Report & Proposal Writing

Self Learning Guide

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Table of Contents

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Introduction to the Self Learning Package

The Self Learning Package Series is based on a few key principles:

1. People are their own best experts.
2. People are competent in their work and enjoy improving their professional and personal skills.
3. People learn best when they are responsible for their own learning.
4. People need an opportunity to learn at their own pace and for their own reasons.
5. People need information that is flexible enough for them to adapt to incorporate their own cultural, religious, and economic beliefs and customs.

The Self Learning Package Series has very simple objectives:

1. To summarize a wealth of general and basic information into manageable resources for people to use personally and professionally;
2. To provide this information in readable and practical resources that will give people the opportunity to learn for themselves, at their own pace, some or all of the information presented;
3. To help people integrate their communication, leadership and supervision, learning and personal growth skills into one body of information;
4. To provide people with further references and ideas to continue their self-directed learning.

Note: This self learning package will take approximately 45 minutes to complete.

Introduction

Writing a report or a business proposal can seem like a daunting task. Where do I start? What do I need to say? How do I know if I've written a report or proposal that my customer will understand? Writing reports and business proposals are an increasingly important aspect of any professional business. To help us answer these questions, let's understand the difference between a report and a proposal.

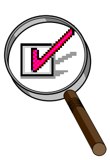
What is a report?

Reports are written for a variety of reasons. They can be informative or persuasive or a combination of both. Informative reports include employee evaluations, progress reports and minutes of meetings. Whereas, persuasive reports usually fall into two categories: problem/solution based and feasibility studies.

What is a proposal?

It is primarily a sophisticated sales piece that seeks to define problems or opportunities and to sell the client or management on your ability to provide solutions and strategies.

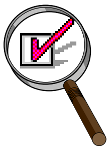
This self-learning package will assist you in gaining the tools and techniques to feel more confident in writing reports and proposals. You will learn that it is a process – not a single event.



Learning Objectives

After completing this self-learning package you will be able to:

- Describe the differences between a report and business proposal
- Describe the 3 stages in writing a report
- Apply the various formats/approaches in documenting a report and proposal



My Personal Learning Objectives

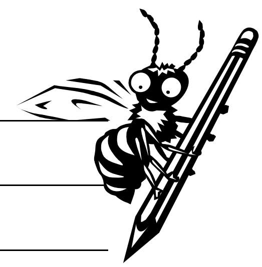
My personal learning objectives are:

My Writing Self-Assessment

Before you begin to write a report or proposal, take a few minutes to reflect. Reflect on your strengths and what you would like to improve. For example, you may be familiar with the fundamentals of good writing, but you might not be sure how to write persuasively.

Exercise:

Think about your own skills and assess your writing ability. The purpose of this exercise will help you focus on the specific skills you have and those you would like to acquire.



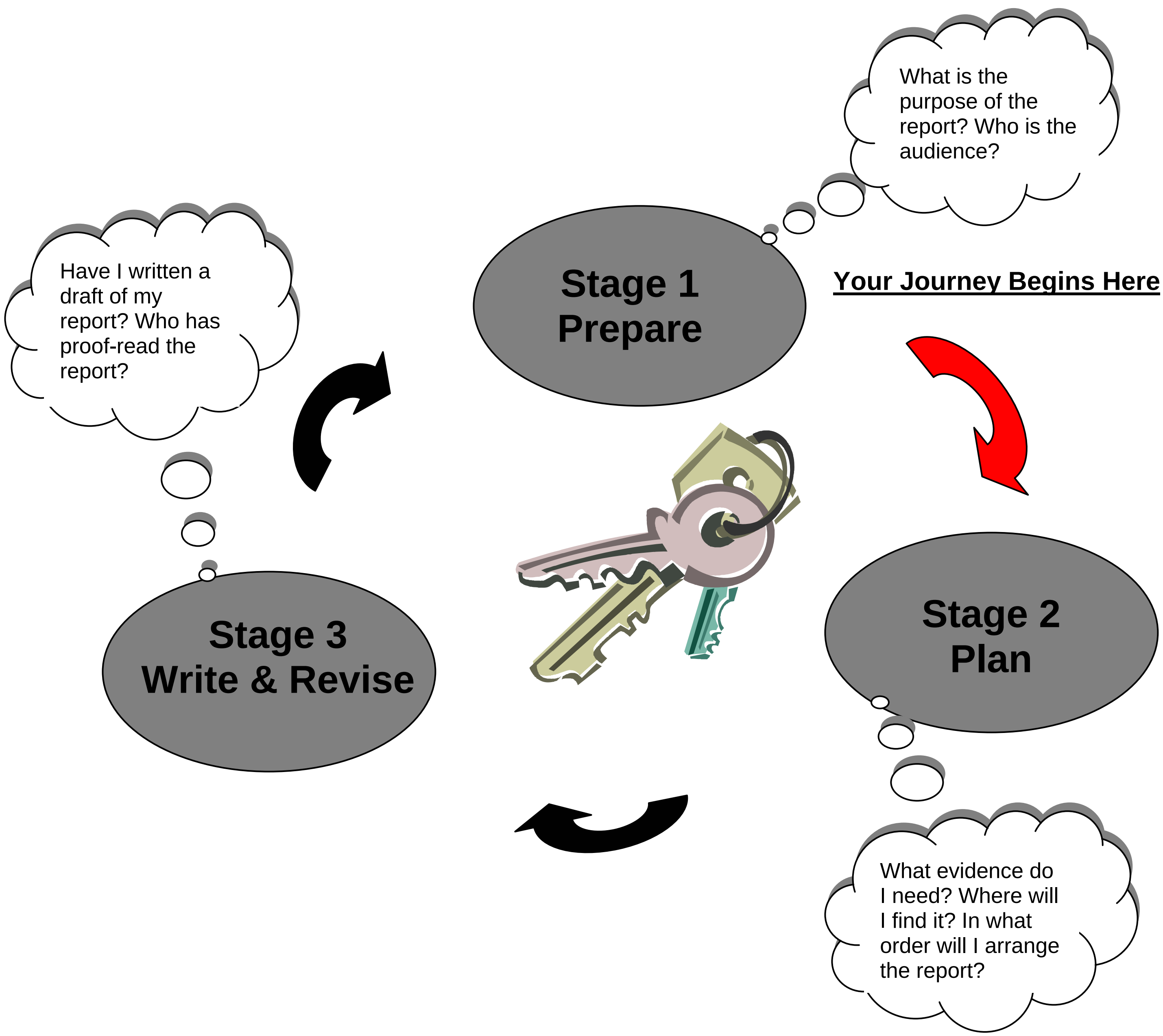
My writing strengths are:

My writing challenges are:

Note: To practice your writing skills please refer to the self-learning package: The Business Writer's Guide. Email hrlearn@yorku.ca to register.

Writing Successful Reports

The following diagram illustrates the three key stages involved in the production of a report.



Stage 1: Prepare

Clarify the Topic/ Purpose/Problem

The purpose of any report is to answer the question: "**Why** am I writing this report?"
Ask yourself the question, "Why am I writing this?" ("Because I have to," is not a sufficient answer!)

To write a useful report, it is important to understand how it will be used. Find out what purpose management has in mind in requesting the report. Is the purpose to provide information (limited to findings) or to be evaluative (including your conclusions and recommendations)?

Once the purpose has been defined, your next step is to define the problem as precisely as you can. This may not always be easy. When conducting research for your report you may discover people confusing description and evaluation of the problem. One person may say, "The problem is that we need new machines. The ones we have are always breaking down." Another person may say, "The problem is that the new employees don't do their jobs properly."

People use language loosely, but report writers need to be precise. These "problems" are evaluations, not descriptions.

The problem-solving method suggests a series of questions that can help you describe the dimensions of a problem.

- What is the problem?
- Where is the problem?
- When is the problem?
- What is the extent of the problem?

Not all of these questions apply with equal effectiveness to every situation, but they will help you to stay on target.

Exercise: Reflecting on Your Report

Instructions: Select a report that you may be required to write, and begin your process by brainstorming the following questions:

1. What is the topic of the report?

2. What is the reason/purpose of the report?

3. Is the report to be informative (limited to findings) or evaluative (including your conclusions and recommendations)?

4. What is the identified problem?

5. Where is the identified problem?

6. When does the identified problem occur?

7. What is the extent of the identified problem?

Analyze the Audience

The average person writes a report with a specific reader or group of readers in mind. Having a specific audience can be an advantage. It enables the writer to analyze the reader and effectively shapes the purpose of the report.

Never treat your audience as customers, always as partners. – James Stewart

Here are some questions that will help you communicate with the reader:

1. How much background do I need to give this reader, considering his or her position, attitude toward this subject, and experience with the subject?
2. What does the reader need to know and how can I best provide this information?
3. What is my credibility with this reader? Must I build credibility gradually as I proceed, or can I assume that he or she will accept recommendations based on my interpretations?

4. Is the reader likely to agree or disagree with my position? What approach would be most appropriate in view of this agreement of disagreement?

5. Can you answer each of these questions?

The fourth question is very important. It implies that the writer aims to see the reader's point of view, and will make every effort to look at the subject the way the reader will probably look at it. That isn't easy to do. It takes both imagination and some understanding of psychology. It is worth the effort and is a gateway to effective communication.

Although reports are written primarily for the persons who commissioned them, they are often reproduced and circulated to other interested persons. As a report may be circulated to different readers who may have different interests it essential we pay close attention to the format and organization of the report.

For your primary reader, you need to write text that is interesting and clear. For your secondary readers, you want headings, graphs, charts—i.e. devices that will enable them to find what they're looking for.

Exercise: Audience Analysis Worksheet

Use the following worksheet to help you identify your audience.

1. Who is the audience?

____

____

____

____

2. What is the audience's relationship to you?

- ☐ Customer
- ☐ Manager
- ☐ Peer
- ☐ Subordinate
- ☐ Public
- ☐ Other ______________________________________

3. How much background do I need to give this reader, considering his or her position, attitude toward this subject, and experience with the subject?

4. What does the reader need to know and how can I best provide this information?

5. How is my credibility with this reader? Must I build credibility gradually as I proceed, or can I assume that he or she will accept recommendations based on my interpretations?

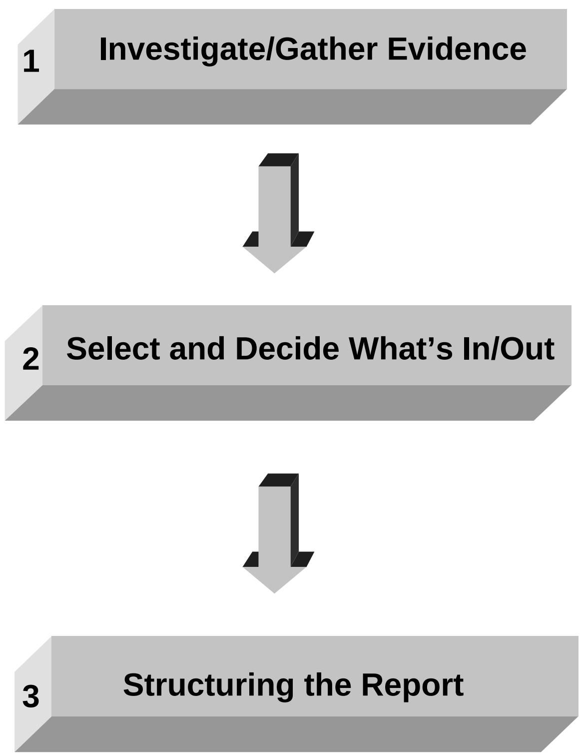
6. Is the reader likely to agree or disagree with my position? What approach would be most appropriate in view of this agreement of disagreement?

Stage 2: Plan

Once you have determined your purpose and objective of the report, you are ready to organize the relevant facts and evidence which supports your report.

The following is a suggested process for organizing facts and evidence.

There are three steps to consider:



Let’s begin with investigate/gather evidence.

Step 1: Investigate/Gather Evidence

Unless you’re an authority on your subject, your recommendations carry only as much weight as the evidence you can gather to support them. The more evidence you can collect and organize before writing, the easier your writing task will be.

There are three ways to gather facts and information:

1. Through careful observation
2. Through intelligent fieldwork (talking to the appropriate person)
3. Through library research

The Rules of Evidence

In presenting your findings, use the following Rules of Evidence:

Rules of Evidence	Explanation
1. Look at the evidence and follow where it leads.	The trick here is not to let your own bias lead you into selecting only the evidence you agree with. If you aren't careful, you unconsciously start forcing the evidence to fit the design that seems to be emerging. When fact A and fact B both point toward the same conclusion, there is always the temptation to make fact C fit.
2. Look for the simplest explanation that accounts for all the evidence.	When the lights in the room go out, the sudden darkness might be taken as evidence of a power failure. But a quick investigation turns up other evidence: the streetlights are still on; the refrigerator is still functioning. A simpler explanation may exist, so a check of the circuit breakers or fuse box would be appropriate.
3. Look at all likely alternatives.	Likely alternatives in the example just outlined could include burned-out bulbs, loose plugs, and defective outlets; so all alternatives should be examined in the investigation stage. During the writing stage, however, do not overload the reader with a detailed examination or eight or ten alternatives. Reduce the number to three, or perhaps four, alternatives. The others can usually be discussed and dealt with in one brief paragraph. Examining alternatives has two other major advantages: it saves the reader raising the question in his or her mind, "Didn't the writer of this report look at anything else?", and it establishes writer's objectivity.
4. Beware of absolute statements.	In the complexity of the real world, we can rarely state absolute generalizations. Be wary of writing general statements using words like "all," "never," or "always." Sometimes these words can be effectively implied rather than stated.

Note: Readers of reports look for hard evidence to make objective decision-making. Be careful to distinguish which statements are facts, which are opinions, and which are assumptions.

Search Strategies

To give formal reports credibility and authority, researchers generally rely on secondary data, in print or electronic formats.

1. What are some effective research methodologies?

2. Where do you look for information?

3. If your report was about 360 degree performance reviews, what research sources would you use?

Citing Sources

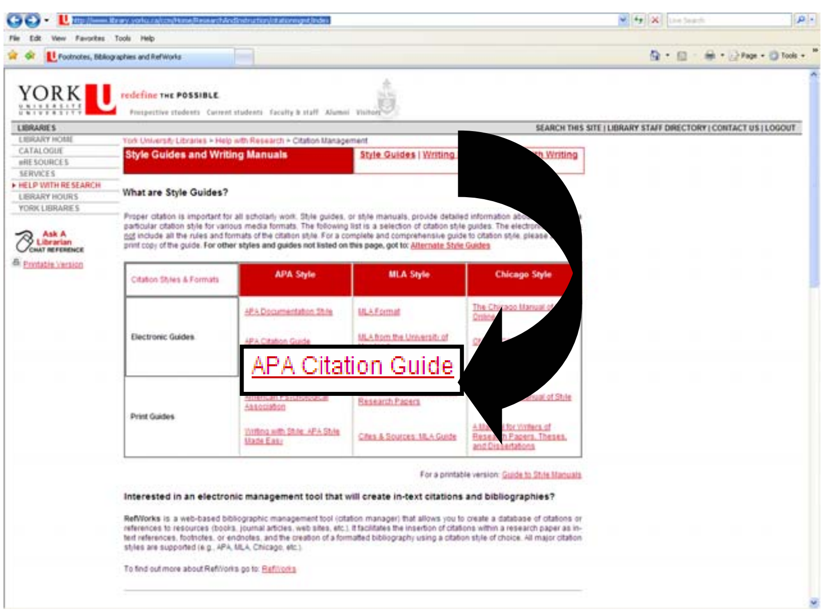
If you use data from secondary sources, the data must be documented; i.e. you must reference where the data originated. Using the ideas of someone else without giving credit is plagiarism and is unethical.

Even if you paraphrase, and put the information in your own words, the ideas must be credited to the source. In citing sources, you should use direct quotations sparingly. Good writers use the exact words of another writer to emphasize opinions because of the author's status as an expert; or duplicate the exact wording before criticizing; or repeat identical phrasing because of its precision, clarity, or aptness.

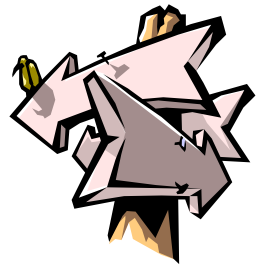
References are often listed on a page by themselves, alphabetically by author, and include all the references you used to produce your report. This list is called References, Works Cited, Cited References, or References, depending on the style you have used.

The list for a report may include a variety of sources. A source is anything you draw information from, and in your report you should list every source you use.

The following York U website:
http://www.library.yorku.ca/ccm/Home/ResearchAndInstruction/citationmgmt/index lists a selection of citation style guides. The most common citation style and format is the APA style. Click on the APA Citation Guide to review all the various reference formats.



Step 2: Select and Decide What's In/Out



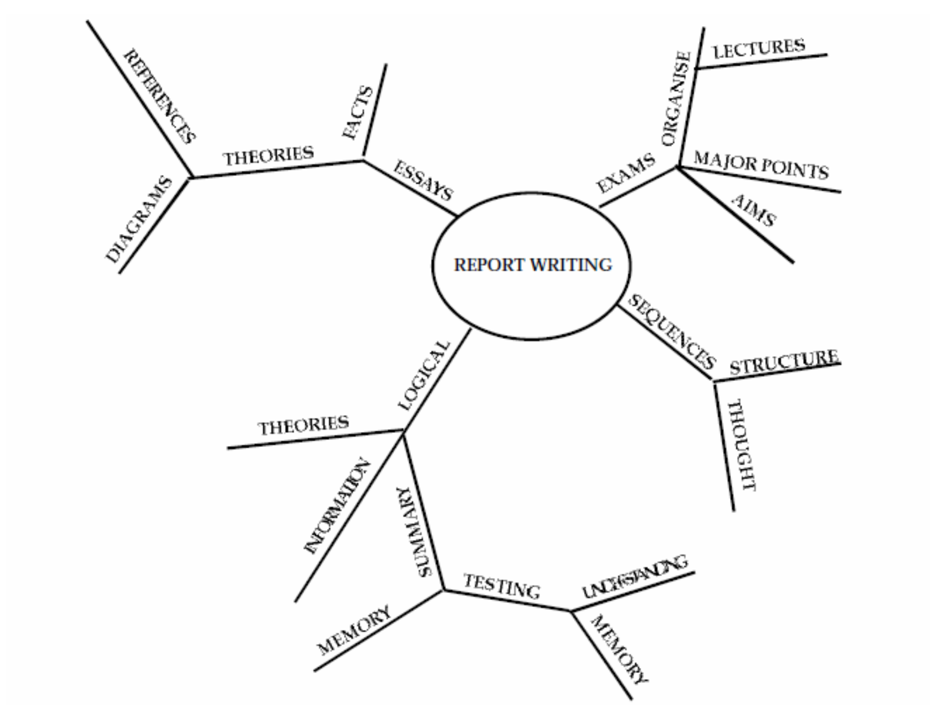
Two helpful ways to organize your information into topics are:

1. brainstorm your ideas into a mind map
2. use file cards/post-it notes when you collect information

Tips on Creating a Mind Map

- Write the main theme in the centre of a piece of paper.
- Write down all the ideas and keywords related to your topic starting from the centre and branching out along lines of connecting ideas.
- Each idea can be circled or linked by lines as appropriate.
- When you have finished, highlight any related ideas and then sort topics.
- Some ideas will form main headings, and others will be sub-sections under these headings.
- You should then be able to see a pattern emerging and be able to arrange your main headings in a logical order (see diagram below).

Example of a Mind Map



Exercise: Creating a Mind Map

Use the space below to begin a mind map of your evidence.

Using Post-It Notes When Collecting Information

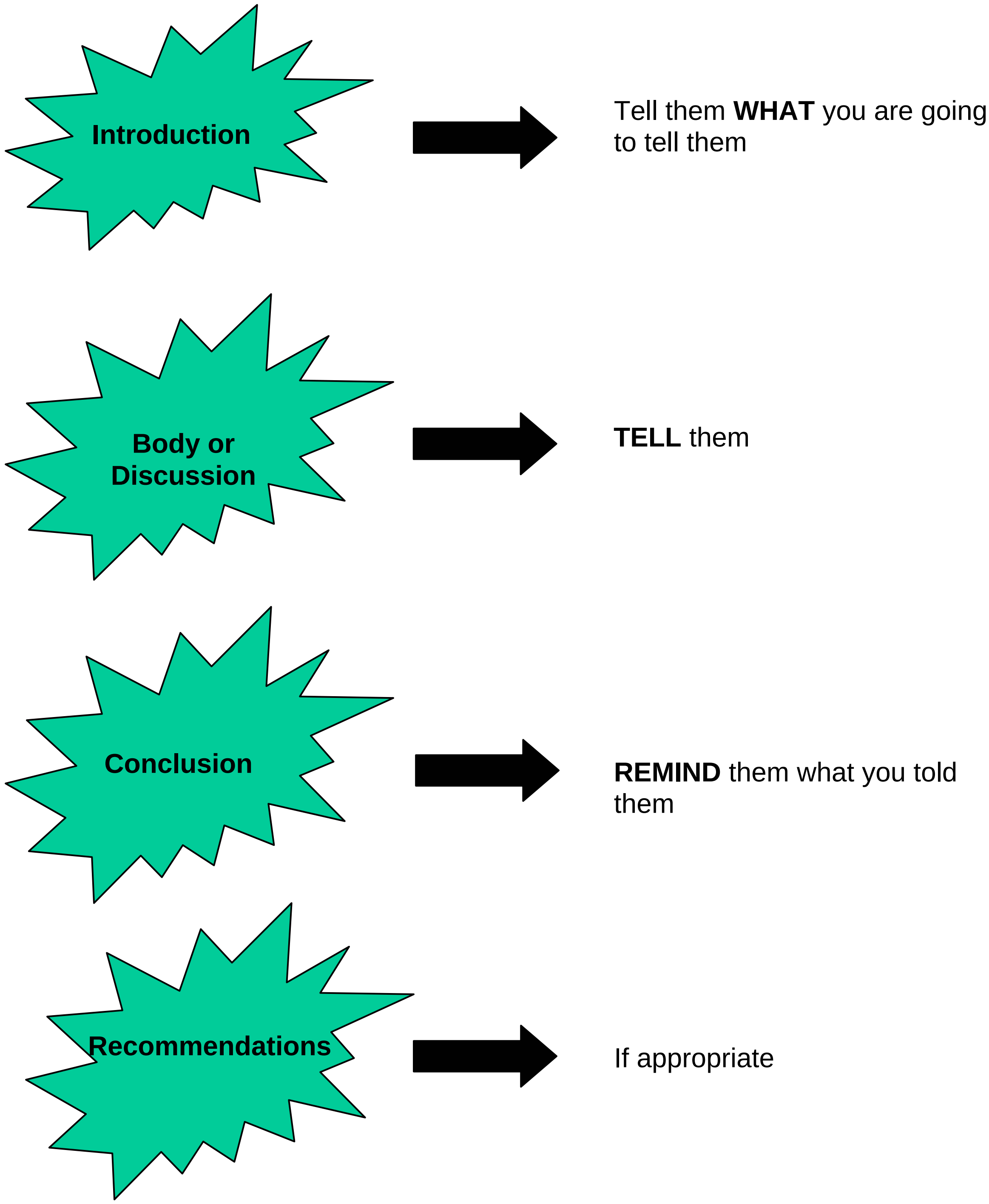
Experienced writers often use file cards/post-it notes when they collect information. These can be easily arranged and rearranged. By arranging them in piles, you can create and organize information into a plan.

Here are some tips for this strategy:

- Write only one point on each card.
- Arrange the cards/notes into piles, putting all closely related points together. All evidence related to marketing goes in one pile, all evidence related to product development goes in another pile, and so on.
- Arrange the piles of cards/notes in one of the following basic ways. (The choice of sequence will depend largely on the logic of the subject matter and the needs of your audience.)
    - Time; from past to present to future.
    - Background, present status, future prospects.
    - Place; by location.
    - Factor. Depends on the topic and factors selected.
    - Problem-analysis-solution. Description of problem, why it exists, what to do about it.
    - Order of importance; from least important to most important or vice-versa.
- Go through each pile and arrange the notes in an understandable sequence within your basic plan. Which points need to precede others in order to present a clear picture?
- Write out your organization plan (outline) and use it as your “roadmap” while you write the report.

Step 3: Structuring the Report

Every report should be planned in a logical way. The basic structure of a report is:



Having thought about your purpose and your audience, your next step is to carefully consider the appropriate communication format.

There are two basic formats to writing reports:

1. Direct Approach **2. Indirect Approach**

The Direct Approach

The direct approach, states recommendations first, and is the "up-front" or "psychological" approach. This format is often used in short reports and when recommendations are more-or-less straightforward.

An example of the direct approach format is shown below.

Title Page	• This should include the title of the report (which should give a precise indication of the subject matter), the author's name, module, course and the date.
Synopsis	• Statement of the problem • Scope and limitations • General findings • Purpose
Recommendations	• List in order of importance
Body/Discussion	• Background • Methods used • Results obtained • Analysis of results
Summary	• State the theme of each section • Link themes together
Conclusions	• Relate to recommendations • Support recommendations • Use the same order as recommendations
References	• It is important that you give precise details of all the work by other authors which has been referred to within the report.

The Indirect Approach

The indirect approach, outlining detailed recommendations at the end, presents the evidence in a more logical way. This approach is used when it is necessary to “build your case” leading to more-or-less controversial recommendations. A synopsis or executive summary is used to highlight key recommendations at the beginning of the report.

An example of the format for the indirect approach is shown below.

Title Page	• This should include the title of the report (which should give a precise indication of the subject matter), the author’s name, module, course and the date.
Executive Summary	• This should be a short paragraph summarizing the main contents of the report. It should include a short statement of the main task, the methods used, conclusions reached and recommendations. • The abstract or summary should be concise, informative and independent of the report. • Write this section **after** you have written the report.
Introduction	• The introduction comes next. It prepares the reader by giving background on the subject, explaining the method by which you arrived at your findings, defining technical terms if necessary, and/or explaining limitations. Generally, the more widely a report is to be circulated, the lengthier the introduction.
Body/Discussion	• Your findings will be in the body of the report. The way you organize the sequence of ideas will depend on the subject and your purpose. • There are a number of ways in which results can be presented: tables, graphs, pie charts, bar charts, and diagrams.
Conclusions	• The main issues are outlined in this section. It should be expressed clearly and should not present any new information.
Recommendations	• You may wish to list your recommendations in a separate section or include them with the conclusions.
References	• It is important that you give precise details of all the work by other authors that has been referenced in the report.

Congratulations! You should feel better prepared for your next report or proposal.

Remember: Writing is a process. It is often hard work even for good writers. As with most skills, you must practice, practice, practice.

Good Luck!

Stage 3: Write & Revise

Once you have determined the approach for the report, you are ready to begin writing.

Writing Your Report

Here are some tips that will help you get started in writing the report:

- Begin with a rough draft – you may want to start with what seems easiest such as the findings.
- Use simple words and short sentences.
- Use plenty of space.
- Use headings and subheadings to grab the reader's attention.
- Present facts in an objective way.
- Use bullets, bold, and italics (if applicable).

TIP:

- **Headings should be as descriptive as possible. They should describe what comes next and help make the transition from one subject to another.**

Revise Your Report

Once the rough draft is written, put it aside and give yourself a breather. Then use the "proofreading checklist" to help you write a polished draft.

Proofreading Checklist

The proofreading checklist consists of 5 techniques.

1 Check the Facts

- Be careful not to make assumptions.

2 Check the Length

- Should you cut or add? Avoid too much detail.

3 Check the Structure

- The report ought to have a beginning, middle and an end.
- Check each paragraph to ensure there is only one idea and it logically flows into the next one.

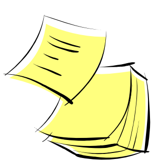
4 Check the Style

- Lookout for lengthy, obscure sentences, wordiness, and overuse of the passive voice.
- Eliminate words or phrases that don't emphasize the information.

5 Check the Spelling, Grammar

- Verify the spelling of words, every pronoun has a clear reference and the punctuation is both correct and appropriate

Note: Prior to submitting the final copy, have someone else proofread the report looking specifically for errors in spelling, punctuation, and grammar.



NOTES AND IDEAS

Writing Winning Business Proposals

Business proposals are an increasingly important aspect of any organization. The intent of the proposal document is to "sell" to a customer, or to supporters. The customer wants to understand what you want to do, how you propose to do it, and mostly why. A proposal is not based on emotions but, rather on facts, information and rationale linking the WHO, WHY, WHAT and HOW questions.

The following table provides an explanation on how to answer each question.

Question	Explanation
The **Who** Question	Do you know your customer? Do you know what they really want? Remember your customer has some problem they need a solution to. Are you really in tune with what that is? Does your proposal clearly define the business problem or opportunity you propose to solve?
The **Why** Question	Why should the customer hire you? What differentiates you from the competition (if applicable)?
The **What** Question	This question answers WHAT you will deliver for the customer. Ensure your report is simple and clear to read.
The **How** Question	It's vital to tell your customer HOW you will deliver on your promise. Who will be involved in delivering your product or service? Does the customer need to be involved? If so, what will be expected of them?

Why Write a Business Proposal?

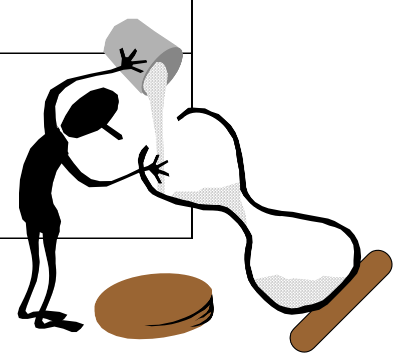
What's In It For Me?

Why would you decide to document a proposal idea? "What's in it for you to be involved in such a time-limited (and sometimes quite time-intensive) activity?

Exercise: Benefits to Me of Applying A Business Proposal Process

Use this workspace to answer the question, “What is in it for YOU?” to be a proactive, supportive, and an enthusiastic writer of a business proposal.

Area of Benefit	Potential Benefit
The University as a Whole	
My Personal Development	
My Contribution to My “Peer Team”	
Other:	
MAIN COST TO ME	

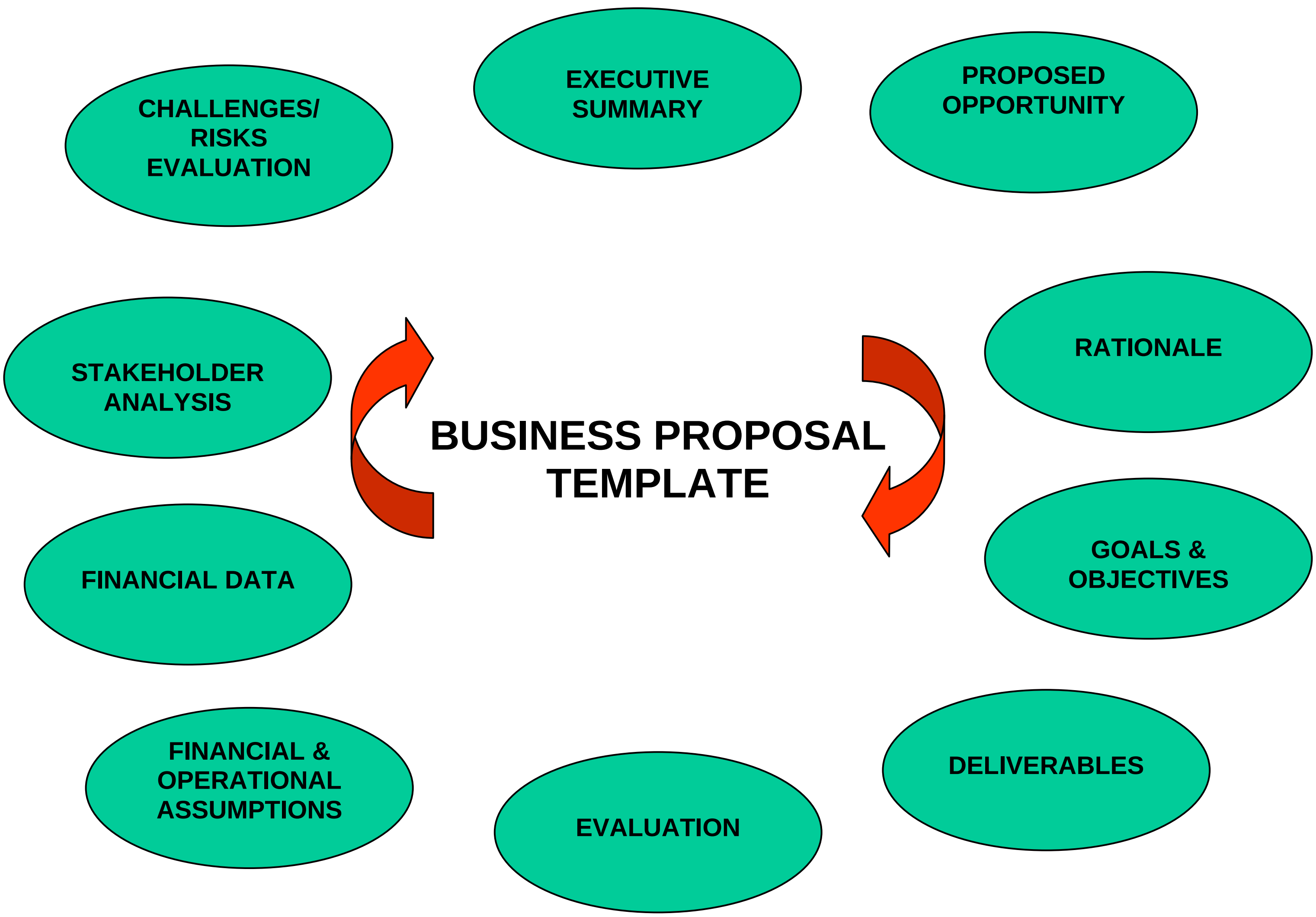


Suggested Business Proposal Templates

This section is will provide you with an idea on HOW to write and format a business proposal.

Sample Template #1

There are ten subheadings within the template. The following provides you with an explanation on how to document each subheading.



SUBHEADING	EXPLANATION	QUESTIONS / TIPS FOR DOCUMENTING SUBHEADING
1. Executive Summary	• summarizes what the proposal is about, who is affected, net revenues and expenses, and why it should be implemented.	• Should be no more than half a page • Usually written at the end of drafting the proposal • What is the proposal about? Who is affected? Why should it be implemented?
2. Proposed Opportunity	• describes what the proposal is about	• it would be helpful to the reader to add sub-headings – current status and proposed change • What is the current situation? What is the proposed change?
3. Rationale	• an overview of why the proposal should be implemented	• connect the proposal to the overall department's or York University's strategic direction
4. Goals and Objectives	• an overview of why the proposal should be implemented in a detailed, measurable way.	• Use the SMART method – Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Timely
5. Deliverables	• describes what will be implemented through the proposal (e.g. the tangible, measurable end results or outcome	• What changes/modifications need to be implemented in order to achieve the proposal?

SUBHEADING	EXPLANATION	QUESTIONS / TIPS FOR DOCUMENTING SUBHEADING
6. Evaluation/Measurement of Outcomes/Indicators	• describes how the proposal will be measured over a short and long term	• How will the proposal be evaluated?
7. Stakeholder Impact Analysis	• a list of all stakeholders that are impacted	• Who are the stakeholders?
8. Financial Data	• provides details on the financial impacts	• If applicable discuss this with the departments financial representative who can support you in gathering the correct information • What are the reduced expenses for year ___?
9. Financial and Operational Analysis	• summarizes all financial and operational assumptions and justifications for estimates	• Include any assumptions
10. Challenges/Risk Evaluation	• identifies the challenges and/or risks to the organization for implementing (or not implementing) the proposal	• describe the strategies recommended to minimize the challenges/risks • What are the identified challenges/risks?

TIP: As part of your business proposal report include any documents in the appendices such as: lists, diagrams, detailed budget, job descriptions and any other necessary detailed documents.

Example:

Business Case – East Side Tower Free Cooling

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The current HVAC system is not designed to provide cooling from October to April. Modifying this system will allow the organization to provide cooling during the off season with minimal additional operating costs. The proposed alterations will also result in water and energy savings of up to $50,000 every year.

PROJECT/BUSINESS OPPORTUNITY

Currently there are 6 free standing air conditioning units that provide cooling using city water. By converting these unites to the main cooling system significant water usage savings will be realized and in addition will provide cooling that would not otherwise have been possible.

RATIONALE

The rationale for proposing this change is to reduce utility costs and provide better cooling to the main building.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

1. Increased tenant satisfaction in the building
2. Increase the efficiency of the cooing system prior to March 1
3. Reduce the water and electrical consumption totaling up to $50,000 per year

DELIVERABLES

1. Winterize the cooling tower
2. Convert the individual air conditioning units to the main cooling system
3. Approval of work to be done in the winter season, December to March, when the cooling system is offline

EVALUATION/MEASUREMENT OF OUTCOMES

Progress will be measured by reviewing the utility information on a regular basis and compare them to last year. Monitoring staff and tenant enquiries about discomfort due to heat between October and May will provide some indications that service has improved.

STAKEHOLDER IMPACT ANALYSIS

There will be 4 areas that will be affected by the implementation of this work; Room 3, Bell Telephone Room, Computer Room, Nuclear Medicine and Level 4 corridor. It is proposed that the work take place after normal working hours in the Clinical areas so disruption can be kept to a minimum.

FINANCIAL DATA

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Total
						$0
Grants						$0
Fees for service						$0
Other (specify)						$0
Savings						
Reduced expenses	$50,000	$54,500	$59,405	$64,751	$70,579	$299,235
Reduced salaries						$0
Total Rev/Sav	**$50,000**	**$54,500**	**$59,405**	**$64,751**	**$70,579**	**$299,235**
Expenses						
Salaries						$0
Non-salary						$0
Maintenance						$0
Training						$0
Stakeholder Impact						$0
Total Expenses	**$0**	**$0**	**$0**	**$0**	**$0**	**$0**
Net (Rev+Sav-Exp)	**$50,000**	**$54,500**	**$59,405**	**$64,751**	**$70,579**	**$299,235**
Capital	(Put in Year 1 Only)					
Equipment						$0
Projects	$100,000					$100,000
Total Capital	**$100,000**					**$100,000**
NET (Rev+Sav-Exp-Cap)	**-$50,000**	**$54,500**	**$59,405**	**$64,751**	**$70,579**	**$199,235**
PAYBACK PERIOD	(Based on Years 1 & 2)				**1.9**	

FINANCIAL & OPERATIONAL ASSUMPTIONS

Savings

- Energy consumption savings will be dependent on weather conditions between October and May and will vary. The proposed modifications will facilitate delaying the start up of the Chiller System in the spring and save energy costs although these figures have not been included in the savings; however actual data indicates that a warm weather event of about 5 days when the chiller is offline will save approximately $5000. Historically, one to two of these events will occur during the year.

CHALLENGES/RISKS EVALUATION

The challenge is to have the project complete prior to March 1 in order for the Hospital to begin providing cooling during the spring when the main system is still offline. The sooner the proposal is approved the sooner work may commence and ensure completion by March 1st.

Exercise: Example Business Proposal

Take a few minutes to review the example proposal and answer the following questions:

1. What is effective about this proposal? Be specific.

2. What would I improve about this proposal? Be specific.

Sample Template #2

The following is another way to organize and develop a proposal.

HEADING	EXPLAINATION
Overview or Executive Summary	☑ Convey your main ideas clearly and concisely
Introduction and Background	☑ Include: background on client relationships
Objectives	☑ Identify their needs ☑ Benefits of the suggested change – financial, manpower, service levels, quality etc.
Solutions	☑ Identify why they should select you ☑ Future effects of the benefits on the organization
Proposed Timeline	☑ Outlines the expected completion dates for the major steps of the process
Fees/Costs	☑ State what they can expect to pay for the services or product
Conclusion	☑ References/endorsements of others who have adapted this solution
Appendix	☑ Add any other relevant or supporting piece of information to enhance the proposal

Exercise: Reflecting on Your Business Proposal

Instructions: Select a proposal that you may be required to write and begin your process by brainstorming the following questions:

1. What is the topic of the business proposal?

2. Who is the customer or target audience? Be specific.

3. What is the reason/purpose for the proposal?

4. What template will you use?

Checklist for Report & Proposal Writing

Prepare to write

- ❑ Determine the topic.
- ❑ Determine the reason/purpose.
- ❑ Determine the target audience.
- ❑ Outline answers to the following questions: who, what, when, where, how and why.
- ❑ Know the product and service.
- ❑ Identify partners/consults and resources required, including writers.
- ❑ Complete research and needs assessment (if applicable).
- ❑ Determine the format/structure or approach of the report or proposal.

Review the basics

- ❑ Use simple words.
- ❑ Use plenty of space within the document.
- ❑ Use headings where necessary.
- ❑ State facts clearly.
- ❑ Avoid using clichés or jargon.
- ❑ Include graphics or illustrations (if applicable).

Edit to enhance your writing

- ❑ Proofread the report or proposal at least twice for typographical errors.

A Personal Action Plan

1. I will start with small steps, especially in areas that are difficult for me. My short – term goals for improvement are:

2. I'm setting myself up for success by choosing to work towards long-range goals. My long-term goals for success are:

Congratulations! You should feel better prepared for your next report or proposal.

Remember: Writing is a process. It is often hard work even for good writers. As with most skills, you must practice, practice, practice.

Good Luck!