evolve over time. A valuable lesson when it comes to writing.

Gary Provost's books: Make Every Word Count and 100 Ways to Improve Your Writing

I've only recently discovered these books, and I wish I had them when I first started writing. So readable, so passionate and such valuable advice. Plus, he's talking to ANYONE who writes – it doesn't matter if you're a novelist, a lawyer or a student. If you write, his books are for you.

New Hart's Rules – The Oxford Style Guide

This book is a god send for businesses who want consistency across their writing. It

acts as a 'universal' style guide for anyone writing in English, and is helpful for answering those tricky questions about capitalisation, punctuation, formatting and so on. I can't recommend it highly enough.

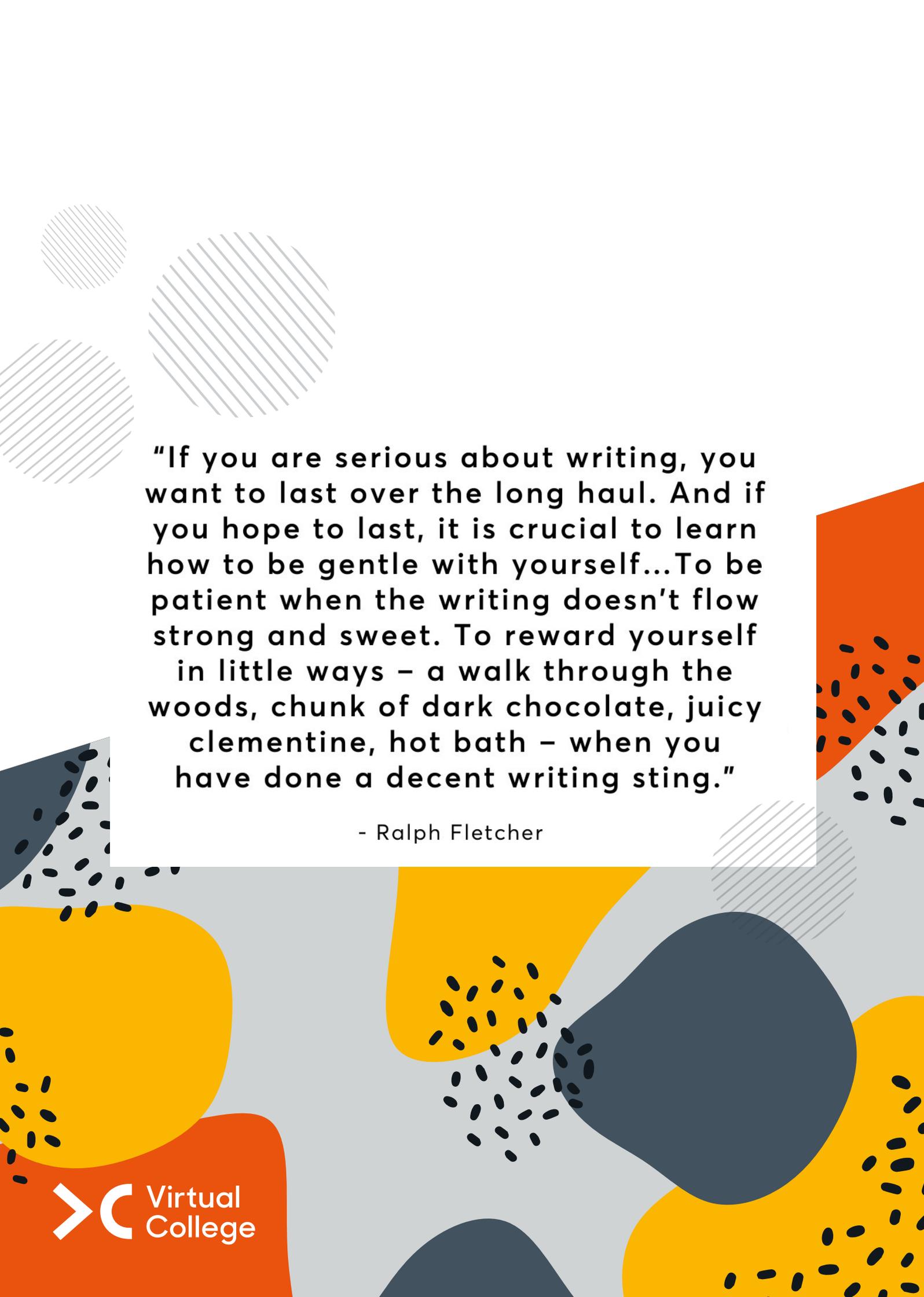
Troublesome Words by Bill Bryson

This book is the perfect guide for anyone who feels they trip over the troublesome words in our complex language. Whether it's explaining the difference between 'compliment' and 'complement' or why we shouldn't say 'between you and I', Bryson is as entertaining and insightful as always.

Big Magic by Elizabeth Gilbert

I LOVE this book. I always turn to it if I want a creative boost. In her warm, friendly, and hilarious way, Gilbert lays down the path for tapping into our creative selves, encouraging us to be brave, curious and present.

Eager for more resources? Check out our resource library: virtual-college.co.uk/resources

The background features several overlapping circles and abstract shapes. Some circles are filled with diagonal hatching lines. There are also solid-colored shapes in orange, yellow, and grey, some of which contain clusters of small black dots. The overall aesthetic is modern and graphic.

"If you are serious about writing, you want to last over the long haul. And if you hope to last, it is crucial to learn how to be gentle with yourself...To be patient when the writing doesn't flow strong and sweet. To reward yourself in little ways – a walk through the woods, chunk of dark chocolate, juicy clementine, hot bath – when you have done a decent writing sting."

- Ralph Fletcher