



## Chapter 1. Writing Your Way to Success

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I wrote my first computer magazine article not long after many years after microcomputers first appeared on the scene. Back then we were all just trying to figure out how the things work and how to get them to do something interesting. I figured out how to use a fairly obscure and complex feature of my new computer. Then I realized that I probably was not the only person who didn't know how to use that particular feature and that other people might find my newly-gained insight valuable. So I began submitting articles to computer hobbyist magazines and I've never stopped.

The ability to write about and publish my experiences and ideas has been instrumental in my ability to establish a career as an independent consultant. Much of the consulting work I've done has involved developing process-related materials for clients. I have created all manner of process descriptions, procedures, document templates, checklists, guidance documents, and other work aids. Other engagements have involved performing a process assessment that resulted in a written report of my observations, analysis, and recommendations. So the ability to communicate clearly, concisely, and effectively through the written word is an essential skill for many consultants. This eBook, adapted from my Consulting Tips and Tricks Blog ([www.karlconsulting.blogspot.com](http://www.karlconsulting.blogspot.com)), provides a lot of useful information about writing books, articles, blog posts, and anything else you might wish to share with the public.

As you gain experience and wisdom in a particular domain, you might wish to share what you've learned with others. I've now written about 160 articles on numerous software development, quality, and management topics, as well as more than twenty articles on chemistry and military history, of all things. Traditional print magazines published most of these articles, although more and more have appeared in recent years on websites. Most magazines will pay for articles; many websites will not. But remember, everything is negotiable. If you have a good enough story to tell and enough credibility in the industry, you might be able to negotiate some payment from anyone who publishes your work. In general, you might get between \$200 and \$1000 per article, although the latter figure seems to be on the high side these days. Chapter 3 of this eBook provides many recommendations regarding writing for magazines and websites.

Eventually you might decide to write a book. That's a whole different prospect from writing a bunch of magazine articles or blog posts will. Telling a story in a few thousand words on a focused topic isn't too hard; writing 60,000 to 100,000 words in a typical book takes much planning, time,

and effort. Then there's the whole matter of getting the book published, negotiating contracts, promoting it, and all the rest. It ain't trivial. Chapters 4 and 5 of this eBook are devoted to suggestions about writing and publishing books.

## Choosing a Role Model

To get things started, here's one tidbit of wisdom I've acquired after writing seven books: think about whose writing you find particularly appealing and learn from them. You might have favorite authors who you find to be especially helpful, interesting, and enjoyable to read. Take the time to examine their work and assess why you like their writing. Then you can try to emulate some of those desirable characteristics in your own work.

I did this quite a few years ago. I realized that Steve McConnell was one of my favorite software authors (he's also a good friend). Steve has written numerous top-selling software books and is very highly regarded in the industry. When I thought about it, I realized that Steve used fairly short sentences in much of his writing, and he writes in a direct, conversational style. I also favor that informal writing style, although I confess to being somewhat long-winded by nature. My sentences can get wordy. I also tend to overuse adverbs, and I say "tend to" a lot. We all have our shortcomings.

Once I recognized what I like about Steve's writing, I tried to steer my own writing style in that direction. I use the statistics from Word's grammar checker (part of the spell check feature) to provide guidance. I find the grammar checking feature in Word worse than useless overall—I think it was programmed on Opposite Day—but I do like these statistics. The statistics report the average number of sentences per paragraph in the document, words per sentence, and characters per word. The number of characters per word should be around five when writing in English. I aim to keep the average words per sentence no higher than twenty, and preferably fewer. Shorter words, shorter sentences, and shorter paragraphs enhance readability.

The statistics report also shows several readability measures. The higher the Flesch Reading Ease index, the easier the document is to read (duh). I aim for at least 40. The lower the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level, the easier the document is to read. I keep my technical writing at a grade level around twelve. For my nontechnical writing, I aim for a grade level between eight and nine. I also try to keep the number of passive sentences low. Sentences written in the active voice are more direct and easier to understand than passive-voice sentences.

If the statistics don't come out like I want after I've drafted an article or book chapter, I'll do some editing to simplify the material and increase the readability. By way of example, here are the statistics for this chapter:

- ◆ 1373 words
- ◆ Average of 6.7 sentences per paragraph (a little high)
- ◆ Average of 16.2 words per sentence (fine)
- ◆ Average of 4.8 characters per word (typical)
- ◆ One percent passive sentences (fine)
- ◆ Flesch Reading Ease of 56.1 (great)
- ◆ Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level of 9.3 (fine)

If these statistics are meaningful, you should find this chapter easy to read. I hope that's the case.

## Developing a Style

The whole point of writing is to communicate with your readers. Readers respond to writing that doesn't make them work hard to understand it. They love direct, simple tutorials that teach them techniques they can apply immediately. Readers appreciate clearly stated concepts, explanations, and opinions. Some authors write as though they want readers to know how smart they are. Nobody cares how smart you are. They just care if you're able to communicate useful information to them. Hence, my interest in using a simple and conversational writing style. When I was writing a series of tutorials on assembly language programming for a computer magazine long ago, I met a man who said, "When I work through your articles, I feel like you are standing there explaining them to me." This is exactly the kind of reaction I'm hoping for when I write. It was good to know that at least one person felt like I was communicating through the written word in just the way I wanted to.

As you develop your writing style, you might think about what kind of compliments from an admiring reader would mean the most to you. Then you can develop a style that elicits that sort of feedback. Just this week, a reader commented on one of my blog posts: "I always enjoy your articles as they provide so much insight and information in a simple and interesting way. I find that your books are also very user-friendly and practical." This comment delighted me; "simple, interesting, user-friendly, and practical" was music to my ears. It's one thing to inspire people with ideas, but I'm most interested in giving busy practitioners both useful techniques and the motivation to apply them.

I was educated as a scientist. The first substantial document I wrote was a PhD thesis in physical organic chemistry titled "Kinetics and Mechanism of Lithium Aluminum Hydride Reductions of Ketones." (What could be more fascinating than that? Actually, it was pretty cool.) Scientists neither write nor speak like normal people. When I began writing on topics other than science, it took me quite a while to un-learn how scientists write, to revamp my writing style to be more accessible. I think I've largely succeeded. One of the best compliments I ever got on my writing was when someone said, "You don't write like you have a PhD." I was most pleased.