What Does "It" Look Like? Writing Workshop

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Mid-America Intergovernmental Audit Forum (MAMIAF)/Midwestern Intergovernmental Audit Forum (MIAF) Joint Meeting
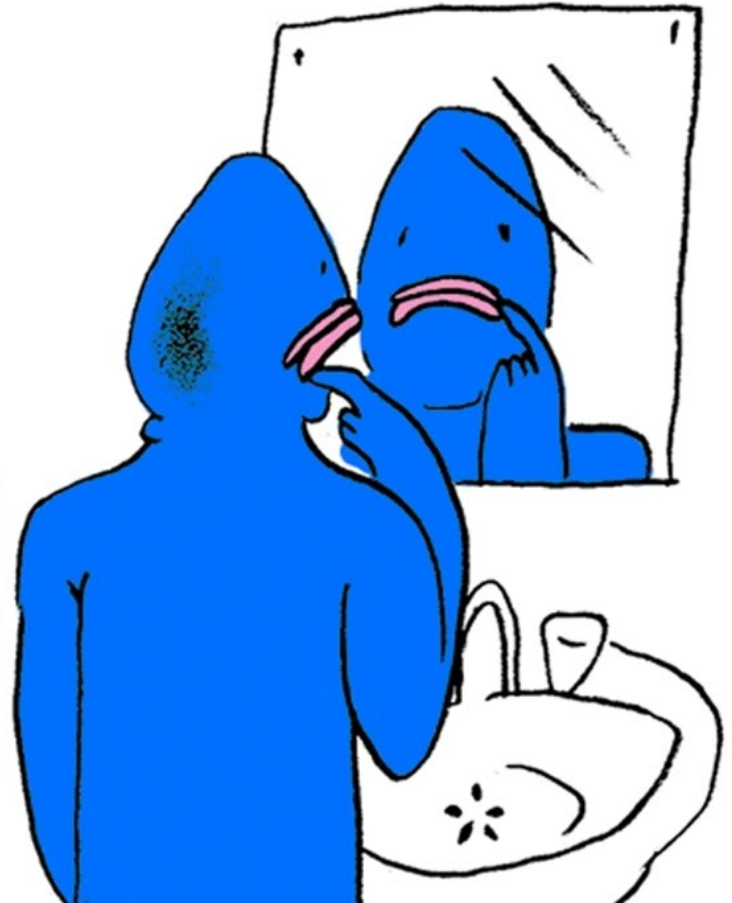
December 6, 2018

A GAO joke:

"When the book on GAO writing is written, it will be called, 'I'll know it when I see it!'"

Humor is sometimes borne out of misery and frustration

SHOULD WE LAUGH OR SHOULD WE CRY?

The issue: how can we give the boss, and readers generally, what they want?

Workshop objectives

- Identify and explain straightforward writing rules that, if applied consistently, will help you create documents that generally meet your readers' needs

- Develop practices to help you commit to enhancing your writing, such as by using checklists or allowing "cold readers" to evaluate your work

Follow some simple rules to get closer to "It"

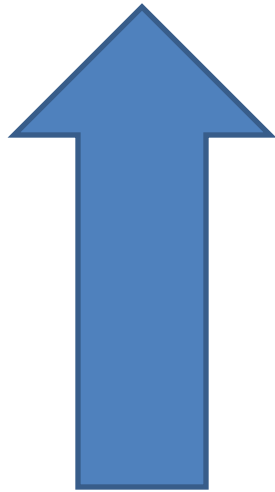Make readers care: write useful content by answering key questions

Follow some simple rules to get closer to "It"

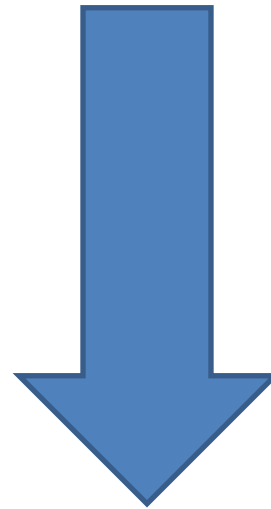Don't waste readers' time: highlight messages

Follow some simple rules to get closer to "It"

Work hard so readers don't have to: keep sentences simple (although not simplistic)

Level of interest

Level of effort
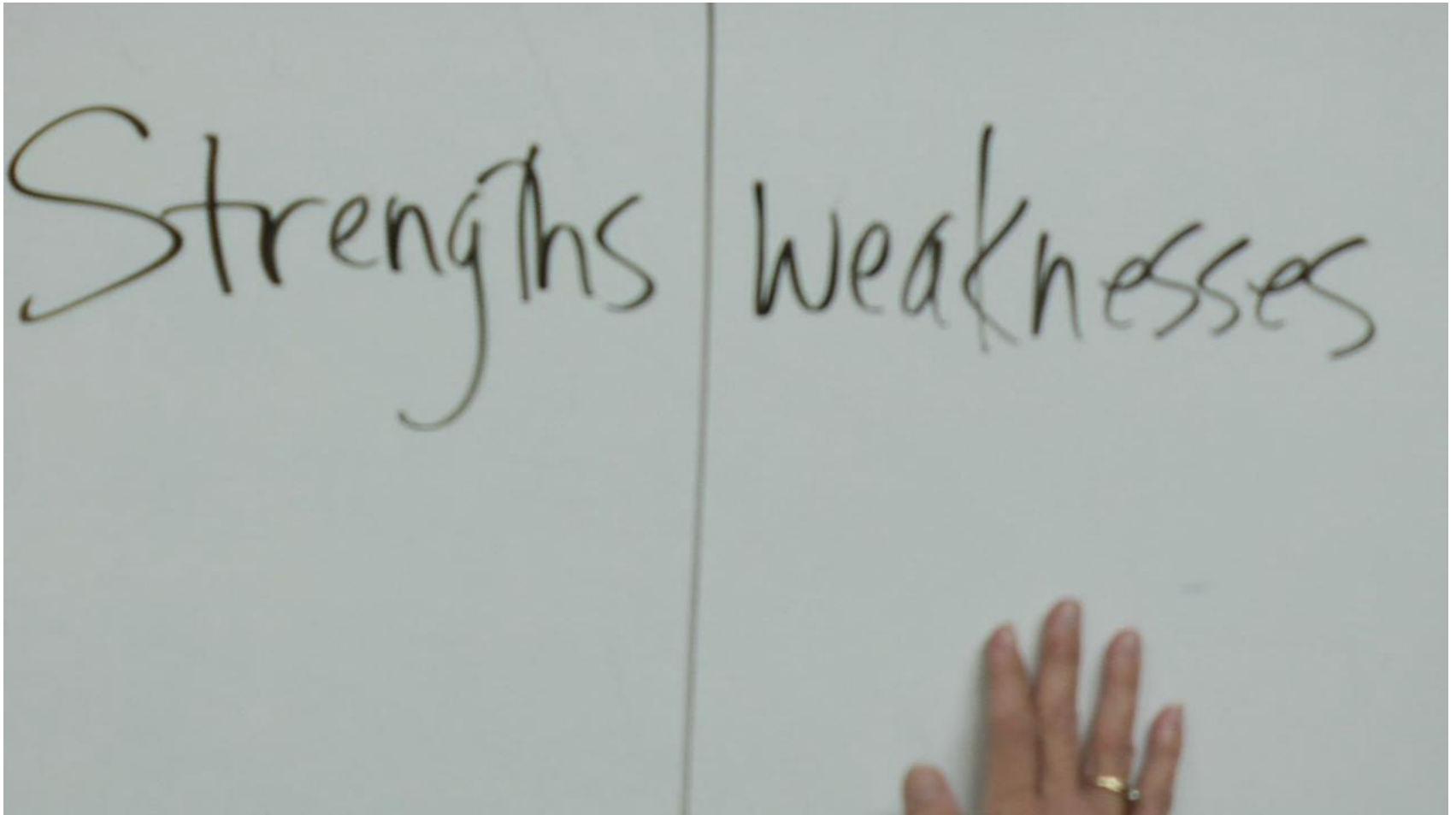
How to do it?

Inventory writing strengths and weaknesses

Set a writing goal

Find an accountability partner

Commit to "It"

Manage time wisely

Commit to "It"

Know what you need to know, and know where to look up the rest

Commit to "It"

Analyze rather than read drafts

Commit to "It"

Seek feedback on early drafts

Commit to "It"

Learn from feedback

The Simple Rules

Exploit thinking and writing opportunities early	Identify key messages	Don't waste readers' time
Make audit design transparent to give you an initial roadmap	Prune the "nice to know" from the "need to know"	Relentlessly apply a "main point up front" presentation throughout the document
Keep explicit track of what's being learned	Whiteboarding	Ensure that supporting details clearly link to those main points
Be thinking about readers' questions	Outlining	Write simple, straightforward sentences

Exploit opportunities to help you write long before we need to

Exploit thinking and writing opportunities early
Make audit design transparent to give you an initial roadmap
Keep explicit track of what's being learned
Be thinking about readers' questions

Transparent audit design puts you on the right road to answering readers' questions

Researchable Question(s)	Criteria and Information Required and Source(s)	Scope and Methodology Including Data Reliability	Limitations	What This Analysis Will Likely Allow GAO to Say
What question(s) is the team trying to answer?	What information does the team need to address the question? Where will they get it?	How will the team answer each question?	What are the engagement's design's limitations and how will it affect the product?	What are the expected results of th work?
Identify key researchable questions. Ensure each question is specific, objective, neutral, measurable, and doable. Ensure key terms are defined. Each major evaluation question should be addressed in a separate row on this table. **Upon completing the Risk Assessment Tool for Nonfinancial Engagements: Design Attachment (Form 418C), cite the applicable codes for internal controls and other issues that are significant to the engagement objectives as instructed, e.g., A1, B1, C1, etc. in this column. (Optional: Insert DM # or link)**	**For performance audit objectives that will evaluate evidence against explicit criteria, identify the criteria or plans to collect documents that will establish the criteria to be used. For performance audit objectives that will not evaluate evidence against explicit criteria but instead add assurance related to a program (implicit criteria), add "Criteria: A6.03" here.** Identify documents or types of information that the team must have. Identify whether photographs, video, audio, or other media could be collected to enhance documentation and communication of information. Identify plans to address internal controls and compliance. Identify plans to follow up on known significant findings and open recommendations that team found in obtaining background information. Identify sources of the required information, such as databases, studies, subject area experts, program officials, models, etc.	Describe strategies for collecting the required information or data, such as conducting random sampling, case studies, DCIs, focus groups, questionnaires; benchmarking to best practices; using existing data bases; taking or acquiring photographs, video or audio recording, etc. Describe the planned scope of each strategy, including the timeframe, locations to visit, and sample sizes. Describe the analytical techniques to be used, such as regression analysis, cost benefit analysis, sensitivity analysis, modeling, descriptive analysis, content analysis, case study summaries, etc. Describe the steps to be taken to assess reliability of the data sources.	Cite any limitations as a result of the information required or the scope and methodology, such as: --Questionable data quality and/or reliability. --Inability to access certain types of data or obtain data covering a certain time frame. --Security classification restrictions. --Inability to generalize or extrapolate findings to the universe. Be sure to address how these limitations will affect the product.	Describe what GAO can likely say. Draw on preliminary results for illustrative purposes, if helpful. Ensure that the proposed answer addresses the question in column one As appropriate, describe potential video, audio, animation, or other media that could help communicate information.

Keeping explicit track of what you learn throughout the audit will help you write

EVIDENCE TRACKER

Objective	Work in Design Matrix	Analysis (summary of the results of each piece of major work)	Remaining work, questions
Obj. from Design Matrix/ Paper	Major work 1		
	Major work 2		
	Major work 3		
What does ALL of the collected evidence say about the objective?			
Obj. from Design Matrix/ Paper	Major work 1		
	Major work 2		
Obj. from Design	Major Work 1		
	Major Work 2		

Answer readers' questions

Twenty questions

Before you write, are you stuck on the facts? Can't think of what to say in your analysis? Here are twenty questions or "thought starters" to help you analyze the components of your report objectives. (Not all of these questions will be relevant to your engagement.)

1. What is X?
2. Why does X exist?
3. Should X exist?
4. Who/what is responsible for X?
5. What is the essential function of X?
6. What is the value/significance of X?
7. How would you describe X?
8. How well does X do what it is supposed to do?
9. What are the component parts of X?
10. What is the relevant historical background of X for this report?
11. What is the present status of X?
12. What are the problems with X?
13. What else will be affected by the problems with X?
14. Are there other types of X?
15. How is X like or unlike Y?
16. How much money has been spent on X?
17. What criteria are we measuring X against?
18. How does X measure up against that criteria?
19. Why is X in this condition?
20. What recommendations are we likely to make for X?

Identify key messages

Identify key messages
Prune the "nice to know" from the "need to know"
Whiteboarding
Outlining

Prune the "nice to know" from the "need to know"

What <u>can</u> we say?

What <u>should</u> we say?

What <u>must</u> we say?
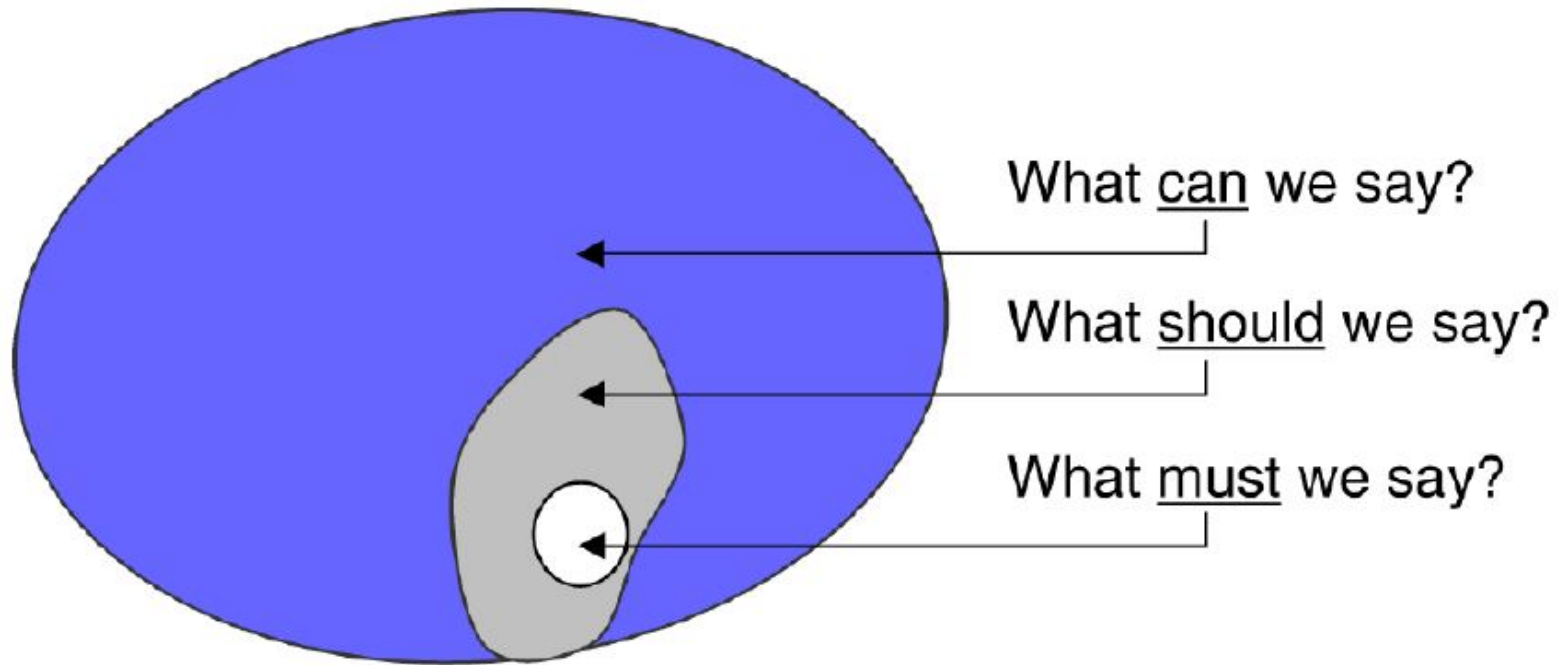
Identify main messages from your evidence

Outline easy-to-follow text

- ROC used two tools.

- Link analysis.

- ROC researched more than a million entities.

- Etc., etc.

The ROC Has Provided Valuable Analytic Capabilities to the Oversight Community

- As we reported in our July 2015 testimony describing the progress made in the initial implementation of the DATA Act, the ROC has provided significant analytical services to its clients, including many OIGs, in support of their antifraud and other activities.

- Specifically, on the basis of the ROC's client-service performance data that we reviewed, as part of the ROC's analysis supporting investigations and audits, the ROC researched roughly 1.7 million entities associated with $36.4 billion in federal funds during fiscal years 2013 and 2014 at the request of various OIGs and other entities.

- Two major tools the ROC used on behalf of the OIGs included (1) link analysis and (2) unstructured text mining:
  - Link analysis assists analysts in making connections by visually representing investigative findings. Link-analysis charts visually depict how individuals and companies are connected, what awards an entity has received, and how these actors may be linked to any derogatory information obtained from multiple data sets.
    - Examples of the use of link analysis will be developed in the draft
  - The ROC's unstructured text mining tools were developed to proactively identify high-risk entities. This tool uses key words or phrases to rapidly filter through thousands of documents and pinpoint high-risk areas to uncover trends and conduct predictive analysis across agencies, programs, and states and to identify and assign weights to risk factors or concepts.

Don't waste readers' time
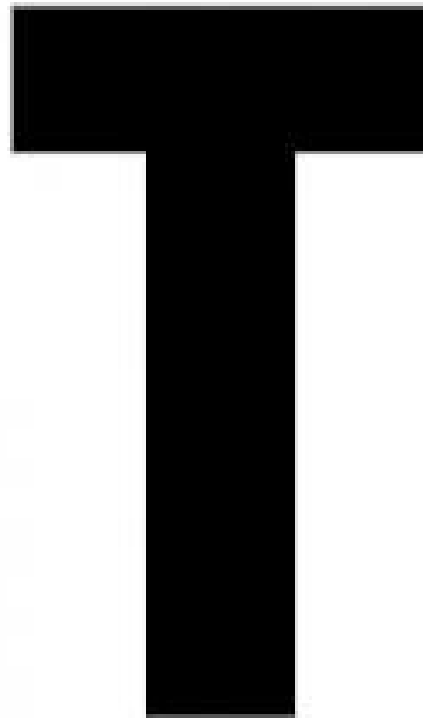
Don't waste readers' time
Relentlessly apply a "main point up front" presentation throughout the document
Ensure that supporting details clearly link to those main points
Write simple, straightforward sentences

Main message up front, always

Message

Supporting details

Ensure that details clearly support main points

The closure contract specifies both Kaiser-Hill's and DOE's responsibilities. Kaiser-Hill is responsible for processing, packing, and shipping off-site all of Rocky Flats' nuclear materials and radioactive and hazardous wastes. DOE is responsible for delivering a variety of services and items to support the project. For example, the contract specifies that DOE arrange receiver sites for all the materials and wastes that must be shipped off-site and to obtain the necessary certifications for the containers in which the materials and wastes must be packed and shipped.

Simplify sentences: use passive voice judiciously

Simplify sentences: tell the reader who is doing what

The agency issued guidelines that had to be completely revised just 3 months later.

VS

The agency, which had delayed taking action for several years because its leadership could not decide on appropriate steps, issued—while acknowledging their preliminary nature—guidelines that, in three months, needed to be completely revised.

Simplify sentences: turn nouns back into verbs

The dismantlement of the organizational structure into component pieces by the agency had the result of a reduction of efficiency.

VS

The agency reduced efficiency after it dismantled the organizational structure into its components.

So, what does "It" look like?

A well-thought-out document that answers readers' questions, highlighting key messages that are supported by focused paragraphs and simple sentences.

In short: YOUR next draft!

Commit to It

"What if we don't change at all ... and something magical just happens?"
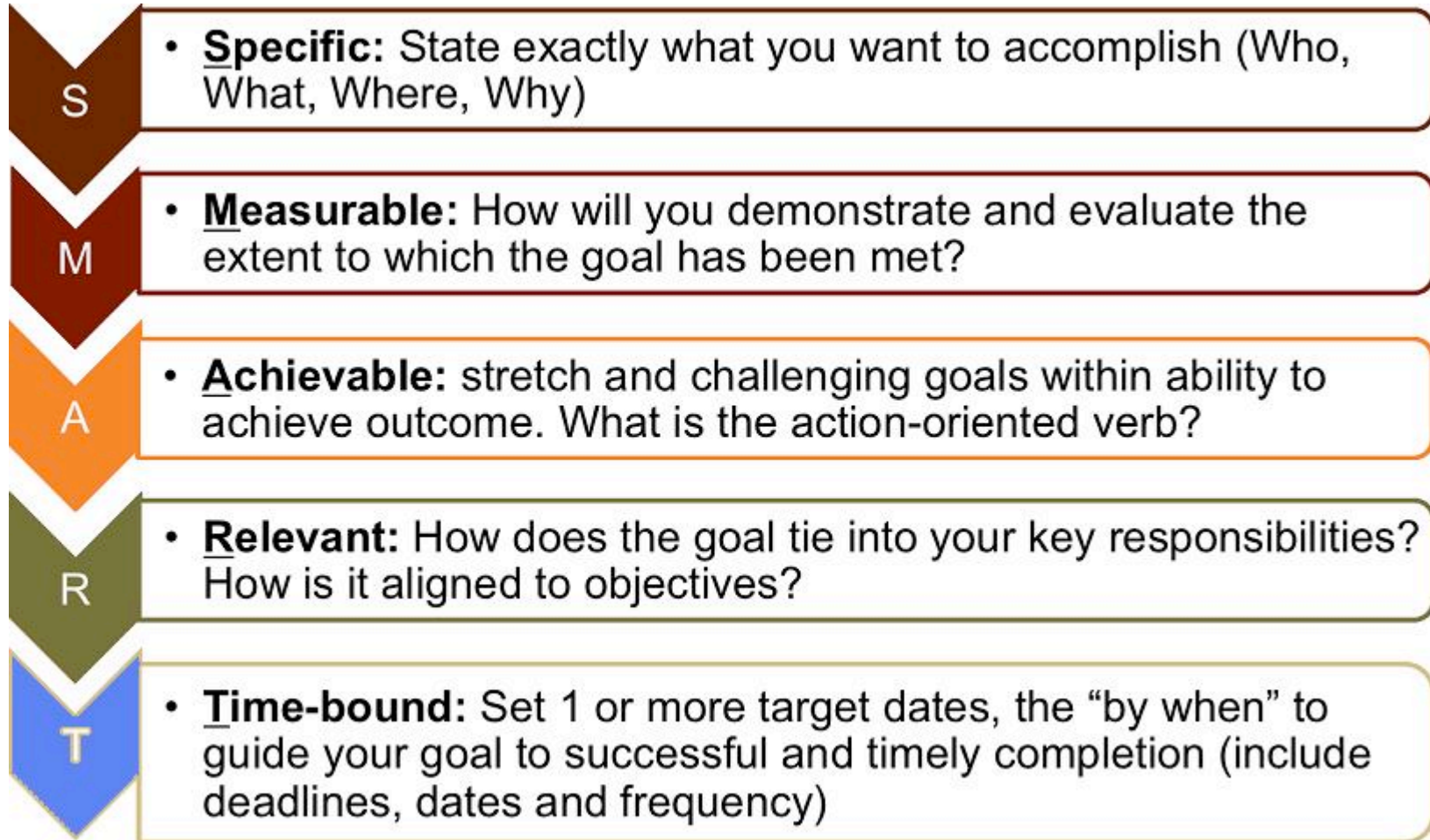
Our brains can only handle so much at one time

To improve our writing, we need to focus on it

Inventory writing strengths and weaknesses

Set a writing goal

- **Specific:** State exactly what you want to accomplish (Who, What, Where, Why)

- **Measurable:** How will you demonstrate and evaluate the extent to which the goal has been met?

- **Achievable:** stretch and challenging goals within ability to achieve outcome. What is the action-oriented verb?

- **Relevant:** How does the goal tie into your key responsibilities? How is it aligned to objectives?

- **Time-bound:** Set 1 or more target dates, the "by when" to guide your goal to successful and timely completion (include deadlines, dates and frequency)
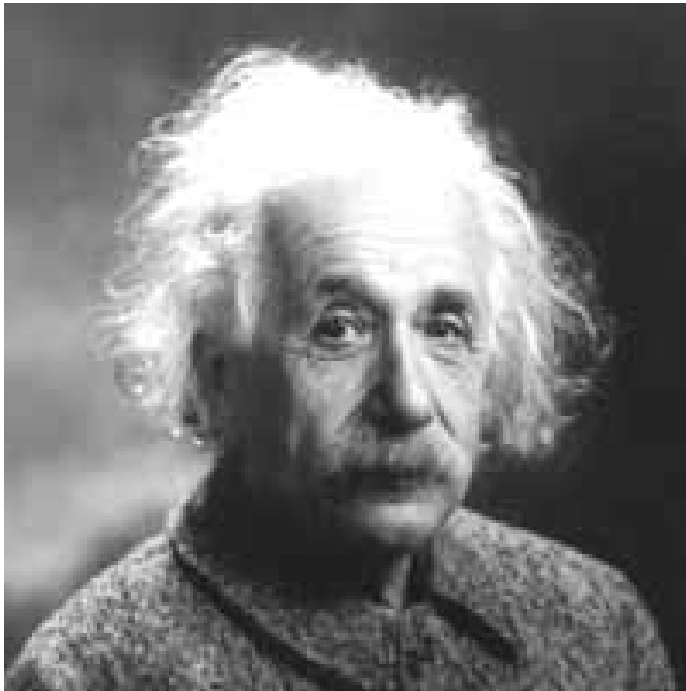
Find an "accountability partner"

Manage time

Know what you need to know and know where to find the rest

An example of something to look up rather than memorize

Abbreviations

Spell out a word or term the first time it is used in the report and again when first used in each appendix, and give the abbreviation in parentheses. Spell out fiscal year in text; you may use FY in figures and tables. Spell out percent with a number in text; you may use the percent symbol (%) in tables and figures.

Consider abbreviating months in tables and figures to save space. For citations, abbreviate months inside parentheses if the month is accompanied by both the day and the year (Oct. 24, 2018), but spell out the month if only the month and year are given (February 2018). Always spell out May, June, and July.

And/or

Do not use except when part of a direct quotation. Usually, one or the other ("and" or "or") is sufficient. If the either-or-both meaning is essential, use something like "xxx, yyy, or both."

Appendixes

Spell with an "x" rather than a "c." Use roman numerals for appendix numbers. Numbering for figures and tables in appendixes is continuous throughout the report. Footnote numbering restarts in each appendix; normally, ISTS makes this change during the final formatting process.

Capitalization

Capitalize proper nouns and names (e.g., Department of State, House of Representatives, President Lincoln), but lowercase general, nonspecific nouns and names (e.g., agency, committee, department, office, administration, act). Capitalize World Wide Web (proper name), but lowercase website, web, webcast, webinar, web page.

Citations

Use this format to cite a GAO product: GAO, *Main Title: Subtitle*, report number (Washington, D.C.: date). Use this format to cite an electronic source (an article online): Janet Ridgely, "2002: Forecasted Data, Economy," in *Industry, Business, Management Resources*, ver. 3.2 (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan, August 2000), accessed September 20, 2000, http://www.um.edu/~ibmr/fore2002/figs.htm.

Compound words

Refer to *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th edition, to determine whether a compound word should be hyphenated.

Generally, compound words formed with prefixes (e.g., sub, re, pre, semi, non) are spelled as one word (e.g., nonprofit). If the prefix creates a repeated "i," "a," and "o" vowel, a hyphen is used after the prefix (e.g., anti-inflammatory). No hyphen is used with repeated-"e" words (e.g., reengineer).

Write compound verbs ending in a preposition as two words (e.g., back up, break down). When they are used as nouns or adjectives, check Webster's; typically, they are written as one word or hyphenated (e.g., the backup was significant). Note: "Email" is no longer hyphenated.

Dashes

Use an em dash (—) to set off a series or to mark a sudden break. It should not have a space before or after it. Use an en dash (–) in number, date, or time ranges to mean "through" (i.e., "up to and including"). Use a word instead of an en dash if a range starts with "from" or "between."

Don't read your rough draft, analyze it

Don't read your rough draft, analyze it

- For messages, prominently displayed

VBA Identified Some Contractor Issues, but Lacked Adequate Oversight of Contractors' Performance

- For focused paragraphs

The **closure contract** specifies both Kaiser-Hill's and DOE's **responsibilities**. **Kaiser-Hill** is **responsible** for processing, packing, and shipping off-site all of Rocky Flats' nuclear materials and radioactive and hazardous wastes. **DOE** is **responsible** for delivering a variety of services and items to support the project. For example, the **contract specifies** that **DOE** arrange receiver sites for all the materials and wastes that must be shipped off-site and to obtain the necessary certifications for the containers in which the materials and wastes must be packed and shipped.

- For simple sentences

VA and state agencies coordinate and share information about their oversight activities in a variety of ways.

Seek feedback on early drafts

Learn from feedback

Take stock after your writing project: did you meet your goal?

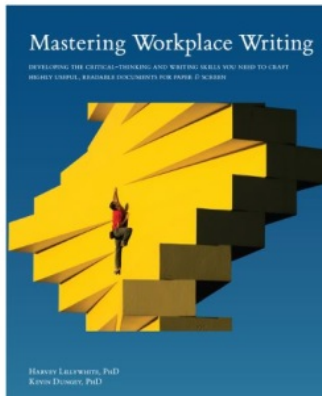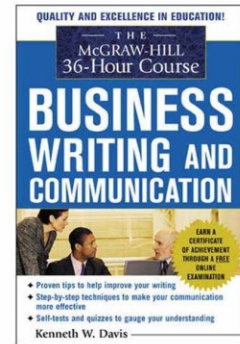"THE FIRST STEP TOWARDS GETTING SOMEWHERE IS TO DECIDE THAT YOU ARE NOT GOING TO STAY WHERE YOU ARE."

UNKNOWN

What's your first, next step to improve your writing, to commit to "It"?

Recommended resources

- Kenneth W. Davis, *Business Writing and Communication*

Kevin Dungey and Harvey Lillywhite*, Mastering Workplace Writing* (see also their blog at https://qcgwrite.com/)

- Joseph M. Williams, *Style*