


Thinking Like a Writer

By Jean Reynolds, Ph.D.



I've always been curious about how people *think*, and I've learned a lot that way. It's one of the reasons I enjoy working with police officers. It's not just that they often notice things that I—a writing consultant who's a civilian—am likely to miss. What's really fascinating is watching their thinking process unfold—often at lightning speed—as they decide how to handle a tricky or dangerous situation.

In this article, I'm going to turn the tables and explain how writers (people like me) think their way through a writing problem. If you're in a leadership position—or hope to hold one of those positions someday—the ability to *think like a writer* can be invaluable. I hope this article will stimulate your curiosity!

A Strategy for Traffic Stops

A few years ago, a criminal justice company hired me to write some articles about officer safety. One traffic stop strategy surprised me with its simplicity. When an officer got out of their service vehicle, they closed the driver's side door *twice*. Hearing that, the citizen who had been pulled over naturally thought there were *two* officers. It was a simple strategy that increased the margin of safety only slightly. Nevertheless, several officers assured me that even a small margin can mean a lot in a risky situation.

Of course, we're talking about *writing* today, not safety. If you were a diligent student in your high school English classes, you might have noticed that I made a grammatical mistake—two of them, actually—in the previous paragraph. Here's the offending sentence:

When the officer got out of their service vehicle, they closed the driver's side door twice.

(Please don't worry: I'm not going to give you a grammar lesson! My topic today is *thinking*.)

That mistake is called a singular “they,” and it’s long been the bane of English teachers. An officer is one person, right? I shouldn’t have written “*their* service vehicle” and “*they* closed.” A strict grammarian would have written the sentence like this:

When the officer got out of *his or her* service vehicle, *he or she* closed the driver's side door twice.

Although that rule is fading away (thank goodness!), there are still some English textbooks that tell you

that *his or her* is required in sentences like mine. But here I am—a professional writer who broke that rule. Why would I do that in an article I was *paid* to write? The answer is that I was thinking about my readers. *His or her* is a clumsy expression. Using it once is bad enough; using it *twice* in a single sentence would be unforgivable, in my opinion.

What do pros like me think about when we sit down at our keyboards? If your answer is grammar, or rules, or correctness, you're wrong.

I respect grammar, of course. My grammar and spellchecker are always turned on: error-free writing helps me put my ideas across. But I don't allow grammar—or something a professor or a textbook told me—to have the final say about a writing task. I turn on my writer's brain and make my own decision.

Successful professional writers think first about *connecting* with their readers. How can you make your point, quickly and efficiently? How can you win your readers' respect?

Thinking Like a Pro

What does all of this have to do with criminal justice? *A lot.* The higher you go on the career ladder, the more writing you'll be doing. If you want to be a top-notch writer, I recommend spending a few moments each day on a thinking activity that focuses on language.

At least once a day, pick up something you (or a coworker) have written, and ask yourself some questions:

- What choices did I (or the writer) make? Why?
- Were those choices effective? Why or why not?
- Which criminal justice traditions shaped this writing task? Are they helpful? Is it time to revisit them?
- How would a typical reader react to this written piece? Would they be impressed? Confused? Tired? Enlightened?



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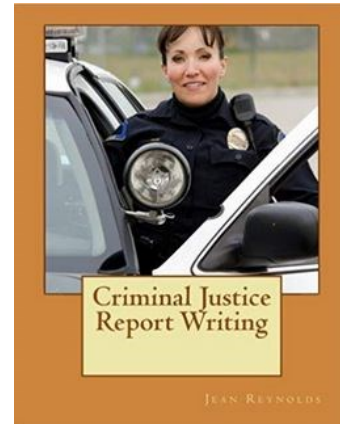
Although this kind of daily practice takes only a few minutes, the payoff can be huge. You're laying tracks in your head (literally)—building new brain pathways that will automatically turn on whenever you sit down to write.

There's nothing new or mysterious about this kind of brain-building: you've been doing it ever since you began your academy program. The years you've spent in law enforcement have created a complex set of thinking skills that automatically turn on when you need them.

In this article, I've been encouraging you to pay attention to another, equally complex set of thinking skills—your language habits. You've been developing them since you first learned to talk. You live your life in a world of words. You're constantly processing sophisticated sentences, paragraphs, pages, and ideas. You know *language*! (Everybody does.)

Make a resolution—now—to become more aware of language. Ask questions. Muse. Wonder. The results of this daily, effortless practice—simple listening, looking, and thinking—will amaze you. Start now!

Dr. Jean Reynolds is Professor Emeritus at Polk State College in Florida, where she taught English for over thirty years. She served as a consultant on communications and problem-solving skills to staff in Florida's Department of Corrections. At Polk State College, she has taught report writing classes for recruits and advanced report writing and FTO classes for police and correctional officers. She is the author of *Criminal Justice Report Writing*.



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