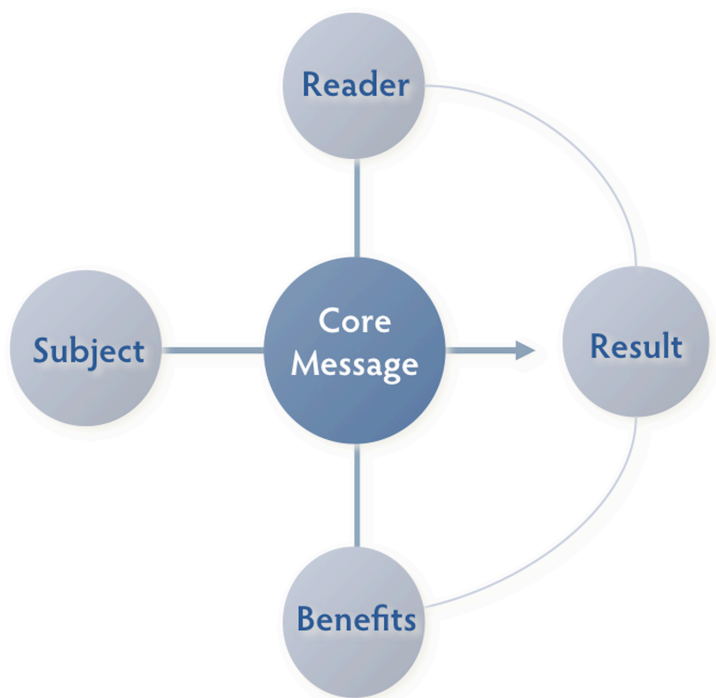


# Writing Methods That Work

for business, school, & life



an ebook by  
Peter Ingle

**Writing Methods That Work**  
for business, school, & life

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## **Foreword**

Most books about writing focus on grammar, usage, and style. They don't explain how to plan, organize, and write—how to actually build—documents. As a result, the process of writing is generally a labyrinth of drafting, revising, rewriting, feeling frustrated, and starting over—all in the hope of somehow getting it right. But the obstacle is not writing. The obstacle is a lack of understanding about the process.

When you are definite about what you want to say and you have a clear strategy for saying it, your writing will be vivid and you will come to see the process in a fresh, exciting way.

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## The AIDA Method

### A Jewel of a Writing Method

This may well be the writing tool you end up using the most. It is simple, direct, and adaptable to almost any kind of writing project.

The AIDA method originated as a marketing strategy in advertising and sales communication. It can be applied, however, to memos, letters, executive summaries, and more. AIDA stands for:

A..... Attention—grab the reader's *Attention*.

I..... Interest—generate *Interest*.

D..... Desire—create *Desire* (or *Decision*) in the reader.

A..... Action—prompt the reader to take *Action*.

The AIDA method stresses strategy and result, which should be the aim of all your writing. Practice this technique. Use AIDA to build your framework *before* you write a memo or letter or executive summary.

## **Business Memos**

A memo is more than a short note. It is a crisp message whose purpose is to inform or instruct. As the Latin origin of 'memorandum' implies, a memo is something to be remembered.

AIDA is perfect for this because it helps you organize your message strategically and deliver it with verve.

When writing memos with AIDA, build a skeleton of four parts, pinpoint the core message of each part, expand into paragraphs, then polish the whole.

Here is one strategy for building an effective memo:

A..... Attention—Arouse/alert the reader.

I..... Interest—State the key facts, findings, goals.

D ..... Desire—Convey the impact and consequences.

A..... Action—List the steps to be taken.

### Business memo sketch

**From** Paul Leda, CFO  
**To** Company Officers  
**RE:** Company cars and annual mileage  
A.....State that the cost to drive a company car is going up.  
I.....Describe how fleet expenses have skyrocketed.  
D.....Explain that a new policy will start next year.  
A.....Outline a few steps for drivers to follow.

### Business memo final

**From** Paul Leda, CFO  
**To** Company Officers  
**RE:** Company cars and annual mileage

Your cost to drive a company car MAY be going up next year—depending on how many miles you drive annually.

In the last 12 months, fleet expenses have skyrocketed. Insurance rates have tripled, maintenance costs have jumped 44 percent, and employee miles have doubled.

To help reduce costs, company mileage next year will be limited to a maximum of 10,000 miles per year. For mileage exceeding 10,000, you will be required to reimburse the company 19 cents per mile (half the federal reimbursement rate).

Please take a few minutes to familiarize yourself with the monthly mileage log (attached) which will be in effect on January first. For questions, or if you feel your situation merits an exception to this new policy, please contact Accounting at extension 22.

AIDA is effective for memos because it combines planning, organizing, outlining, and writing in one tool. You control each stage of writing and the whole document at the same time. Most importantly, you manage the message that you want to deliver.

**TIP:** When preparing the sketch for your memo, remember that you can write a list of topics or a set of tasks, or both.

## **Business Letters**

A business letter should be formal and informative, with a personal tone that refrains from being casual.

Whereas a memo is factual and sent to many people at once, a business letter usually addresses an issue of professional concern between two people.

Here is one strategy for building an effective business letter:

A..... Attention—Introduce the reason for writing.

I..... Interest—List/develop the main points.

D ..... Desire—Draw conclusions/Propose alternatives.

A..... Action—Provide decisions or action steps.

**TIP:** Limit business letters to four paragraphs and to one page. This will maximize the AIDA formula and produce a strong, organized message.

### Business letter sketch

**RE: Catalog Printing Services**

A..... Reconnect since our previous conversation.

I..... Outline the project requirements.

D..... Suggest pricing parameters.

A..... Request an exact quote.

### Business letter final

**RE: Company cars and annual mileage**

Dear Mr. Cannon,

While meeting with my staff this morning, I mentioned some of the proposals that you and I talked about at the conference. As a follow-up, we would like to give you a few more details about what we need next month.

The catalog will be standard size, with 190 pages and 245 color images. Contrary to what I told you earlier, there will be no page bleeds. We would need 20,000 catalogs by the 10th of the month and another 15,000 by the 20th of the month.

For the last four years we have received discounts from our printer in the form of 20 percent after 5,000 copies and 40 percent after 10,000 copies. We would like to know if you can match or beat these rates, and whether you have any additional proposals or incentives for us.

Although time is short, as it always seems to be in this business, I would appreciate receiving your bottom-line quotes by the 25th of this month so that we can make a decision and still meet our normal delivery schedule.

Sincerely yours,

## Executive Summaries

Whether an executive summary is one or twenty pages long, you can approach it the same way you do a letter or memo. The key is to follow the AIDA method and limit your organization to four parts.

Remember that an executive summary is not a report. Its purpose is to provide a succinct overview. To achieve this, stick to main points and include only those details that absolutely must be included to support the main points.

An executive summary fails when it delves into content that obscures the main message. Always beware of a summary that starts with big-picture impact only to fizzle into facts. In short, don't let your executive summary turn into a report.

Set the subject-matter goals. Limit the scope. Focus on major, executive-level points. If you need to reinforce those points, do so in a follow-up report or proposal.

Here is one AIDA strategy for building an effective summary:

A..... Attention—Introduce the subject/impact.

I..... Interest—Explain the background/significance.

D ..... Desire—Describe the major findings/costs.

A..... Action—Outline the large solutions/savings.

Limit short *and* long summaries to four sections. Otherwise you will spread your message too thin and lose the reader.

**TIP:** If your summary will exceed two pages, prepare each of the four sections as a list of bullets before writing full paragraphs. Analyze them carefully for message and strategy. This will help you tighten the organization and send a clear message.

*(see examples next page)*

## Executive summary *without* AIDA

### The World's Water Crisis

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Earth, with its diverse and abundant life forms, including over six billion humans, is facing a serious water crisis. All the signs suggest that it is getting worse and will continue to do so, unless corrective action is taken. This crisis is one of water governance, essentially caused by the ways in which we mismanage water. But the real tragedy is the effect it has on the everyday lives of poor people, who are blighted by the burden of water-related disease, living in degraded and often dangerous environments, struggling to get an education for their children and to earn a living, and to get enough to eat. The crisis is experienced also by the natural environment, which is groaning under the mountain of wastes dumped onto it daily, and from overuse and misuse, with seemingly little care for the future consequences and future generations. In truth it is attitude and behaviour problems that lie at the heart of the crisis. We know most (but not all) of what the problems are and a good deal about where they are. We have knowledge and expertise to begin to tackle them. We have developed excellent concepts, such as equity and sustainability. Yet inertia at leadership level, and a world population not fully aware of the scale of the problem (and in many cases not sufficiently empowered to do much about it) means we fail to take the needed timely corrective actions and put the concepts to work.

For humanity, the poverty of a large percentage of the world's population is both a symptom and a cause of the water crisis. Giving the poor better access to better managed water can make a big contribution to poverty eradication, as The World Water Development Report (WWDR) will show. Such better management will enable us to deal with the growing per capita scarcity of water in many parts of the developing world.

Solving the water crisis in its many aspects is but one of the several challenges facing humankind as we confront life in this third millennium and it has to be seen in that context. We have to fit the water crisis into an overall scenario of problem-solving and conflict resolution. As pointed out by the Commission for Sustainable Development (CSD) in 2002: "Poverty eradication, changing unsustainable patterns of production and consumption and protecting and managing the natural resource base of economic and social development are overarching objectives of, and essential requirements for, sustainable development."

*Continued...*

Yet of all the social and natural resource crises we humans face, the water crisis is the one that lies at the heart of our survival and that of our planet Earth.

This first WWDR is a joint undertaking of twenty-three United Nations (UN) agencies, and is a major initiative of the new World Water Assessment Programme (WWAP) established in 2000, with its Secretariat in the Paris headquarters of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). This report is organized in six main sections: a background, an evaluation of the world's water resources, an examination of the needs for, the uses of and the demands on water, a scrutiny of water management, seven representative case studies highlighting different water scenarios, and conclusions and annexes. The 'examination' and 'scrutiny' are based on the seven challenges identified at the 2nd World Water Forum in 2000 plus a further four challenges identified in the production of this report. The report is documented throughout with revealing figures, tables and global maps that include country-based information, as well as boxes illustrating lessons learned. This Executive Summary covers the key points of the report, and for the detailed synthesis, conclusions and recommendations, readers are referred to its relevant sections.

## Executive summary *with* AIDA (and converted to active voice)

### The World's Water Crisis

The Earth is facing a serious water crisis that will continue to get worse unless we take corrective action.

The water crisis is caused by three main things:

- The ways we mismanage water.
- The effect this has on disease among poor people.
- The results of waste dumped daily into the environment.

We have the expertise to tackle these problems, yet inertia at a world leadership level, along with ignorance on a large public scale, prevent us from taking corrective action.

As The World Water Development Report (attached) shows, world poverty is both a symptom and a cause of the water crisis. Improving water management will significantly reduce poverty and mitigate the per-capita scarcity of water in the developing world.

Of the many natural and social problem-solving challenges we face in the new millennium, water management lies at the heart of our survival and the survival of our planet—and it is a problem that we can fix.

The attached report, presented in six sections listed below, explains the scope of the water crisis and proposes the steps we can take toward corrective action.

1. Background.
2. Evaluation of the world's water resources.
3. Examination of the needs for and demands on water.
4. Scrutiny of water management.
5. Seven case studies of water scenarios.
6. Conclusions and annexes.

## Web Pages

You can also use the AIDA method to write web pages, especially the home page which is often the most crucial for capturing and convincing the internet reader.

Writing web pages is tricky because you have to write for the search engines that list and rank your web pages, and for customers who decide—often in seconds—whether to stay and possibly buy from you.

Web pages also differ from other kinds of business documents. Instead of telling readers what you want them to hear, your pages have to answer the questions that readers are silently asking. In AIDA terms, the main questions are:

A..... Attention—Who are you and what do you provide?

I..... Interest—What can you do especially for me?

D ..... Desire—What will I gain (convenience, benefits, cost)?

A..... Action—How do I proceed (search, respond, buy)?

Although the content and strategy of web pages may differ from standard business documents, you can still plan, organize, and write them the same way. The key is to manage your strategy and writing in four parts.

## Home Page

The home page is your front door. Its job is to beckon and to open easily. The home page is not supposed to be the living room where you entertain guests and make them comfortable. Don't clutter your home page with too much information and too many choices. Use AIDA to limit content. Prioritize information for your reader. Make information clear. Keep choices simple. Get the reader *inside*.

## Page Construction

The internet began as a content (text) based network and although rapid growth ushered in graphic design, all indications are that the internet is clinging to its content-based origins.

The clearest indication comes from the search engine companies that use algorithms to find, list, and rank web pages. Those algorithms cannot read graphics and probably never will. They base their analysis solely on the text they find in the source code and text—particularly the richness of subject matter—on your web pages.

Fortunately, readers also base their final decision on information, not images. Nice images can capture *attention* and create *interest*, but it is from information that internet customers make their *decision* and take *action*.

Because most internet customers are eager, if not impatient, for results, build your pages around clear, informative text rather than generic, high-density graphics. Graphics are slow to reach the reader (to download) and they mean absolutely nothing to search engines. Text, on the other hand, reaches the reader instantaneously and means everything to the search engines. This does not mean leaving graphics out of your strategy. It means rendering graphics secondary so that they support rather than obstruct your core message.

## Page Content

Perhaps the most common weakness of web page writing is to write about what your company offers instead of what the reader (the customer) needs. This may seem like a small distinction, but it makes a big difference. The difference is between what your company does and “what it can do for me.”

The second weakness of most web page writing is to write in broad terms and passive voice. Broad language can cover many business bases at once, but it usually defeats its own purpose by diluting—and never delivering—the core message. Passive voice does the same thing. It dulls the message and makes it hard to get at.

Compare these examples of company descriptions:

*Company-focused, vague, and passive:*

Providing enterprise-wide IT solutions.

*Customer-focused, but still vague and passive:*

Customized systems for large financial institutions.

*Customer-focused, specific, and active:*

We build secure databases for banks and credit unions.

## Search Engine Technology

The goal of writing web pages and standard business documents is the same: to deliver a clear message to the reader for the purpose of achieving an intended result. With web pages, however, you also need to send a message to the search engine ‘spiders’ that crawl your site, and to the algorithms which rank and list your pages.

As the internet continues to develop, search engine technology and algorithms keep changing. At the same time, sponsored listings, pay-per-click campaigns, and advertising methods continue to add grist to the financial mill. It is all moving at electronic speed and no one knows for sure what the guidelines will be even a year from now.

The best help is to buy yourself a book about search engine technology and subscribe to some online newsletters on the subject. The one I highly recommend is written by SEO expert Jill Whalen [www.highrankings.com](http://www.highrankings.com). Her knowledge, experience, and pragmatism are unsurpassed.

Above all, experiment with your web pages to see what yields the best results from clients and search engines (in that order). Remember that strategic planning, clear organization, and a crisp message are always your keys to successful writing—on and off the internet.

## About the Author

Peter Ingle is a freelance business writer in Charleston, SC. He holds a B.A. in English from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His writing workshops at California State University, the University of California, and California State agencies became the basis for this book.

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