

Red Level Strategies

Note: These reference guides do not take the place of assignment guidelines



Strategies for Controlling the Rhetorical Situation

The Red Level Strategies are the foundations of Professional Writing. These strategies are designed to assist you during the invention stage, provide clarity and succinctness while writing, and allow for the creative and intentional use of rhetorical strategies when presenting your message to an audience.

Establish Purpose, Audience, and Tone

Purpose and audience are the basis of all communication. The goal of professional writing is to clearly identify and present your purpose to a specific audience. Purpose, audience, and tone are explained in further detail below.

Purpose

In professional writing, the purpose refers to your goals and desired outcomes for a written work. The following questions can help guide you when deciding what your purpose is:

- "What am I writing about? Why am I writing about it?"
- "What action do I want my readers to take in response to my writing?"

Example Purpose: *"I am writing about bringing Swamp Dragons to FGCU's campus, and my goal is to educate readers on the benefits of introducing Swamp Dragons to Florida ecosystems. I want my readers to feel compelled to support bringing Swamp Dragons to FGCU, and to encourage university administrators to bring this change to campus."*

Audience

Your audience is who you are communicating with. Your audience could be your friends, your teachers, your colleagues, a supervisor, or any number of individuals or groups. With a clear audience in mind, you can tailor your style to match audience expectations. When determining your audience, it is important to ask yourself several questions before you write, such as:

- "How can my audience be described in a few words? What groups does my audience identify with?"
- "What is my audience's general age, gender, economic status, political status, religious preference, etc.?"
- "What is the average level of education within my audience?"
- "How much experience does my audience have with my topic and purpose? What is my position relative to my audience?"

Example Audience: *"My topic is bringing Swamp Dragons to FGCU, and I am speaking to FGCU's student body. I know that my audience is largely young adult, equally male and female, relatively diverse, mostly middle class, active students attending an environmentally-friendly university. Most are working towards bachelors degrees. My audience doesn't know much about my subject yet, and they are the ones who will help promote my message."*

Tone

Your tone is the overall implicit and explicit attitudes, opinions, and feelings that you convey through your communication. Your tone will likely change depending on your audience and purpose. For example, you would likely not speak to a professor the same way you would speak to your friends and peers. To determine the appropriate tone for your communication, you can ask yourself several questions as you write:

- "What words express strong emotions and opinions in my writing?"
- "How did I feel after I read my communication? How do I want my readers to react to or feel about my purpose?"

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Speaking with a Professor: *"Dear professor, I am struggling to understand the meaning behind 'Mysteries of the Swamp Dragon' and was wondering if I could meet with you during your office hours to discuss it?"*

Speaking with Friends: *"I'm over it! 'Mysteries of the Swamp Dragon' is too confusing. Why would anyone read this?"*

Use Direct Organization

Direct organization is a pattern of organization that emphasizes the purpose of the communication. Direct organization typically adheres to the following format:

Direct Organization

1. State your purpose clearly and concisely.
2. Explain the reasoning and context behind your purpose.
3. Fill in the pertinent details: who, what, where, when, and why?
4. Conclude by motivating the reader to action: what do you want your reader to do?

Use Simple, Concrete, and Direct Language – Align Language and Purpose

Simple Language

Simple language improves the reader's ability to process and understand your communications. Simple language is the use of common words over complex or lengthy ones.

Complex Example: *"Whether, as a matter of principle, a man speaks that which he does not believe, it is not a clear indication of his nature, nor does it shed light on his moral essence."*

Simple Example: *"Telling a lie does not necessarily mean a person is a habitual liar or inherently bad."*

Use Familiar Vocabulary

Use language that suits the audience and purpose of your piece. The use of common language and simple jargon makes your writing easier to comprehend by wide audiences.

Unfamiliar Vocabulary: *"It is imperative that we utilize the most efficacious stratagems during the implementation of our avant-garde, reformist enterprise of introducing Swamp Dragons to the educational community."*

Familiar Vocabulary: *"It is important that we use the most effective strategies when beginning our progressive new project of bring Swamp Dragons to campus."*

Write in Short Paragraphs

Professional writing favors short paragraphs. Four to ten sentences are ideal, with some paragraphs being as short as a single sentence. Paragraphs should have a single focus, with topic sentences that clearly state their purposes. Topic sentences should contain a clear topic and a controlling idea. The topic is what will be discussed within the paragraph. The controlling idea contains your opinion or analysis of the topic.

Focused Topic Sentence: *"Pollution causes the widespread disruption of local and global Swamp Dragon ecosystems through habitat destruction, contamination of natural resources, and decreased quality of life."*

Topic: *"Pollution causes the widespread disruption of local and global Swamp Dragon ecosystems."*

Controlling Idea: *"Disruptions include habitat destruction, contamination of natural resources, and decreased quality of life."*

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Concrete and Specific Language

Abstract vs. Concrete Language

Abstract language refers to intangible ideas, qualities, and concepts that are recognized through the intellect. Concrete language refers to tangible qualities and characteristics that are known through the senses. In professional writing, it is important to use concrete language to express ideas and concepts, using abstract language only when necessary.

Abstract Language: *"To raise Swamp Dragons, you must work hard."*

Concrete Language: *"To raise Swamp Dragons, you must build an appropriate enclosure, study recommended Swamp Dragon diets, adhere to a strict care routine, and provide lots of toys and love to your dragon."*

General vs. Specific Language

General language refers to categories and groups, as well as vague concepts like "most," "some," "well," "really," and "good." Specific language refers to particular items, objects, and individual cases.

General Language: *"Most people at the university say they like the new project."*

Specific Language: *"Seventy-five percent of Florida Gulf Coast University students are satisfied with the new Swamp Dragon program."*

The Ladder of Abstraction

Typically, words do not fall neatly into the categories of abstract and concrete, general or specific. Furthermore, the two categories overlap, leading to words that can be general but also concrete or abstract but also specific. Because of this lack of easy categorization, it is helpful to arrange words into a scale, arranged from least concrete and specific to most, called a Ladder of Abstraction. Below is an example of a Ladder of Abstraction for the word "Animal." As you read through, pay attention to the way in which your mental image of the animal being described becomes increasingly clearer as the language becomes more specific and concrete.

Example Ladder of Abstraction

8. Animal
7. Reptile
6. Dragon
5. Swamp Dragon
4. College Swamp Dragon
3. FGCU's Swamp Dragon
2. FGCU's Swamp Dragon, Patrick, who lives in the lake.
1. FGCU's brand new Swamp Dragon, Patrick, who lives in the lake behind the FGCU Library.

Direct Language

Use Pronouns

Since you are talking directly to other people in professional writing, it is acceptable, and even expected, to use pronouns like "I," "me," "we," or "us."

Academic Pronoun Use: *"The campus takes three hours to complete, and in that time onlookers can expect to see alligators, squirrels, and a Swamp Dragon."*

Business Pronoun Use: *"It will take us three hours to finish the campus tour, and we can expect to see alligators, squirrels, and a Swamp Dragon!"*

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Avoid the Undesignated "This"

This is something you should avoid. Unclear, right? Placing "this" at the beginning of the sentence forces the reader to stop and consider who or what "this" is referring to. Instead, you should clearly state what "this" is.

Undesignated "This": *"This shows that our university has the skills necessary to raise Swamp Dragons."*

Designated "This": *"Our history of sustainability, preserve lands, and dedication to the SW Florida environment show that our university has the skills necessary to raise Swamp Dragons."*

Write in Active Voice

Professional writing is typically written in active voice because active voice tends to result in shorter, more direct sentences. Active voice refers specifically to a type of sentence structure that emphasizes the subject of the sentence rather than the object. See our *Active Voice vs. Passive Voice* handout for a more detailed explanation of active voice.

Ensure Accuracy and Completeness

It is essential to consider the accuracy and completeness of your writing and communication. These two qualities are essential when establishing trust with and motivating readers.

Accuracy

Accuracy relates to the objective qualities of your communication: the who, what, where, when, why, and how. By being specific, you are able to use these objective qualities strategically within your writing to connect with your reader, while also strengthening your purpose.

Inaccurate Example: *"All students are bad at math."*

Accurate Example: *"Seventy-five percent of students surveyed claimed that they would have struggled more with their math class if they had not visited the Center for Academic Achievement."*

Completeness

Completeness relates to the subjective qualities of your communication. It involves the amount of information presented, the context of the communication, and the pertinent details associated with it. Vague and incomplete communication tends to suggest an action or change, but is not specific enough to compel readers to act or suggest how they should act. Complete communications offer a reason for the reader to act *and* suggest what actions can be taken.

Incomplete Example: *"I would like to see you tomorrow"*

Complete Example: *"I would like to see you tomorrow at or around three o'clock to discuss your proposal for a Swamp Dragon habitat. Let's meet at Starbucks."*

Use Purposeful and Informative Subject Lines

Subject lines are the first piece of information your audience sees, and they set the tone and purpose for your communication. The length of a subject line will vary based on the type of communication you are writing; however, subject lines should generally be long enough to give your reader a clear idea of the communication's content but short enough to fit into a single line or sentence.

Ineffective Subject Line: *"Dragons"*

Better Subject Line: *"Question about When Dragons Will Arrive"*

Effective Subject Line: *"Question about the Expected Swamp Dragon Delivery on Oct. 9th, Order # 5907141"*