

# **Just Write: Evaluation Report**

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**Alicia Fentiman  
Charlotte Creed  
Terry Allsop**

**International Research Foundation for Open Learning  
Cambridge**

**“The structure of the course itself was good. The course was like a step-by-step guide to effective writing – more like a recipe book. If you follow the directions and have the right ingredients you can’t go wrong. That’s the impression that has dented my mind about the course”. (Quoted from a participant upon completion of the course)**

**“The Just Write Course has made a big difference to my writing. Currently I can write my scientific reports without the assistance of my seniors. I can write research proposals and win grants. I can write publications and be published at least in our local journals! It was not like that prior to the Just Write Course. Perhaps it might have contributed to my promotion to be a project leader recently.” (Quoted from one of the Just Write participants 8 months after taking the course)**

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## **Executive Summary**

### **(a) Evaluation process**

Three independent evaluators from the International Research Foundation for Open Learning monitored and scrutinised the Just Write pilot course prior to the course beginning, during the course and after the course. They used a range of qualitative data techniques to examine the interactions between participants and tutor. Detailed scrutiny was made of the technical aspects of the CD-Rom and materials by our materials expert, Charlotte Creed.

### **(b) The Just Write Pilot Course**

Just Write is an online course on effective writing. It consists of an intensive three week course which combines study material, interactive exercises, on line discussions with fellow participants and individual online tuition from the course tutor. The aim of the course is to assist participants to write powerful, persuasive documents. It caters to a wide range of people in a diverse range of occupations; it is open to anyone, anywhere who wants to improve his/her writing skills. It covers four key areas essential in creative writing: planning, outlining, writing a first draft and editing to create a final version.

### **(c) Findings**

**Our findings are summarised from specific questions and observations which are expressed more fully in Sections 3, 4, and 5 of the main report.**

#### **(1) Learner's perspectives/experiences**

A total of twenty-five participants registered for the Just Write course; however, only eight completed all the assignments. In order to assess their expectations and their experiences questionnaires were sent prior to the course and after the course. The participants were a diverse group of people with varied backgrounds. The reasons for undertaking the course included: to improve their means of communication and to write more persuasively, to improve their self-esteem and confidence, to organise their work better and to improve their English. They expected the tutor to help with both technical and moral support.

After the course, a questionnaire was sent to all the participants to find out their reactions to the pilot course and to determine whether they had found it useful, relevant and/or challenging. Only six participants responded, and they summed up their experiences by stating some of the achievements they gained from the course. These included: confidence to write better, enjoyment in writing, improvement in planning and the development of newly acquired skills to structure a written piece.

The on-line tutorial support met the learners' expectations and praise was given to the tutor for his swift and encouraging remarks and his motivation. One respondent commented: "The support was wonderful. Each time I raised a query, the responses were

swift. My sincere gratitude goes to Alan Barker whose contributions towards my assignments were very encouraging. His comments were eye openers and he is a good motivator. I thoroughly enjoyed being his student.”

Although most of the learners did not encounter technical problems with the CDrom, a few of the learners experienced technical difficulties and found the files in the CDrom too long to download. One respondent commented “Because I am in a rural area with a slow connection, the graphics at the beginning of the CDrom took too long to download.” For the most part the instruction was clear and the participants liked the check-lists at the end of each section. Another learner commented, “The CDrom will continue to be of assistance; I can revisit the course until it has nothing further to offer”.

Two significant recommendations about the course were made by the learners:

- *Time Management*: The major obstacle hindering participation for many learners was the time factor. They felt that too much was expected of them in a very short time. Each of the participants is working full time and the demands of the course were too great. All suggested that more time should be allotted to them to undertake the course. Some of the participants did not have full access to internet facilities and found that the assignments were too demanding. They found that the course took more than one hour per day.
- *Incentives*: The retention rate was only 32% and it was suggested by the participants that a certificate be awarded for completion. This would award those who completed all the assignments. Some stressed the importance of a certificate for upgrading their employment prospects.

In order to assess the longer term impact of the course, another questionnaire was devised to send to the participants six months after the course. Only four participants completed the questionnaire and overwhelmingly they thought the course had made a difference to their writing skills. None of the line managers provided feedback.

## **(2) On-line tuition: tutor-learner interaction**

A significant aspect of the course is intensive interaction between the tutor and the participant; this is done on-line. Detailed examination of the dialogue and comments between tutor and participant show a committed, professional rapport. The tutor excels in balancing constructive criticism on the one hand and enthusiasm and encouragement on the other. The on-line communication works well. The tutor coped admirably well in working with such a diverse group of learners with varied writing abilities. This was especially true with learners who did not have English as their first language. Although he spent more time correcting their grammar, punctuation and sentence construction, he was able to encourage and praise their work in a positive manner. He did not seem to think that it hindered his participation or interaction with other learners. The tutor stressed that he is opposed to any pre-course selection on the basis of competence in English.

It is difficult to measure the “time” the tutor spent with each assignment because of the varied writing abilities. However, the comments to each assignment were well structured and often highlighted in different colours making the corrections to stand out. This enabled the recipient (and evaluator) to follow the changes clearly. This worked very well; the on-line dialogue between the tutor and learner showed a committed working relationship. The level of this varied from individual to individual.

### **(3) Quality of the materials**

#### **CDrom and Handbook**

The CDrom and handbook were scrutinised by Dr Charlotte Creed. The overall impression was that the course was well thought through and the structure of the learning block – with overview, content and summary working very well. The pdfs are very useful to the learner. Each block has extremely useful points about writing and these are effectively and imaginatively put across. A lot of ground is covered in a short space of time and make good practical, interactive demands on the participants in small exercises, discussion points and assignments. The written material, however, could be better presented and provide a “friendlier” tone of encouragement. It was also recommended that the material should encourage the learners to read more and to be able to scrutinise between “good” writing and “bad” writing; more examples could illustrate some of the fundamental principles of writing effectively and persuasively.

#### **(d.) Conclusion and Recommendations**

Just Write offers an intensive, on-line course that can be used worldwide to help anyone, anywhere to improve their writing skills. It is an effective and well designed programme. Discussions with learners and tutor identified important issues which need to be addressed for the sustainability of future courses. The following recommendations are based on their feedback.

- **Commitment**

Although it is stipulated in the introductory message, participants need to realise the level of commitment necessary to undertake the course. It has to be stressed to the participants (and their line managers) from the outset that this is a highly demanding on-line course. Participants need to commit themselves fully to the course in order to benefit from its teachings. It is a short, highly demanding course and they need to make the necessary arrangements and provisions for access to the internet. Those who did not complete the course cited intermittent access to the internet and heavy workloads as obstacles to the course.

- **Time factor**

More time is needed for the participants to complete their assignments. The three week course is too short for the majority of participants.

- **Incentive**  
A certificate or some sort of incentive should be awarded to the learners who completed the course. This will reward those who have committed themselves to the course as well as act as incentive for those who may have been too lax about the importance of completion of assignments.
- **Materials**  
The materials appear to work well; however, it is suggested to improve the written materials that accompany the CDrom and to make the CDrom more user-friendly. There is no real cohesion between the handbook and the CDrom. It is suggested to turn the navigational instructions into a step-by-step exercise. It is also recommended to help the participants to understand the concepts by getting them to read and analyse illustrative texts, good and bad. Reading can help one develop as a writer and in turn, appreciate good writing.

## **1. Introduction**

Just Write is an online course on effective writing. It consists of an intensive three week course which combines study material, interactive exercises, on line discussions with fellow participants and individual online tuition from the course tutor, Alan Barker. The course reaches out to a wide range of participants from diverse countries. Before the first course began, The International Research Foundation for Open Learning (IRFOL) was asked to undertake the evaluation for the first Just Write Course. The framework for the evaluation is found in Annex 1.

## **2. Data Collection and Methodology**

Data were collected through a variety of qualitative instruments which included questionnaire, interviews and observations.

- A pre-course questionnaire to participants
- A post-course questionnaire to participants
- A pre-course questionnaire to the tutor
- A post-course interview with the tutor
- A follow up of the outcomes and effectiveness of the course with participants several months on
- Examination of dialogue and interactions between participants and tutor in relationship to assignments and interventions
- Critique of CDrom and handbook

A total of twenty-five participants registered for the Just Write Course. The original figure was twenty-nine but four participants transferred to a later course. Two of the registered learners made no contribution at all throughout the course.

Before the course started, a pre-course questionnaire was designed to obtain some feedback from the participants about the type of writing tasks they perform, their feelings about the course, their level of IT skills, and expectations in terms of support (See Annex 2).

Only fifteen participants completed the pre-course questionnaire. At the end of the course, a post-course questionnaire was sent to the participants to receive their feedback about the course and their personal experiences. Only six responded to the post-course questionnaire and only four responded to a questionnaire several months later (See Annex 3 and 4).

To evaluate an on-line project can be fraught with difficulties because of the diverse and varied nature of the participant and the “distance” factor. The number of participants who

responded to the questionnaires was low; therefore, it is difficult to make generalisations and to quantify the findings. As a result, a much more humanistic approach was employed and the following sections highlight the direct quotations and interviews from the participants and the tutor. This enables the “voice” of the participants and the tutor to be fairly represented.

### **Modifications**

In the evaluation framework, it was originally proposed to have a teleconference several months after the Just Write course to gather the views and experiences of the participants and their line managers to see whether the course has had any long term impact in their work. Unfortunately, it was not possible to have a teleconference due to logistical problems of coordinating the participants and line managers to take part at one moment in time. Therefore, the framework was modified and the participants were sent a brief questionnaire about the impact of the Just Write course (See Annex 4). All participants were sent the questionnaire (irrespective of completing the assignments), but only four participants completed the questionnaire. None of the line managers commented. This highlights one of the difficulties in evaluating a course at a distance. The only access to the participants was via e-mail and some of the e-mail addresses bounced back. Only two provided the evaluator with a phone number.

## **3.0 Learners’ Perspectives**

In order to obtain information about the expectations about the participants prior to the course, a questionnaire was designed to ask them about the type of writing they performed and what they hoped to get out of the course. Fifteen participants completed the questionnaire and a summary of the results are below.

### **3.1 Results from the pre-course questionnaire**

#### **1. Which writing tasks do you normally engage in your professional life?**

The responses to this question varied enormously from individual to individual. A wide range of writing styles was reported catering to a diverse audience. These included: research reports, project funding or grant applications, minutes, policy documents, academic journals (scientific papers), and website design,

#### **2. What is the level of your IT skills?**

This question was answered in several different ways. Some of the respondents discussed their level of ability through an adjective, the type of software and some did not understand the acronym, “IT”.

- “adjective” – such as moderate, basic, above average, exceptionally high
- Type of software or packages they used such as “Word”, “Word Perfect”, Power point, excel, word, SPSS, and other statistical packages.
- Did not understand the question. Two respondents asked, “What do you mean by this?” and another replied, “Please do not ask questions with abbreviations”.

### 3. What expectations do you have about the course?

The expectations of the course participants varied but the main points were:

- **Communication** – to write more effectively and to communicate ideas more persuasively and “to be more focused” One participant remarked “to enhance my limited knowledge on writing effective and influential documents”
- **Self-esteem** – “to gain confidence” and “to be confident and positive about writing any piece of work”
- **Feedback** - “to gain valuable feedback from the tutor”
- **Time management/organisation** – “to organise work better and to structure my time”
- **Improve English** – Several respondents mentioned that English was not their first language so they expected the course to help them write better. “English is not my mother tongue. I hope that after a few weeks, I will be able to produce accurate and comprehensive documents.”

### 4. What gains do you hope for in relation to writing skills?

- **Technical skills.** Many of the respondents wanted to improve their grammar and sentence construction. They wanted to be able to write in a particular style for a specific audience.
- **Personal gains:** To improve self-esteem, confidence, and expression

### 5. What kind and extent of support do you expect during the course?

- **Tutorial support** – The majority of respondents had great expectations of the tutor. The level of support varied from technical support to moral support - “a one-to-one relationship with the tutor”

Support to achieve end result

Encouragement and moral support

Personal feedback

On-line support

- **Support from Participants** -A few of the respondents stressed the importance of support and interaction with fellow participants.

- **Uncertainty** - Some of the participants expressed a certain level of uncertainty as to what to expect. One participant commented, “I am not sure what to expect from the course. I did not find the introductory handout to be very informative with regard to exactly what is expected of us and the layout of the course. A basic timetable and explicit description of the intensity of the course should be communicated to the user well in advance so that suitable arrangements can be made to ensure maximal participation and benefit. I have never done a course such as this before.” Another commented, “I have faith that the support will be there, but I am no sure what to expect.”

Another questioned, “What of the support after the course?”

### 6. What anxieties do you have about participating in the course?

- **Time Management** - The majority expressed their anxiety about being able to meet the deadlines and the time constraints inherent in the course. Some added that it would be added to their already over-stretched workload and commitments. Another queried the time it would take to write a thesis. Others were concerned about losing momentum for the course.

● **On-line Participation** - Some stressed their anxiety about being on-line. One commented, “I am quite nervous about having to communicate on-line and that there will be so many people reading my comments and giving me feedback. It will be a challenge, but I will be a bit anxious before submitting comments. ” Another expressed concern about being compared with her colleagues from around the world. Another remarked on the uniqueness of the situation and that it was her first time to participate in an on-line training

● **Computer/Internet access** - Some of the participants were concerned that they would not have the necessary internet connection to make the course work effectively.

● **Travel** - Duties away from the office such as travel would conflict with the course.

● **Comprehension** -A few were concerned about whether they would be able to comprehend and understand the materials fully. Whilst another participant said he had very few anxieties and was keen to have an “in-depth” understanding.

#### **7. What is the attitude of your line manager to your participation in the course?**

● **Support** - There was overwhelming support and encouragement from their line managers to undertake the course. The course is “worthwhile” and “positive toward skill development.” One respondent responded that although he had support from his line manager that it should not conflict with work and that, “work commitments had to come first”. Another manager expressed concern about internet access and travel commitments of the participant.

● **No Line Manager** – Three of the participants did not have a line manager.

**8. What are your typical responses when you are asked to carry out an extended writing task?** This question was prompted with the following - *you might like to answer with a short group of descriptive words like: enthusiasm, fear, insecurity, fascination*) The responses to this question were very mixed. Some were very confident and interested while others expressed great fear, reluctance and trepidation.

● **Fear/Insecurity** - “I hate having to write anything and it takes me at least an entire week to produce a 3 page report.” “Overwhelmed, as I am a slow writer. I carefully construct and rewrite every sentence, so I find writing a difficult and never-ending process”. Another expressed he was worried if he would deliver a paper to the desirable standards. “I normally feel insecure when asked to compile any document and am always anxious to get a speedy response from my supervisor on what I have submitted. Both on the content and document lay-out.”

● **Mixed** - Some respondents had very mixed responses and expressed their response with a combination of words. For example, one respondent commented “fear, paralysis, excitement, passion (depending on content), helplessness, frustration (if unknown topic)”. Another commented, “At first, delight. I love to write and have few problems with ideas or how to express myself, but I have not been taught organisation skills and know that there must be methods that would streamline the process. Because of this I am overcome with insecurity about getting the job done on time. At times I find it difficult to start because I seem to waste too much time.”

● **Positive:** The few respondents who were very positive appeared very enthusiastic. One responded, “Excited because I love writing”. Another, “I write what interests me”  
“Thoughtfulness, reflection, and planning with a touch of anxiety about running away with myself and writing meaningless technical nonsense, that means little to the reader and a lot to me. I think in, in-depth concepts often focusing on the wider picture and forgetting my communication with the reader.”

## 3.2 Post Course Questionnaire

At the end of the course, IRFOL asked the course participants to complete a brief post-course questionnaire. Only 6/25 (24%) participants completed the questionnaire. (Annex 2). This was disappointing because the evaluators felt that the feedback would be greater and would make useful suggestions for improvement. Only one of the respondents was negative about the course.

### 1. How did you find the Just Write Course?

Overall the responses were very positive and encouraging about the course.

“very useful and relevant to the kind of work I do”

Mixed response: Demanding especially time-wise difficult to juggle full-time work/travel. “Perhaps in the future it would be wise to have the course flexible enough to take care of time constraints for those who are full time employees. Also bear in mind that some of us have English as a second language”

Course is effective in imparting practical writing skills. The CD-rom is an extremely wholesome hand tool that addresses common problems encountered during the writing process.

“Challenging, because it made me rethink my approach to writing and introduced concepts that I had not before considered.”

“Good”

One participant seemed disappointed and commented, ““Poor and misleading it was not made clear that participants were English as a second language students.”

### 2. Was this your first experience of a distance education course?

Yes (3) “It was indeed. Initially, I had feelings of anxiety as I wasn’t sure I would live up to the expectations of the course, but the course is designed to in such a way as to guide you step-by-step. That made my life so very easy indeed.

No (2)

“Difficult procedure and to follow the schedule.”

(1) Did not understand the question

**3. To what extent were your expectations of the Just-Write Course fulfilled?**

(Fully? Partly? Only a little? Not at All?)

Fully(1)

Partly (3) – (I found it took much more than one hour a day. I was unable to complete the course in the allotted time.”

Not at all (1)

**4. What gains in your writing skills did you achieve through the course?**

“Writing with confidence and independently”

“As I progressed through the course, I began to feel that writing can, afterall, be an enjoyable experience as long as one is equipped with the proper skills.”

“I wanted to improve my planning and developing an outline skills. When I am finished, I think the course will have helped me in these areas.”

“I got the conceptual knowledge and skills in writing, but time did not allow me to do all the steps in the course. I do apologize for it”.

**5. Did the on-line support meet your expectations?**

(Fully? Partly? Only a little? Not at all?)

Yes, Fully. “The support was wonderful. Each time I raised a query, the responses were swift. My sincere gratitude goes to Alan Barker whose contributions towards my assignments were very encouraging. His comments were eye openers and he is a good motivator I thoroughly enjoyed being his student”.

“I was helped with technical difficulties at the beginning of the course. I did not ask for other help)

“Not at all”.

**6. What strategies did you employ to protect space and/or time to do the course?**

(For example, how did you manage to work full time and take the course)

“Going through the CD early in the morning and do the assignments and THEN participating in the discussion late in the evening after my working day” “I scheduled an hour in the early morning, and scheduled from 9pm until about midnight. Some days other commitments prevented me from achieving this.”

“I tried to use my evening time for it, but due to office reporting time it does not work.”

“I am self employed, so I could fully commit”

**7. What did you like about the course?**

“Exchange of experiences between the participants and the effective monitoring by the tutor”

“The structure of the course itself was good. The course was like a step-by-step guide to effective writing – more like a recipe book. If you follow the directions and have the right ingredients you can’t go wrong. That’s the impression that has dented my mind about the course”.

“For the most part the instruction was clear. I liked the check-lists at the end of each section. The CDROM will continue to be of assistance. I can revisit the course until it has nothing further to offer.

“I found this course is innovative and helpful in creative writing and writing skills development. Thus I like the course very much.”

### **8. What did you dislike about the course?**

Time was too short. “The duration of the course was a bit short” and it should be extended to at least a month.

“The rigidity was unnerving. I felt the pressure in me to live up to the course expectations.”

“The fact that I was misled, poor debate”

“Because I am in a rural area with a slow connection, the graphics at the beginning of the CD-Rom took too long to download. There was not enough time. Four weeks would have been better. The time I spent on going through the CD-Rom and taking notes did not leave enough time to properly participate in the discussions.

### **9. Any other comments?**

Incentive: Certificate of participation and/performance

The tutor should “rate” his students so that I get to know how I performed in relation to the rest of the group”.

“Thanks for providing me an opportunity to participate in this course. Even I could not complete all its steps. I found it is very useful for my work. Thanks once again.”

## **3.3 Just Write Several Months Later: Individual Learner’s reflections about the course**

In order to assess the longer term impact of the Just Write course, participants were asked to comment whether they thought that Just Write has made an impact on their writing skills 6 months later. Only four participants provided feedback. This was disappointing, but the few who did respond made some important comments about the long term effect of the course. We did not receive any feedback from the line managers.

### **Q. Do you think the Just Write course has made any difference to your writing skills? If so, in what ways? Can you provide any examples?**

I. “Yes, it has made a great difference. It has improved my writing skills tremendously. I can now structure my documents, and I write better than before. I am now able to write

using persuasive language. The example, I can give is this: Last December, I wrote a research report using the skills I acquired from the Just Write course. My report was better and accepted without difficulty.”

II. “Yes. It has made a big difference. Currently I can write my scientific reports without the assistance of my seniors. I can write research proposals and win grants. I can write publications and be published at least in our local journals! It was not like that prior to the Just Write Course. Perhaps it might have contributed to my promotion to be a project leader recently.”

III. “I had not written much since the course because I was out in the field collecting data. What I have noticed is that the course has made me think differently about writing documents.”

IV. “Sure, the last online Just Write course helped me in my writing skills. Mainly in the writing organisation of my manuscript, and how to interest my primary reader in the beginning of my writing. Through my medical manuscript, after the just write course I pay attention to my main idea of my writing.”

### **Q. Can you share any reflections you have about the course?**

I. “I thought the course was good. I do, however, feel that it would have been even better had we had more time in which to read the course materials and write. The course was too fast and too pressured. It did not surprise me that so many people did not finish it. I devoted a huge amount of time to the course and spent most of my free time writing. This was mostly done after hours. I would have valued some time to mull over some aspects of the work. I am currently doing another online course. The pace is just right for me. We get weekly assignments (which are not compulsory), yet I find that I see to it that the work is done before I view the answers. I also enjoy the time between the release of the lectures as it gives me a chance to think about the content thereof. The difference is that in your course (Just Write) we have access to the entire CD (which is probably good given the amount of time that we have to do the course in). In this course the lectures are posted on the website at the end of each week.”

“I am not sure whether I was entirely happy with the layout of the CD as it was difficult to browse through and I would often have to wait a very long time before I could open the pdf pages. It seems that I have many criticisms but they are meant to be constructive. I did enjoy the course. I certainly learnt a great deal. The tutor was helpful, and I definitely noticed an improvement in my writings as I worked on my assignments.”

II. “What I can generally say is that the course was good and is useful to anybody wishing to improve his or her writing skills. However, the course tutor needs to inform the course participant in advance that they will need to dedicate enough of their time to the course. The course is time taking.”

III. “By the way, I asked Alan about another preoccupation that I have, but I did not receive a response. My cultural reality in African countries is that after a course you get an attendance certificate. This can help you to convince your colleague, through your performance and the course justification for undertaking the course. “

## **4.0 The Tutor**

Before the course began the tutor was asked a few questions about his expectations or problems he envisaged he may encounter, how he would be able to cater for different levels of ability, and how he would cope with participants who have English as a second language. The following is a summary of his answers.

### **4.1 Pre Course Thoughts**

#### **Q. Do you envisage any problems with the course? (I realise it is a pilot course)**

The questions going through my mind at the moment – two days before the official start but a few days into receiving e-mails from the students – are roughly as follows.

- Have I made the course too complicated?
- Will people understand the process that I am introducing to them?
- Will people maintain the level of discipline and focus necessary to follow the process through to its conclusion?
- How do I avoid getting into private conversations with the students?
- How far do I accommodate individuals’ requests for preferential treatment
- Will everybody be able to keep to a quite tight schedule?
- Have I left myself enough time to be an effective tutor?
- How much do I intervene in the discussion group?

#### **Q. How do you cater for the different level of abilities and different skills of the learners? For example, learners whose first language is not English? Or the various skills of the learners.**

“I don’t recognise ‘levels’ of ability in any of the groups I train. The word implies measurable grades, and I’m not sure that the skills of writing can be usefully broken into measurable levels – though others who create educational curricula presumably do. I have never trained in the context of any graded programme and have never worked with groups who have been pre-tested in any way to assess their abilities. Every group is

‘mixed ability’. And I never have any but the most general expectations of anybody’s abilities prior to training them - unless I see any of their work beforehand.

The process at the heart of the course is therefore designed to be useful to anyone who writes functional documents in English. It is quite rigid – I worry continually that it may be too rigid. But it has stood the test of time over ten years and continues to prove enlightening to people, so I feel fairly confident that it works. On good days, I tell myself that this method of mine is uniquely powerful. It has its roots in a number of rhetorical procedures, from classical rhetoric, various nineteenth century teachers, and a number of more recent practitioners – the plain English movement, Strunk and White, Barbara Minto, and others. But I’m not aware of a method that is as detailed or adaptable as this one.

The course is about writing. Because it focuses on the skills of planning, drafting and editing a piece of writing, the course does not demand any particular skills of any other kind. I hope that the course would be useful to a reasonably able child of, say, 8 – and to a professor (we have a professor on this course).

The course is not about writing fiction. Neither is it directly about writing journalism, or advertising copy, or promotional material, or press releases, or propaganda, or publicity brochures – though it will be of interest to anybody working in those fields.

I have struggled for years to decide how much technical grammar to include. I have as yet found no clear answer! Just Write contains trigger points where the learner can investigate the technicalities of grammar more fully if they wish. I hope that a learner could successfully complete the course without knowing or learning more than a very few grammatical terms, if they so wish. I do strongly believe that people can improve their writing without learning any grammar at all. But their progress will be limited unless they begin to learn something of grammar – just as their ability to repair a car engine will be limited unless they learn something of motor mechanics.

Of course, I am assuming a basic proficiency in English. And I am not sure I could define ‘basic’. The student must be able to read the CDROM, for a start.

I think we have made it clear to our students that this is not an English course. (I suspect that perhaps we need to make that point even more clearly.) It’s not my primary responsibility to help people with their English. Of course, I recognise that I have an opportunity to do just that, and I shall do everything I can to help people improve their language skills. But I can only do that in the context of the documents they submit to me – not as a structured programme of learning. So I shall point out as many issues of language use as I can in the assignments on this course – but I may not cover every error that I find. I don’t intend to correct people’s English in the e-mails they post to the discussion list, unless as a general observation of a common problem. (I hope we can get people to write better e-mails as a by-product of the course.)

I also have to be aware that my time with the learners is limited. I have a responsibility to leave each person feeling that they are more able than they were when they started – not less able!

More able – and more enthusiastic about writing. I want to give people the tools to help them take command of their ideas, and the means of expressing them – instead of allowing ideas and language to control them.”

**Q. How do you deal with the wide variety of people who are taking the course from different disciplines, for example, those who are coming from a scientific or health background and those from the social science background?**

The simple answer is all alike. If that sounds a little presumptuous or arrogant, let me explain. I think there are a number of important points here.

I have certain expectations of the way people may write in various disciplines, or in various types of organisation. Those expectations are based on past experience and I regard them more or less as my own prejudices. I hope that I manage those prejudices in the way that I manage any other prejudices I may possess.

Certain disciplines and certain organisations make specific demands on people in the way they write. Scientific publications usually have style guidelines, for example; an organisation may have particular demands of the documents people produce in that organisation. It's useful to know about those conventions. Some of them are predictable in a general sense (science writing for example, although the conventions of science writing are shifting); others are not (I can't guess what an NGO may demand in terms of style or layout).

Just Write promotes what I think is generally regarded as best practice. By whom? Well, by trainers like me (!), by organisations that promote plain English, and by others who moderate the publication of papers in – for example – scientific journals.

At heart, I suppose I believe that writing is either clear or unclear. I also fundamentally believe that the strongest influence on a person's writing style is their working environment – not their personal or educational background. Most of what I do, I think, involves trying to remove the organisational and professional hindrances to clear writing. So my focus is on the writing, not the background.

And a very important part of the training is to try to get learners to focus on the writing, rather than the 'content' of their writing. But that's another essay...

**Q. You mention two important aspects of the course in your introductory note: time management and assignment targets. Will you be checking up with learners who have not sent their assignments in on time? Or will you leave that to the learner to be responsible for himself/herself?**

Learners are responsible for their own learning and their own time management. But I need to see their early assignments so that I can judge the later ones better. All the assignments contribute to the creation of a single working document. So Assignment 1 is a statement of purpose for that document, Assignment 2 an outline, Assignment 3 a brief discussion of the types of writing the learner intends to use in the document, Assignment 4 a first draft, and Assignment 5 a final version. If they fail to produce 1 and 2, for example, I shall find judging Assignment 4 harder.

If a learner fails to produce assignments by the allotted time, even after public humiliation (!), then I suppose I am in a position to take my time in returning their work. I certainly envisage marking up papers after the course ends, from people who haven't kept to time – and simply because I have not been able to keep up with 28 documents. We have allocated a fourth week for mopping up and returning final assignments.

## 4.2 Tutor-Learner Interaction

A significant aspect of the course is intensive interaction between the tutor and the participant; this is done on-line. Detailed examination of the dialogue and comments between tutor and participant show a committed, professional rapport. The tutor excels in balancing constructive criticism on the one hand and enthusiasm and encouragement on the other. The on-line communication works well.

This discourse illustrates the interaction between participant and tutor and is a good example of on-line dialogue.

*Course Participant:* Thank you very much for your comments. I can definitely note the difference in my approach to writing - and speaking - for that matter. What a great course. I wish that I had more time to absorb the content and make it my own. This course has really helped me overcome huge barriers to writing and I can't wait to really get stuck into writing more documents. I now see the necessity of focussing and asking specific questions! What a revelation and release. I have all the information in my head and previously had no idea how to verbalise it. Up until last week I thought I was a lost cause. I now have more confidence. I will continue to use the CDROM.

I will try not to be disheartened. You are trying to undo years of old habits! I have always let my thoughts run way ahead of me. That's why I am doing this course.

*Tutor:* Thank you for not being disheartened. You are working very hard at this, and it's wonderful to see that the process is helping you.

The tutor coped admirably well with in working with a diverse group of learners with varied writing abilities. This was especially true with learners who did not have English as their first language. Although he spent more time correcting their grammar,

punctuation and sentence construction, he was able to encourage and praise their work in a positive manner. He did not seem to think that it hindered his participation or deter him from other participants. The tutor stressed that he is opposed to any “pre-course selection on the basis of competence in English.” Throughout the assignments, the tutor balanced professional editorial rapport with constructive criticism. It worked extremely well. The participants were encouraged and those who completed all the assignments were pleased with their level of support.

The main disappointment about the course was the low level of completion. However, in the tutor’s final report he argues that “there is no question that the course is highly demanding, in a way that other on-line courses may not be. Writing is hard work. It involves making choices. There are few correct answers. This is a course about actively exercising a skill rather than merely adding to one’s knowledge.”

During an interview with the tutor, it was reported that an additional week has been added to the course. This will, hopefully, assist in the retention of more students.

## **5.0 Materials Evaluation**

The materials for the course included a CDrom and an accompanying handbook. The following section examined the technical aspect of the course.

### **5.1 Handbook**

Presumably, the handbook is the entrance point to the course and has a three-fold function: to welcome the user, to provide the user with a simple overview of the course and its components, and to introduce the CDrom and explain its navigation in a simple, accessible way. (This is especially important for users who might never have used a CDrom before). If this is correct, it could be done better. The impression is that most of the work has gone into the CDrom, whilst the handbook looks as if it is a bit of a rushed afterthought.

In addition, since this is the user’s first experience of the course, the writing used in it should, in itself, provide an example of what is considered to be good writing and reflect key points made in the CDrom. For example, in the CDrom the importance of clear lead sentences and good structure is advocated. This is not actually reflected in the text of the handbook itself. At the moment, these are notes rather than text with a structure. Bullet points can work against this because they stop one from working out, or internalising, the structure of an argument/progression by breaking it down into separate elements whose connections are removed by the bullets.

There could much better cohesion between the handbook and the CDrom. For example, the navigation skills in the handbook expect the user to refer to it when first opening the CDrom, but it would be better to create a more explicit link between the handbook and CDrom. For example, the navigation instructions could be turned into a step-by-step

exercise (e.g. Now before we begin the course on the CDrom, let's look at the first screen after the introduction. You will see.....) then it would automatically illustrate the cohesion between these two components. Better instructions and explanations are needed to explain more explicitly to users, who will have varying experience of CDroms, on how to get in and out of menus and to understand the function of each icon.

### *Specific points*

Page 2 – could do with a warmer welcome and a friendlier tone throughout. The users, with varying degrees of commitment, time and confidence, will need more explicit encouragement right from the first sentence if the aim is for them to join a course which includes a discussion list and tutoring and public writing tasks. Clear explanations about the role of the print handbook and its relationship to the CDrom need to be emphasised.

Page 3 – Key information that users will be wanting to know immediately is the time demands of the course and a quick understanding of the structure. The way the information is presented does not help them. They have to piece it together. For example, the explanation of the components of the course is poorly presented and structured on the page(s). An alternative approach might be to highlight the time demands first, followed by a simple graphic diagram showing the different components of the six methods of learning (a real document, a CDrom, email discussion list, interactive exercises, five assignments and 2 reference sections). The diagram will then provide a framework for the following explanatory text (providing more details about each component) which could be organised using numbers 1-6.

Page 3 – is a thesis or book chapter necessarily 'a powerful and persuasive document'? This is quite a mixture of writing genres, each with very different rhetorical patterns. Without narrowing the text types, doesn't the course risk attracting too wide a mix of learners with too broad a mix of writing and language demands? There is a danger here of severely overloading the tutor. Would it not be better to focus entirely on a discrete type of text, such as effective funding proposals or advocacy reports? The language demands of particular genres, and particularly where mixing L1<sup>1</sup> and L2 participants, will be far more manageable and discrete.

Page 6 – this text is a bit misleading and confusing as it is not, as it suggests, the exact outline of the CDrom but rather functions as an introduction to its main themes. The bullet points, the bolding and the separate paragraphs might look well structured on the page but actually impede understanding. The key information here could be introduced in one simple lead sentence, e.g. Just Write will examine the four key stages in preparing effective documents: good planning, good structuring, drafting and effective editing. Then you can elaborate on each stage. In general, I would argue that you use bullet points or bold but not both at the same time. It becomes too busy and emphasis is dissipated.

Page 7-12 – good navigation help although it could be improved by making it into a little step-by-step exercise with all directions provided and taking the user through everything

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<sup>1</sup> L1 – mother tongue speaker; L2 – speaker regularly using a dominant language other than their mother tongue.

they need to know. Apart from labelling all the additional navigational tools, it needs to be pointed out that actually the user progresses through the course by simply pressing on the arrows. That may sound self explanatory but should not be taken for granted. The function of each icon and how to use it needs to be explained.

## 5.2 CDrom

### *General points*

Generally the CDrom has been well thought through but, as indicated above, it does not initially orientate the user on how to use it very well. It is assumed that the users are experienced in navigating their way around CDroms and browsers. However, the target group may include people with little experience. Even with experience, it does not 'settle the learner down' and provide a strong confident launch into the material. When a user arrives at the first page after the opening sequence, they are left to get on with understanding the icons and following the course themselves. It should not be assumed that learners know what a bookmark is. The accompanying handbook does tell them about each icon but should go further and provide a helping/teaching hand in using them – perhaps a 'now click on the site map...', about entering them and leaving the icons. The icon for the notepad directs the learner to a contract to sign. This is confusing as a learner would assume that this has been sorted out for them. In terms of starting the course, it needs to be explicitly stated (here and/or in the handbook) that the backward and forward arrows are the main navigation tools. This may sound obvious, but it will not be for some users.

The CDrom also needs to help the participants at the outset to understand how the content is modularised into one-hour slots and where to locate the assignments. This will be priority information and a learner cannot, at first glance, find the answer. The hour countdown icon may seem self explanatory, but it only becomes visible once the user has already launched himself/herself into the materials. It would need to be specifically pointed out if learners are to understand its function. I asked two other people to follow the CDrom and both did not even notice the icon as it only emerges once you get going. Both said they didn't know when to stop and start their mini lessons. This information needs signposting and careful locating (here and in the handbook) as people do get into that mesmerised click mode with CDroms. This is not conducive to learning. One suggestion would be to make the structure clearer in the design on the site map. You could number the actual 1-hour learning blocks and distinguish them in colour or size of print here from the additional resources such as the glossary and grammar parts? It is not clear from the sitemap where the course ends and where additional sections begin. The assignments are also very buried and they could be relocated to a dedicated space using the same links from the various sections.

The structure of each learning block -- with overview, content and summary -- works very well. The pdf's are very useful to the learner as and you are right to work on the assumption that learners still need hard copy of key ideas. Each block has extremely useful points about writing and these are effectively and imaginatively put across. They

cover a lot of ground in a short space of time and make good practical, interactive demands of the participants in the small exercises, discussion points and assignments. On the other hand, there is an awful lot to take in here and perhaps the students are being asked too much ahead of their capacity to fully understand them. One key suggestion is helping the participants to understand the concepts by getting them to read and analyse illustrative texts, good and bad. It is often underestimated how reading can help one develop as a writer and appreciate good writing. For example, the number of pdf's could be extended. They are a powerful means of providing illustrative materials and exercises. Some of the participants could feel quite threatened and put off by being asked to produce writing for comments in discussion groups and/or by the tutor. It might be less threatening but still challenging to set assignments in which the learner has to examine/find and then review good and bad examples of writing from advocacy reports. This one-step removed approach might be less threatening and every bit as effective in the long run.

This is the key point. You must have faith (and reflect it in the way you structure the course and the demands you make of the learners) that what is taught won't necessarily come out in their actual writing within the time span of the actual course. If the aim is to improve the quality of their writing in the long term, it is suggested that it would be more effective in the long term to place more emphasis on exploring the ideas that are conveyed.

### *Specific points*

#### Creating your message

What is the objective: Two spellings used: focused and focussed

Three types of reader: the word image appears without an image?

Checking mess

age/SPQR/Problems: both SPQR and the difference between presented and constructed problems are quite difficult concepts and it would help the learner to have more good and bad examples of both from illustrative texts and to engage in identifying activities. The PDF helps in understanding this, but examples of opening paragraphs would illustrate the point better.

Discussion – Persuasion: Finally, persuade us be (by?) appealing to our emotions

- Organising your ideas  
Grouping and summarising/basic rules: The key points should all (include?) sentences of the same kind.
- Collecting evidence
- Organising evidence  
These are rather heavy going sections and could do with reworking to include more illustrative materials and activities. There is a need to counter an inclination to just click your way passively through these sections.
- Writing an outline
- Writing a first draft

- These are excellent sections with lots of detail, strong pdf's and plenty of meat. Writers of varying experience could use these as a very valuable reference.
- Navigation Aids: Useful section. It would be useful to provide examples of referencing rules, e.g. Harvard APA style

## 6.0 Summary and Recommendations

Just Write offers an intensive, on-line course that, in theory, can be used worldwide to help anyone, anywhere to improve his or her writing skills. The pilot course showed that it can be an effective programme; those who provided feedback made some very useful comments pertinent to the course.

Although the evaluation did not receive as much feedback as we had anticipated, the personal experiences and comments about the course offer a valuable insight into the effectiveness of the programme from a personal level. The on-line correspondence between the tutor and participants illustrate the level of intensity of the course and the demands which are made. The course is not easy, and as Alan Barker said, “writing is hard work.”<sup>2</sup> It has to be stressed from the outset that if the participant is to benefit from the course (and from the tutor’s expertise) he or she needs to be realistic about the time needed to undertake the work and to participate effectively. Discussions with participants and the tutor identified important issues which need to be addressed for the sustainability of future courses. The following recommendations are based on their feedback.

- **Commitment**  
Although it is stipulated in the introductory message, participants need to realise the level of commitment necessary to undertake the course. It has to be stressed to the participants (and their line managers) from the outset that this is a highly demanding on-line course. Participants need to commit themselves fully to the course in order to benefit from its teachings. It is a short, highly demanding course and they need to make the necessary arrangements and provisions for access to the internet. Those who did not complete the course cited intermittent access to the internet and heavy workloads as obstacles to the course.
- **Time factor**  
More time is needed for the participants to complete their assignments. The three week course is too short for the majority of participants.
- **Incentive**  
A certificate or some sort of incentive should be awarded to the learners who completed the course. This will reward those who have committed themselves to the course as well as act as incentive for those who may have been too lax about the importance of completion of assignments.

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<sup>2</sup> *Just Write July 2003: Tutor’s Final Report*, Alan Barker.

- **Materials**

The materials appear to work well; however, it is suggested to improve the written materials that accompany the CDrom and to make the CDrom more user-friendly. There is no real cohesion between the handbook and the CDrom. It is suggested to turn the navigational instructions into a step-by-step exercise. It is also recommended to help the participants to understand the concepts by getting them to read and analyse illustrative texts, good and bad. Reading can help one develop as a writer and in turn, appreciate good writing.

## Annex 1: Evaluation Framework

Focus 1: Quality of materials

Focus 2: An assessment of the quality of process of the course, as perceived by (a) course members, (b) their tutor(s)

Focus 3: An assessment of the outcomes in relation to enhanced skills in writing (nine months later).

<b>Evaluation item</b>	<b>Timing</b>	<b>Instrument</b>
1. Technical quality of course materials [Focus 1]	Flexible	Scrutiny by external distance learning materials expert
2. Course members skills and attitudes prior to course [Focus 2]	Immediately prior to course start-up	Questionnaire
3. Process of course as experienced by course members and tutors [Focus 2]	Continuous monitoring throughout duration of course	Monitoring and analysis of all e-mail exchanges: student-student, student-tutor, etc, including writing assignments
4. Course members experience of the course [Focus 2]	Immediately post course	Questionnaire
5. Course members skill development and retention post end of course [Focus 3]	9 months from end of course	(i)Self-reporting by students of a discussion regarding their writing skills with their line manager (ii)Teleconference with three focus groups of five students

## **Annex 2: Just Write: Introductory Questions**

First, a word by way of introduction. The International Research Foundation for Open Learning [IRFOL] has been asked to carry out the evaluation for this first JustWrite course. In different roles, three IRFOL staff will be involved – Charlotte Creed will be looking carefully at the quality of the distance learning material; Alicia Fentiman will be monitoring all the interactions throughout the course, and Terry Allsop will be involved in the design of the instruments and anything else that needs doing.

Second, an assurance, that all the data we collect from you, and all the ‘listening’ we do on the e-mail interactions, will be treated in the strictest confidence. In what we write for wider consumption, the identity of no single individual will be discernible, other than to themselves.

So, to business! We need to know a little about **where you are starting from** as you take on this course. As the whole course is about writing, we thought that the best way for you to get into this would be to provide us with your answers to a short set of self-assessment questions.

### **Questions:**

- 1. With what kinds of writing tasks do you normally engage in your professional life?**
- 2. What is the level of your IT skills?**
- 3. What expectations do you have about the course?**
- 4. What gains do you hope for in relation to writing skills?**
- 5. What kind and extent of support do you expect during the course?**
- 6. What anxieties do you have about participating in the course?**
- 7. What is the attitude of your line manager to your participation in the course?**
- 8. What are your typical responses when you are asked to carry out an extended writing task? [You might like to answer with a short group of descriptive words like – enthusiasm, fear, insecurity, fascination]**

Please send your responses to the above **not later than the first day of the course**, e-mailing them to Alicia Fentiman at [afentiman@irfol.ac.uk](mailto:afentiman@irfol.ac.uk)

Thank you for joining JustWrite and giving us this early feedback.

Terry Allsop, Charlotte Creed, Alicia Fentiman

## **Annex 3: Post Course Questionnaire**

**Dear Just-Write participant,**

**The International Research Foundation for Open Learning has been asked to carry out the evaluation for the first Just Write Course. Many of you replied to a pre-questionnaire before you embarked on the course. I am now writing to ask you if you could spare a few minutes and kindly respond to the following post-course questionnaire. I would really appreciate your feedback!**

**Thank you very much.**

**Yours sincerely,**

**Alicia Fentiman**

### **Just Write: Post-Course Questionnaire**

1. How did you find the Just Write Course?
2. Was this your first experience of a distance education course?
3. To what extent were your expectations of the Just-Write Course fulfilled?  
(Fully? Partly? Only a little? Not at All?)
4. What gains in your writing skills did you achieve through the course?
5. Did the on-line support meet your expectations?  
(Fully? Partly? Only a little? Not at all?)
6. What strategies did you employ to protect space and/or time to do the course?  
(for example, how did you manage to work full time and take the course)
7. What did you like about the course?
8. What did you dislike about the course?
9. Any other comments?

## **Annex 4: Just Write Questionnaire: Reflection about the course several months later**

Dear Just Write Participant,

Last July you participated in the pilot programme for the Just Write Course. The International Research Foundation for Open Learning is evaluating the project. For our final evaluation report, we want to ask you for your feedback several months on from taking the course. We would like to incorporate this information into our final report.

Basically, we want to ask two questions:

### 1. For Just-Write Participant

1. Do **you** think the Just Write course has made any difference to your writing skills? If so, in what ways? Can you provide any examples?

### 2. For your line manager:

Can you kindly ask your line manager if he or she has noticed any changes or differences in your writing over the last few months after you have taken the course? If so, can they provide any examples of how it has changed? Or improved?

We would be very grateful if you could spend a few minutes and reflect on the course. It will be very helpful!