

How to Write Public Policy That Matters

DAVID CHRISINGER, AUTHOR OF

PUBLIC POLICY WRITING THAT MATTERS



Roy Munson was the state bowling champion in 1979. After trying to cheat the wrong guys, he loses his hand and spends the next 17 years unhappily selling bowling equipment. Then he meets Ishmael, a young Amish man who is a natural born bowler. After convincing Ishmael to come with him and use his talents to win money on the professional bowling circuit to help save his family's farm, the two head out and start winning tournaments.

Roy (Woody Harrelson):

- Smoke?

Ishmael (Randy Quaid):

- Oh, no thanks.... You really should try to quit, Mr. Munson. They say it's bad for your heart, lungs. It quickens the aging process.

Roy:

- Is that right? Who's done more research on the subject than the good people at the American Tobacco Industry. They say it's harmless. Why would they lie? If you're dead, you can't smoke.



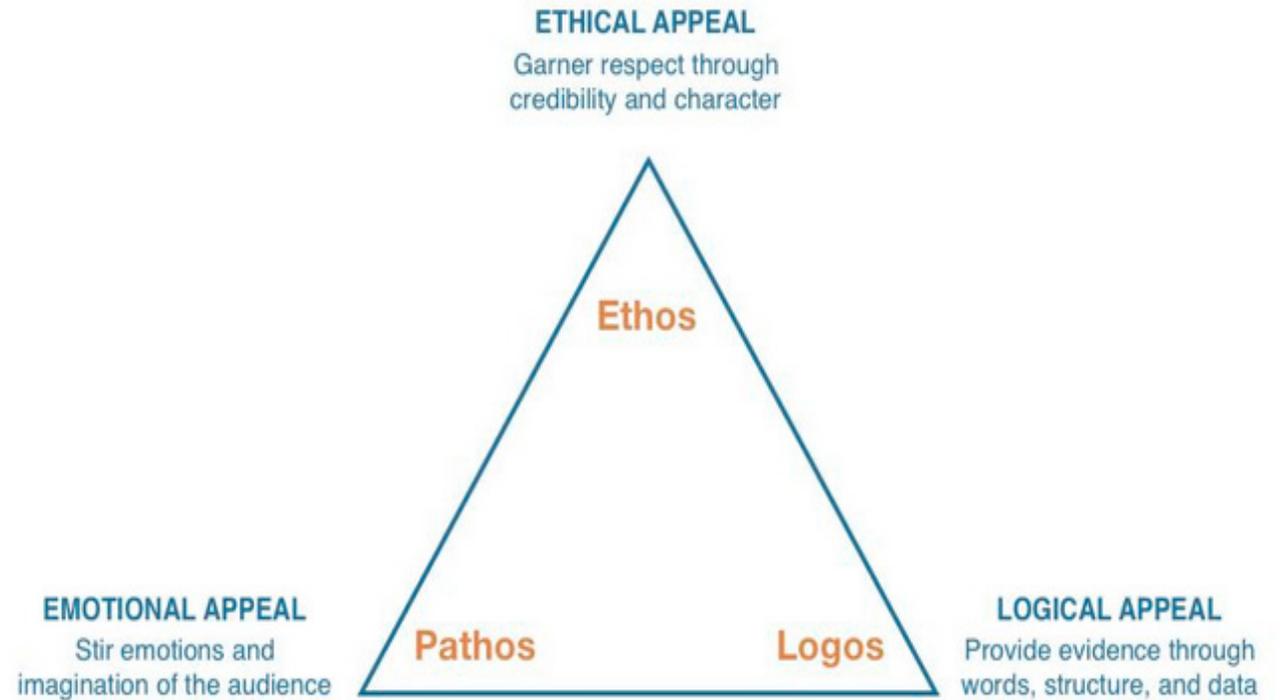
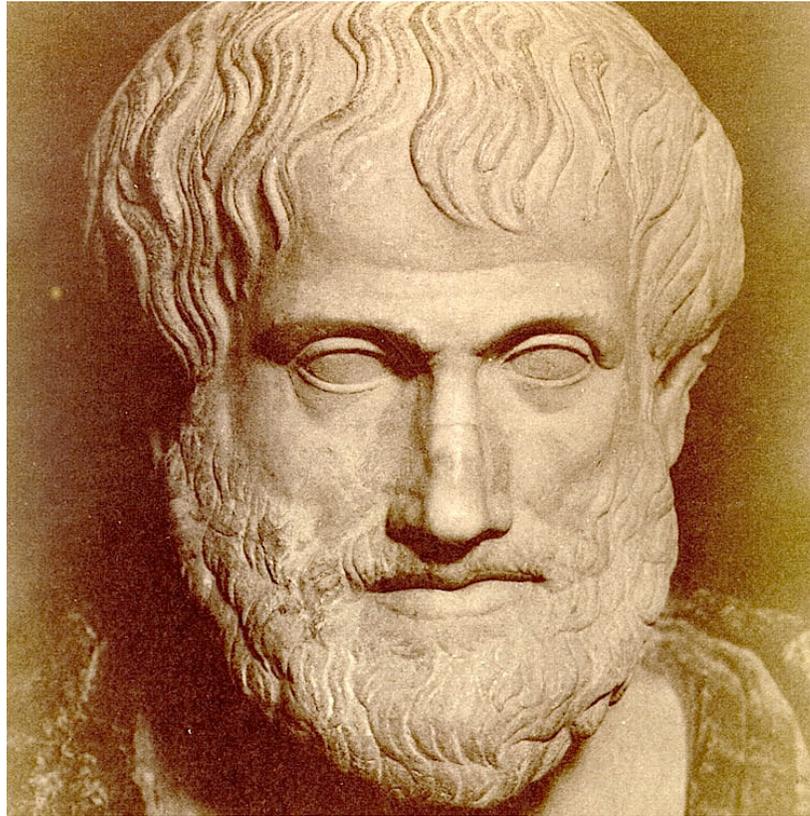
We never think alone...

The Enigma of Reason by Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber:

- Reason is an evolved trait:
 - Humans' biggest advantage over other species is our ability to cooperate.
 - Cooperation is difficult to establish and almost as difficult to sustain.
 - Reason developed not to enable us to solve abstract, logical problems or even to help us draw conclusions from unfamiliar data.
 - Reason developed to resolve the problems posed by living in collaborative groups.



Aristotle's 3 Pillars of Persuasion



Audience and Purpose

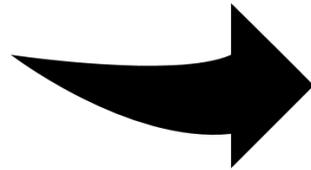
Who is going to read your writing?

What do you want them to do with it?

“The biggest reason most of us write unclearly is that we cannot predict when readers will think our writing is unclear, much less what makes it so. What we write always seems clearer to us than to our readers, because we read into what we want them to get out of it. And so instead of revising our writing to meet their needs, we call it done the moment it meets ours.”

-Joseph M. Williams, *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace*

What Stops Us from Achieving Our Purpose?

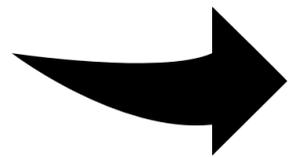


Getting closer...





Almost there...



Here's what the reader wants:



Writing for the Reader: Three Tools

1. Write Deductively

Don't worry about spoiling the punchline:

- Present your main point first
- Follow that main point with supporting evidence

When we write deductively:

- We give the readers what they want right away
- We help the readers scan (79 percent of readers report scanning nearly everything they read)
- The readers will better understand what we're saying



Main Point

**Discussion of
Data and
Evidence**

2. Strike the Right Balance



Narration

- This happened, and then this happened, and then we heard this, and then we heard that.

Summation:

- What does all that narration mean?

Reflection:

- How do we feel about it (i.e., what's the effect)?

Try starting with recommendations and working backwards...

3. Ensure Paragraphs Are Unified and Coherent

Unified paragraphs have one main point

- “One paragraph = One point”

Your topic sentence should answer the question: “What is the point of this paragraph?”

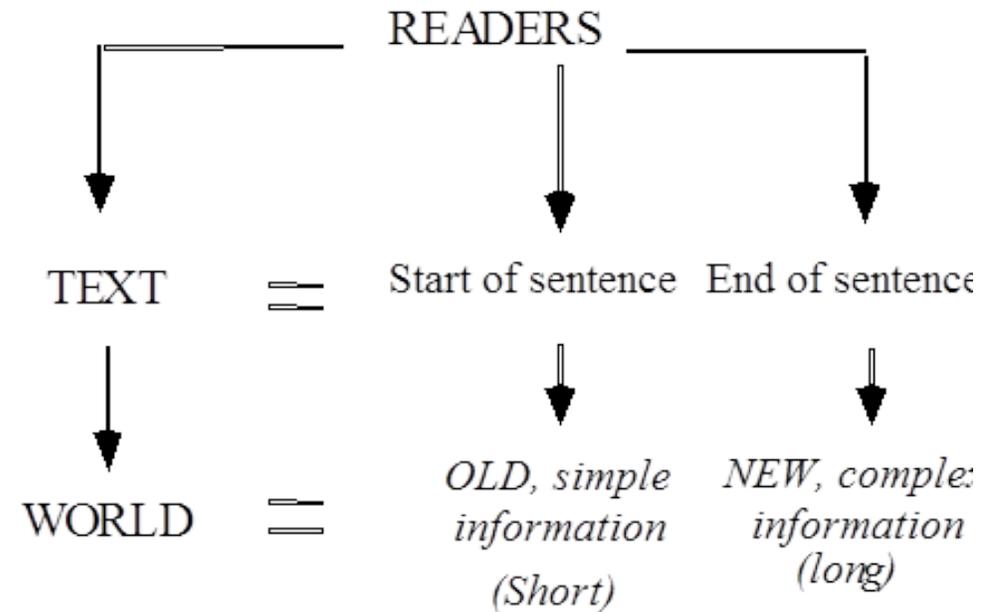
- Lead with your observation, not your research method
- Remember: Your topic sentence sets your reader’s expectations

All sentences in a coherent paragraph relate to themes found in the topic sentence

Improving Coherence: Four Tools

1. Use Old-to-New Information

Begin sentences with information familiar to readers (old information) and end sentences with information that readers cannot anticipate (new information)



An example of old-to-new:

Given the increased variety of support and widened reach of care available to returning veterans, their involvement in VA treatment programs is relatively low. **This low participation rate**, coupled with an increased suicide rate, signals that many veterans are not getting the help they need from VA's available resources. **These resources** are *opt-in*, which means that veterans must actively seek them out. There are, however, many factors that prevent veterans from seeking out care. **These factors include**, but are not limited to a:

- general distrust of mental health professionals;
- lack of awareness of mental health conditions;
- belief that the condition is not severe enough to warrant treatment; or
- belief that by seeking help they will be viewed negatively, weak, or out of control.

2. Repeat Words for Accuracy:

Draft: Under the new health care law, hospitals are required to ensure that doctors comply with new rules and regulations governing outpatient care. If the hospital finds that health care professionals are not complying, they are required to report those physicians and/or issue fines.

Revision: Under the new health care law, hospitals are required to ensure that physicians comply with new rules and regulations governing outpatient care. If the hospital finds that they are not complying, the hospitals are required to report them and/or issue fines.

3. Use Parallel Structure

Many different sorts of transitions can be difficult for anyone who undergoes them. *For civilians*, leaving home for the first time or getting married can be stressful, especially if these transitions take place during periods of financial uncertainty. Similarly, *for returning veterans*, the challenges of coming home from a warzone can be exacerbated by uncertainty with employment, personal relationships, substance abuse, and homelessness.

4. Use Transitional Words and Phrases

Addition

- further, also, in addition, next, furthermore, moreover, additionally

Cause and Effect

- thus, as a result, therefore, consequently, because, accordingly, hence, subsequently

Comparison

- similarly, likewise, in the same way

Contrast

- but, yet, however, nevertheless, in contrast, on the other hand, on the contrary, instead, actually

Illustration and Elaboration

- for example, specifically, in particular, more precisely, in fact, indeed, more specifically, namely, that is, for instance, in other words

Numerical Order

- first, second, third; first, then, finally

Time

- after, before, next, at the same time, currently, earlier

Strengthening Sentences: Three Tools

What is the point of this sentence?

Clinical and preventive strategies to reverse negative trends and reinforce positive trends as well as address persistent concerns are to be considered, especially if they are directed toward the veteran population as a whole with targeted messaging and intervention to each group, including young men, women, patients with and without known mental health conditions, and patients at known high risk for suicide.

1. Strengthen the Sentence Core:

Place the subject close to the verb, and place the subject and verb close to the beginning of the sentence

A clear and concise sentence has a strong “sentence core” that states the (1) actor (the doer of the action) in the subject of the sentence and (2) action (what the actor is doing) in the verb.



Tell Stories about People Doing Something Specific

Most Perceptible → Least Perceptible:

Humans

- Personifications (government, market)
- Inanimate objects (receptor, fragment, instrument)
 - Familiar abstractions (assumption, distinction)
 - Specialized abstractions (polycentric governance of complex economic systems)

If an actor is not recognizable *to your readers*, they will find the writing unclear.

2. Avoid Using Unnecessary Nominalizations

Who is doing what?

- The Internal Revenue Service's case-by-case approach for determining fines and settlement payments could lead to inconsistent treatment of tax payers without adequate justification for the differential treatment.



The Wordiness Virus:

More often than not, wordy sentences have:

1. weak verbs,
2. nominalizations,
3. misplaced actors, and
4. too many *prepositions*

The potential *for* inconsistent penalty administration *within* a decentralized management structure is exacerbated *by* the complexity *of* the penalty process *within* the IRS.

Possible Revisions:

The IRS likely administers penalties inconsistently because it has a decentralized management structure and a complex penalty process.

Or:

The IRS likely administers penalties inconsistently because its management structure is decentralized and its penalty process is complex.

Nominalizations can cost lives...



A defect which involves the possible failure of a frame support plate may exist on your vehicle. This plate (front suspension pivot bar support plate) connects a portion of the front suspension to the vehicle frame, and its failure could affect vehicle directional control, particularly during heavy brake application. In addition, your vehicle may require adjustment service to the hood secondary catch system. The secondary catch may be misaligned so that the hood may not be adequately restrained to prevent hood fly-up in the event the primary latch is inadvertently left unengaged. Sudden hood fly-up beyond the secondary catch while driving could impair driver visibility. In certain circumstances, occurrence of either of the above conditions could result in vehicle crash without prior warning.

Looking for Nominalizations:

- 1) When the nominalization follows a verb with little specific meaning:
 - Change the nominalization to a verb:

 - Example: *The Office of Inspector General conducted an investigation into the matter.*

- 2) When the nominalization follows “there is” or “there are”:
 - Change the nominalization to a verb and find a subject:

 - Example: *There is a need for further evaluation of this agency.*

- 3) When the nominalization is the subject of an empty verb:
 - Change the nominalization to a verb and find a new subject:

 - Example: *The intention of the IRS is to audit the records of the program.*

3. Use the Active Voice...Generally

Remember that readers of English read subjects looking for actors.

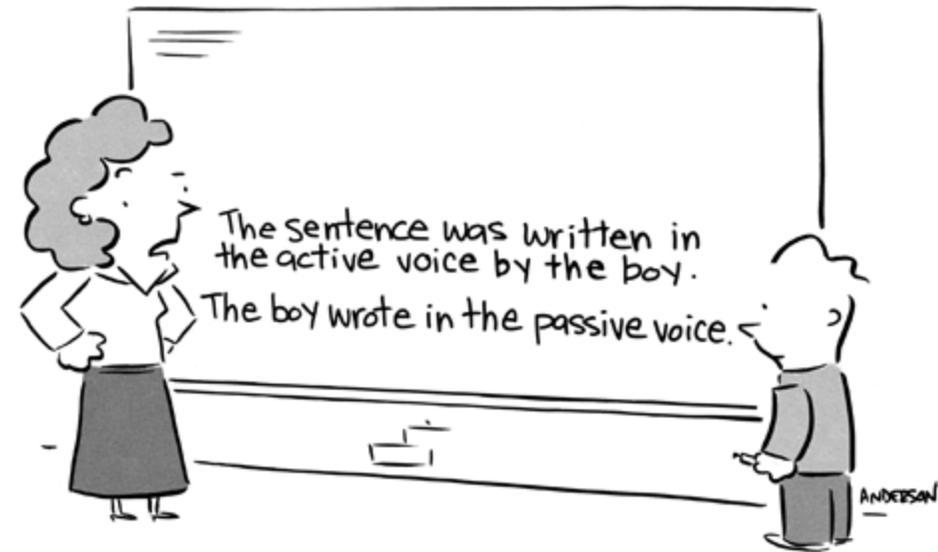
If the subject does not name an actor, the sentence immediately begins to feel unclear, indirect, and difficult.

A passive verb is a problem when you let the passive seduce you into:

- using subjects that are not actors, or
- omitting important actors altogether.

© MARK ANDERSON

WWW.ANDERTOONS.COM



"You're just messing with me, aren't you."

When should you use the passive voice?

The doer is unknown:

- “The veterans’ claims were misplaced, and the veterans were left on the agency’s waitlist for almost two years before someone located the claims.”

The doer of the action is unimportant:

- “The new IT infrastructure was completed early and under budget.”

The receiver of the action, not the doer, needs to be emphasized:

- “Numerous veterans were sent inaccurate payments.”

Focus needs to be kept on the same doer over two sentences (old-to-new sequence):

- “Veterans applying for disability benefits must first fill out an electronic application on VA’s website. In collecting evidence needed to justify their claim, veterans are encouraged by VA to consult with their primary care providers.”

Questions?

EMAIL: DAVE.CHRISINGER@GMAIL.COM