

## Mark Twain on writing – some lessons for your papers

**Samuel Langhorne Clemens** (November 30, 1835 – April 21, 1910), known by his pen name **Mark Twain**, was an American writer, humourist, entrepreneur, publisher, and lecturer. He was the author of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and its sequel, the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

He had a lot to say about writing. Some you will have heard before, and other quotes are not so well known.

**"I would have written you a shorter letter if I'd had the time"**

No doubt you've all heard that maxim. Although it is often associated with Mark Twain, it's not clear he was the originator of it, even though he strongly ascribed to it.

We hear this often when referring to policy advice papers. Of course, succinct and clear papers are preferred by busy Ministers. But they do take time to achieve.

It's easy to start off planning to write a short crisp paper. We are often dealing with complex issues and explaining the nuances takes longer than we expect the first time around.

Frequently, managers, peer reviewers, and experts consulted along the way, seem to suggest putting more in, rather than removing things.

This is when authors need to allow enough time for a hard edit and restructuring or re-writing if needed. All too often we run out of time to do enough at the end. Often, we didn't have much time to start with!

But always plan in a decent chunk of time for self-review of your work.

A quick rule of thumb is the 50/50 rule. Half your time spend on thinking, analysing and resolving the problem, and half on writing (and reviewing).

Peer reviewers also have a major part to play. Make sure you focus on what could be cut, put in an appendix or simplified as part of a good peer review.

**"The time to begin writing an article is when you have finished it to your satisfaction. By that time, you begin to clearly and logically perceive what it is that you really want to say."**

It's easy to tell when this hasn't happened, papers are long-winded, put too much emphasis on the background and the structure is muddled.

So, you could either take the approach of writing, then fully re-writing. Or you could think before you write!

We recommend a having a plan so the necessary research, information gathering, and analysis are done first.

Then determine the conclusions and recommendations. It's always a good idea to test those with others as they can help to refine your thinking and potentially introduce other perspectives.

Then, storyboard your paper, and then, and only then start writing.

**And more from Mark Twain on similar themes**

*"Anybody can have ideas – the difficulty is to express them without squandering a quire of paper on an idea that ought to be reduced to one glittering paragraph."*

*"I notice that you use plain, simple language, short words and brief sentences. That is the way to write English – it is the modern way and the best way. Stick to it; don't let fluff and flowers and verbosity creep in."*

*"As to the Adjective: when in doubt, strike it out."*

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