10 Types Of Writing For eLearning

When I started counting the types of writing that are potentially required to produce an online course, I was stunned. I realized that one instructional designer can potentially provide the skills of an entire writing department.

Not only do we need skills for expository, creative, persuasive and technical writing, but we often write about
topics for which we know very little at first. Furthermore, our writing is expected to be motivating while clearly delivering concepts, procedures and facts.

Here you’ll find some brief guidelines that focus on each type of writing. Much of this writing is done in storyboards, so I didn’t include writing for storyboards as a separate type. What other types of writing for eLearning can you think of?

**1. Writing On-screen Text**

**They Skim!** Nearly all types of online learning—from simple web pages to highly interactive multimedia—include on-screen text. Perhaps in prehistoric times, learners read everything that was on the screen. Today, people skim before they read and learners may skip material unless they are highly engaged.

**Requirements for On-screen.** On-screen text should be lively but not self-conscious. It must relate to the learner’s current world to give it meaning, while providing them with something new. On-screen text should consider the limits people have for processing new information (around four chunks).

**Mind-deadening?** When on-screen text accompanies audio, it is often displayed in short pithy phrases, sometimes as bullet points. Although this can provide another channel for encoding information, many learners find it mind-deadening. See [alternatives to bullet lists](#) to get around the bullet point approach.

**2. Writing Audio Scripts**

**Find the Spark.** It’s probably obvious that writing to be heard is very different than writing to be read, so I won’t mention it. Similar to radio scripts, audio scripts should have a hook that sparks the imagination and entices the listener. We must draw the learner into our content, like a moth to a flame or an instructional designer to Twitter.
It’s About Sound. Word choices are critical when writing for the ear, so pay attention to the sounds of words and the cadence of phrases. Audio content is also processed by that same small working memory, so when it comes to scripting, less is more. Get away from your script for a few days (or hours if time is limited) and re-read it aloud. You’ll then be able to tell what is extraneous and what will be difficult for a narrator to read.

Don’t Mangle It. You don’t want your wonderful script to get mangled, which is why I prefer to use professional narrators, though my clients don’t always agree. For advice in this area, see How to Choose Voice Over Talent. If you’re recording in-house, you may want to read more about microphones to ensure your audio sounds as professional as possible.

3. Writing Video Scripts

Video is for Showing. The most basic rule for writing a video script is to “Show, don’t tell.” Writing for video is a skill that professionals spend a lifetime developing. But since we have to be good at every type of writing, we don’t have that luxury. To develop this skill on your own, it’s wise to read, watch, listen and practice all you can about writing for video.

How to Improve. To move along more quickly, consider hiring a scriptwriter to watch the process or take a professional workshop or course. Try to tag along on a video shoot to get started. For more complex video scripts, you need to think about the set, writing dialogue, character development and camera angles.

4. Technical Writing

Dull and Dry. The broadest definition of technical writing encompasses all instructional or “how to” writing. But many of us think of technical writing in a more limited sense—when we’re writing about technical subject matter, such as how to use PowerPoint, fix a copy machine or test a phone line. And let’s be honest, the topics are often dull and dry.

A Dash of Creativity. To engage an audience, technical writing of any kind requires an injection of creativity. It requires finding a way to honestly connect...
with your readers, listeners or users. This might entail a dash of humor, a conversational style or a brilliant metaphor. Oh. Did I mention it needs to be succinct, clear and accurate? This usually means understanding the content, revising like mad and testing it out on users.

5. Writing Stories

It’s Good Stuff. Storytelling is all the rage now and for good reason. It ties concepts and facts together into meaningful knowledge. Educational research shows that storytelling helps people learn, retain and retrieve the information embedded in a story. I guess that’s why people have been telling stories since ancient times.

What Stories Are. Many formats of storytelling seem to work. Introducing a short scenario where a character must solve a problem or issue in a workplace situation is effective for content presentation, discovery learning, practice activities and test questions. More involved stories might provide an account of an event (real or fictitious) and provide a theme for a lesson, a virtual environment or an entire course.

Set-up, Problem, Resolution. Scenarios and stories require a set-up, where the writer provides an environment in which characters can exist. The characters should resonate with the audience and they need a problem to solve or a goal to achieve. Ideally, the problem or goal has an emotional component—there are consequences of making a particular decision. A more involved story might have unforeseen consequences—twists in the plot. Finally, there is a resolution, a teaching point or some kind of satisfying conclusion. See this interview with the author of Resonate for more guidelines.

6. Writing Test Questions

Would Rather Teach Brain Surgery. As far as I’m concerned, writing reliable and valid test items is more difficult than designing a course on brain surgery. The test item must completely correspond to the learning objective. Every word in the test item must have only one meaning and every sentence must be interpreted in one way, no matter who is reading it. The sentence structure should be easy to understand, while simultaneously testing higher-order thinking skills.
Allot Lots o’ Time. Wherever writing assessment items fits into your design process, be sure to leave a great deal of time to complete this task. Tests should be fair and writing assessment items requires a lot of thought and attention. See the other articles about writing test items if you want more guidelines.

7. Writing Glossary Definitions

Rewriting Definitions. Instructional designers often find it necessary to include glossary terms in online courses. Although Subject Matter Experts may provide us with these definitions, they often need to be rewritten for clarity and to meet the needs of a specific audience. Often, we must write definitions without much to go on.

Don’t Go Mad. There are many challenges in writing glossary definitions. I know. I nearly went mad writing more than 460 definitions for my iPhone app, Instructional Design Guru. Here’s a bit of what I learned: 1) every word counts, 2) remove extraneous words, 3) use a consistent style for every definition and 4) let someone else edit them. Perhaps these points are true for all writing, but if so, then they are 120% true for glossary definitions.

8. Writing Interactions

It’s Powerful. Interactivity leverages the power of online learning. From simple drag and drop exercises to full-blown simulations and games, instructional designers create interactions so learners can test new knowledge and skills in a safe and hopefully challenging or fun environment.

Three Types in One. Interactivity doesn’t just happen. Someone needs to create the interaction or game, based on an instructional purpose. Instructional Designers must describe how an interaction works in a storyboard (one type of writing), create the interactive problem itself (another type of writing) and write instructions for the learners (see microcopy below).

9. Writing Microcopy

The Little Things. Microcopy refers to the little instructions and phrases that we
use in eLearning and in user interface design. You know, things like, “Click here for a definition, even though you should already know it.” or “If you do not pass this super fair test, please resign from your current position.” Actually, that might be the microcopy you wish you could write some days.

**User Experience.** Don’t let your microcopy be an afterthought. Keep it succinct, with the right amount of detail and well-chosen words. The clarity of your mini-instructions affects the user experience. A frustrated learner will become unmotivated and as a result, won’t get as much out of the learning experience. Consider writing microcopy to be a critical task for effective eLearning. Here are more guidelines for writing microcopy.

10. **Copywriting**

**Defined.** Do you ever write the description of a course for an online catalog, learning management system or newsletter? Are you responsible for enticing employees to enroll in a non-required course? If so, you’re involved in copywriting, which involves the purposeful use of language to persuade someone to take a specific and measurable action, such as taking a course, using a product or listening to an expert.

**AIDA.** Copywriters often refer to a formula with the acronym AIDA, which has some similarities to ADDIE. The AIDA formula goes like this: A is for Attention-grab your audience’s attention; I is for Interest—hold their interest; D is for Desire—emphasize the benefits, using real examples if possible; and A is for Action—provide a call to action, such as encouraging someone to sign up for a course.

**How to Improve**

Whenever I hear writers speak about their craft, the one consistent piece of advice they give is this, “practice, practice, practice.” You just have to start writing to improve your writing. And always have a second person read your writing to catch errors, awkward wording and sentences that need to be whittled down.

Get The eLearning Coach delivered to your Inbox twice a month, with articles, tips and resources. Plus download my eBook about writing for instructional design. Sign up below. Your email address will never be shared.
15 Responses to “10 Types Of Writing For eLearning”

**Jill** says:
November 3, 2011 at 8:39 am

AIDA – You described the “A”, “I”, and “D”, but what about the 2nd “A”?

[Reply]

**Connie Malamed** Reply:
November 3rd, 2011 at 8:56 am

Ooops. Thanks for catching that Jill! I think it got accidentally deleted. I’ve fixed the article and the last “A” is for Action.

[Reply]

**Kim George** says:
November 4, 2011 at 12:17 pm

Hi Connie,

As an ex-instructional designer who is now dabbling in marketing and corporate comms,
I've found your post really interesting and enjoyable to read.

I think it's worth noting that the type of audio scripts for e-learning can vary too; sometimes the audio in a course merely voices the text on the screen, word for word, while sometimes it consists of extra detail to complement or expand upon the text content on the screen. So I think finding the spark and choosing words carefully for non-verbatim scripts is crucial, to engage – and not confuse! – the learner. And when writing the text content for a course that will have matching audio, it would be important to bear in mind that every word will be read out. That sentence might read well, but how will it sound?

I think it's a great point you've made that IDs write in so many different ways and I think writing video scripts is one of the hardest skills to accomplish as an e-learning designer. Personally, I always enjoyed writing the microcopy as you call it – I liked guiding a learner through a course with quirky phrases rather than the usual 'Click Next to continue.'

Yawn!

Another type of writing for e-learning would be writing resources such as case studies, FAQs, crib sheets and top tips.

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Connie Malamed Reply:
November 4th, 2011 at 1:03 pm

Hi Kim,

Thanks for your excellent contribution here. I like your point about how writing audio scripts can vary so much. And also, I like your additions, such as case studies, FAQs, crib sheets and top tips. I think writing FAQs is a great addition – we have to do that a lot these days. And by crib sheets I'm guessing you mean job aids? Now I have to think about whether writing a case study is similar to writing a story. What do you think?

Connie

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Jeffrey says:
November 9, 2011 at 11:39 pm

Hi Connie,

I just recently joined your website and I am very excited at all it has to offer. I have been an editor/writer for about 6 years for a math textbook company. As you would guess, each year my company produces less and less print material and produces...
more and more digital content. I have slowly been getting my feet wet in writing digital content and I have just begun classes in Instructional Design.

I found this article quite interesting because it helped to show me all of the similarities and differences in the types of writing done for print versus digital content. Point 8 about writing interactions is something I am really focusing on right now. One of the “quick” and “easy” things my company does now is takes a print book and turns it into an ebook. Then certain levels of interactivity are applied to that ebook. In my opinion, this works pretty well, but I think if the book were written to be an ebook from the beginning the levels of interactivity would be much more dynamic. Have you had any experience in work like this?

Thanks,
Jeffrey

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Connie Malamed Reply:

Connie Malamed Reply:
November 10th, 2011 at 8:22 am

Hi Jeffrey,

Sounds like you’ve landed into a fascinating space. This is something that instructional designers commonly do, transform print-based content into digital or online content, so that was smart of you to start taking ID courses! You’re probably right that if it were written as an eBook from the start, it might have been better, but I’m guessing you can figure out ways to overcome that, if you’re given the freedom to do so at work. Thanks for checking in and sharing your experience.

Best,
Connie

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