Establishing a writing culture at [Company]

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Definition of "writing culture"

Culture is equally elusive to define as it is difficult to change. It is therefore important that we first attempt to establish a common understanding of what culture is, which we will use to ensure that this document builds on a shared foundation. A definition that I think captures the meaning of culture in an organizational context is: *[culture] is a way of life of a group of people--the behaviors, beliefs, values, and symbols that they accept, generally without thinking about them, and that are passed along by communication and imitation.*
A writing culture is then a specific type of culture in which the practice of long-form writing plays a central role in the way a group of people communicates and operates.

Please note that, in our declination of writing culture, writing is intentionally restricted to the narrower definition of *long-form writing*. Powerpoints, bullet lists, emails, slack messages, and, obviously, meetings should not be considered as contributing to a writing culture. Actually, they endanger it.

Long-form writing is essentially a 2+ pages argumentative essay or memo.

By adopting, promoting and living a writing culture from top mgmt to individual contributors, we can expect the following advantages, grouped by area of impact.

Benefits of understanding

> Paul Graham put it this way: *"A good writer doesn't just think, and then write down what he thought, as a sort of transcript. A good writer will almost always discover new things in the process of writing."* [1]

Clarity

Writing is a supremely useful tool to sharpen and clarify our thinking.

Have you ever noticed how difficult it can be to write about a thought that you just had in the shower? How is it possible that in the shower it was so clear and well formed and now, faced by pencil and paper or a computer screen, we seem to not be able to form one coherent sentence?

An explanation can be found in Jeff Bezos's email in which he officially banned the use of PowerPoint at Amazon: "because the narrative structure of a good memo forces better thought and better understanding of what's more important than what, and how things are related."

Another, but similar take on the same idea is that "we don't write about what we know, but we write to know it".

Depth

We mentioned above that long-form writing helps to discover the connections between things. This allows us to go to any depth that we feel is appropriate for the document we are writing.

The written form will also allow our readers to zoom in and out as they prefer, picking the depth that's more appropriate for them at the time. In oral communication, powerpoint, email, etc. this is not possible due to the nature of the medium itself and, consequently, how it is expected to be used. For example, bullet points, which are frequently used in presentations, are easy for the writer to come up with as they don't need to be refined or even accurate. Because of this, bullet points are open to (mis)interpretation and require significant effort on the reader to unpack and absorb.

On the contrary, *(clear) writing gives poor thinking nowhere to hide* (cit.).[2]

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[1] https://fs.blog/why-write/
[2] https://youtu.be/e47wAgIhZ7o?si=1P-S0xbJf2OfT8Gz&t=285

Benefits of working with others

> *A writing culture helps intensely: oftentimes, you kind of have to take this decision to somebody else, typically somebody higher up in the hierarchy…. You say, "Look, we've had this … rigorous conversation and discussion, and it's all documented here in this Google Doc or what have you, and we can't seem to decide." [3]*

Influence

A (clearly) written document can reach people well beyond the circle with which we are in direct contact. It can form alliances and bring alignment where it would have otherwise been difficult.

Second, and equally important, it bypasses meetings as a gatekeeping measure and creates a permission-less structure which is, generally speaking, a behavior seen in generative cultures[4].

If the only way to influence a decision, an outcome, or a group of people is to be in a certain meeting, then if we can't be in that meeting, the meeting is effectively a gate that's keeping us (and our ideas) out. Written form, on the other hand, is much more open by its nature and allows input from people that would not otherwise be able to contribute.

The written form even allows our thoughts and ideas to outlive us, as we'll see later but I think we can all intuitively understand.

Attention

Nothing gets us the full, focused and undivided attention of your audience like the written form.

A written document gets rid of the furious and distracting note-taking that happens during presentations, the occasional remark or question from colleagues, etc. For the writer, long-form writing maximizes the chances of being there, in the reader's head, alone with nothing else. This can happen multiple times too, in fact it happens anytime the reader decides to engage with our writing.

The audience can use the reading support that works better *for them* such as paper, e-reader, computer, tablet, tablet with stylus, phone, reading apps, etc.

The audience can ask as many questions as they want, also in private form, removing the dreaded silence that often follows a presentation. That silence often means that people are not comfortable asking the questions they have, rather than that they agree. Even if they agreed, it would beg to ask: at which level? At a surface level, or in depth?

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[3] https://fs.blog/knowledge-project-podcast/shreyas-doshi/
[4] https://dora.dev/devops-capabilities/cultural/generative-organizational-culture/

Asynchronous

The audience can pick and choose the time that best suits them, and the time at which they can be more focused, or predisposed to consume the information, the idea, the proposal that we have prepared for them.

Writing *always* shifts the dynamic in favor of the reader, who can additionally go back to the source any time they want, without being encumbered by distractions.

Conflict mitigation

The written form indirectly introduces several strong conflict-mitigating factors:
1. Asynchronicity
2. Clarity
3. Escalation

Asynchronous communication creates time to think about the issue without the pressure of a meeting where the clock is ticking and requiring a real time interaction. This creates a false sense of urgency which breeds approximation, misunderstanding, and eventually allows the ego factor to get in the way. It can be an overall frustrating experience, which, when repeated, can create insurmountable chasms.

Clarity of goals, intentions, strategy, etc. will indeed help overcome disagreement and foster consent-based decision making when people feel they can disagree, and still support the decision to the best of their ability through a better understanding of the root of our disagreement.

Oftentimes conflict arises from unclear or missing context for a decision (feeling informed as opposed to consulted). This can lead to speculation and gossip, the silent killers for lots of organizations.

When a decision seems impossible, we need to go higher in the chain of command. Going to them with a written document will help them come to an informed decision, as opposed to going to them with a presentation or, worse, just talking points where lots of nuance can be and will be lost.

Benefits of scope

> *Third, scale. Sometimes documents only live for an hour or so. They're there to drive a decision, and when the decision is made the document is dead. Much more often, in my experience, they live well beyond the initial reading. I've had people ask me questions about documents I wrote more than a decade ago, that they're still finding useful today. I love reading CS papers from before I was born. Writing scales in time much better than speaking.* [5]

Historical record

Written documents will provide an easily searchable history of records. This is supremely valuable in rapidly growing organizations where fresh joiners will otherwise not have the ability to build a context around pre-existing decisions or strategies.

Scale

Repeating the same presentation or saying the same things over and over every time just does not scale. At all. Even in the best case that we can repeat the exact same words every time, it requires time from all involved parties. This can work in a small organization, however it will never work in large, distributed organizations.

Writing simply scales better, both along the axis of time and reach. It's a small upfront investment that will pay itself back many times over, ultimately leading to efficiency and efficacy.

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[5] https://brooker.co.za/blog/2022/11/08/writing.html

Writing well is difficult

If writing is so powerful, why is it not everywhere?

The reason is that writing, and writing well especially, is difficult. We then decide against the investment in writing because when we weigh the difficulty and the initial upfront investment against the sense of urgency of online communication and contemporary work styles, the latter prevails.

What we should always remember is that writing can and will improve with practice. If we set reasonable goals for us we can improve while not feeling frustrated because we have not reached arbitrary, unreasonable goals.

We should therefore first aim at writing, then try to write well, and finally aim at writing excellently. In the appendix we provide some guidance for each level.

As a general rule, we need to accept that writing and writing well will take time, and *a couple of weeks are the bare minimum* before a ready-for-first-pass document emerges from our sea of thoughts.

Appendix

A progressive path to writing well

Goals for starting out with writing:

1. pick a tool that works for you (word, confluence, etc)
2. practice in the language of choice for your writing (which should be English, as it is the primary Company language)
3. enable grammar and syntax checks
4. (opinionated, you might disagree) disable writing assistants, especially if you think your level is beginner. I've found that writing assistants can suggest synonyms or wording that does not mean what the author thought it did, but the author was not fluent enough in the target language to spot the inconsistency
5. practice using basic document structures: sentence, paragraph, use of newlines to separate paragraphs within sections, sections and subsections. Ideally you should be able to generate a meaningful table of contents from a judicious use of structure
6. add page numbers (in case it is likely that the document gets printed) and title to the footer and header respectively
7. go back and re-read the document after a one or two day break. It will probably take one or two weeks before something approachable is ready, depending on your skills, familiarity with the topic and level of refinement you want to achieve
8. ask colleagues if they can proofread your work and be intentional about the kind and degree of advice you expect from them. For example, do you want feedback on the document, the writing or its content? This item is very, very important!

Writing well:

1. switch to a tool that works for your audience! Word is fine initially, but its collaboration and sharing features are limited and oftentimes awkward
2. expand on the document structure and learn footnotes, indices, cross-references, proper use of italics, bold, quotes, captions
3. does the idea benefit from a diagram? Practice integrating one in your writing, for example https://whiteboard.office.com/ can create basic but powerful diagrams
4. practice clarity: what is the one (and only one!) concept that you want to pass on the reader? Start with that one, and use the document structure to separate the main concept from the supporting materials, second-order effects, secondary concepts, etc.
5. learn to master the language of choice for your writing (consume material in English, read books in English, etc.)

Writing exceptionally:

1. work on the aesthetics, do the fine tuning. For example play with line spacing (I find that 1.25 creates a nice, airy sense of space without compromising the structure), indents, page breaks, etc.

2. refine and master clarity by asking yourself: what does my reader want? For example if you are writing a document for a C-level, focus on impact. Are you trying to provide guidance? Focus on execution and advice. And so on.
3. expand your audience: be intentional about the possibility that everyone might read you
4. master the language through continuous practice

Reference material

In descending order of relevance (most relevant first).

https://brooker.co.za/blog/2022/11/08/writing.html

https://rahulramchandani.com/writing-culture-at-amazon/

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https://fs.blog/why-write/

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