

Make Your Writing More Reader-Friendly

COLIN J. FALLON, PH.D.

SENIOR COMMUNICATIONS ANALYST

US GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE

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What specifically nags
you about writing?



Writing is hard—but why?



Writing stresses cognitive load



Writing is decisionmaking



Writing is often exhausting



Writing is hard so that
reading can be easy



My main messages to you

PLAN

- Always be mindful of your audience and purpose
- Identify your key messages
- Organize those messages in chunks before writing full sentences and paragraphs

My main messages to you

WRITE

- Write a “quick and dirty” first draft that you know will change

My main messages to you

REVISE

Revise to

- prominently display your main messages,
- solidify your paragraphs, and
- activate your sentences.

Planning



Planning



Planning: Consider your audience



Planning: Consider your audience

- ▶ Agency officials
- ▶ Legislature
- ▶ Press
- ▶ Concerned citizens

Planning: Consider your audience

BUSY

Planning: Consider your
purpose

Inform?

Persuade?

Planning: Consider your purpose



Planning: Get the information you'll need

- ▶ Identify key objectives
- ▶ Obtain information that answers those objectives
- ▶ Obtain elements of a finding that are necessary

Planning: Clarify your objectives



Exercise: Begin with an end in mind

- ▶ Did Youth Services implement its new Juvenile Justice Enterprise Management System, and is all required and pertinent youth information maintained and accessible in real time?
- ▶ Analyze SOPS's inventory controls, purchasing practices, and distribution procedures for pharmaceuticals to determine their adequacy and effectiveness
- ▶ Determine whether state purchase cards are used properly

Planning: Formalize your plan

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
<p>What question(s) is the team trying to answer?</p> <p>Identify key researchable questions. Ensure each question is specific, objective, neutral, measurable, and doable. Ensure key terms are defined.</p> <p>Each major evaluation question should be addressed in a separate row on this table.</p> <p>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)</p>	<p>What information does the team need to address the question? Where will they get it?</p> <p>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.</p> <p>Identify documents or types of information that the team must have.</p> <p>Identify whether photographs, video, audio, or other media could be collected to enhance documentation and communication of information.</p> <p>Identify plans to address internal controls and compliance.</p> <p>Identify plans to follow up on known significant findings and open recommendations that team found in obtaining background information.</p> <p>Identify sources of the required information, such as databases, studies, subject area experts, program officials, models, etc.</p>	<p>How will the team answer each question?</p> <p>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.</p> <p>Describe the planned scope of each strategy, including the timeframe, locations to visit, and sample sizes.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>Describe the steps to be taken to assess reliability of the data sources.</p>	<p>What are the engagement's design's limitations and how will it affect the product?</p> <p>Cite any limitations as a result of the information required or the scope and methodology, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> --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. <p>Be sure to address how these limitations will affect the product.</p>	<p>What are the expected results of the work?</p> <p>Describe what GAO can likely say. Draw on preliminary results for illustrative purposes, if helpful.</p> <p>Ensure that the proposed answer addresses the question in column one.</p> <p>As appropriate, describe potential video, audio, animation, or other media that could help communicate information.</p>

Planning: Keep track of what you're learning

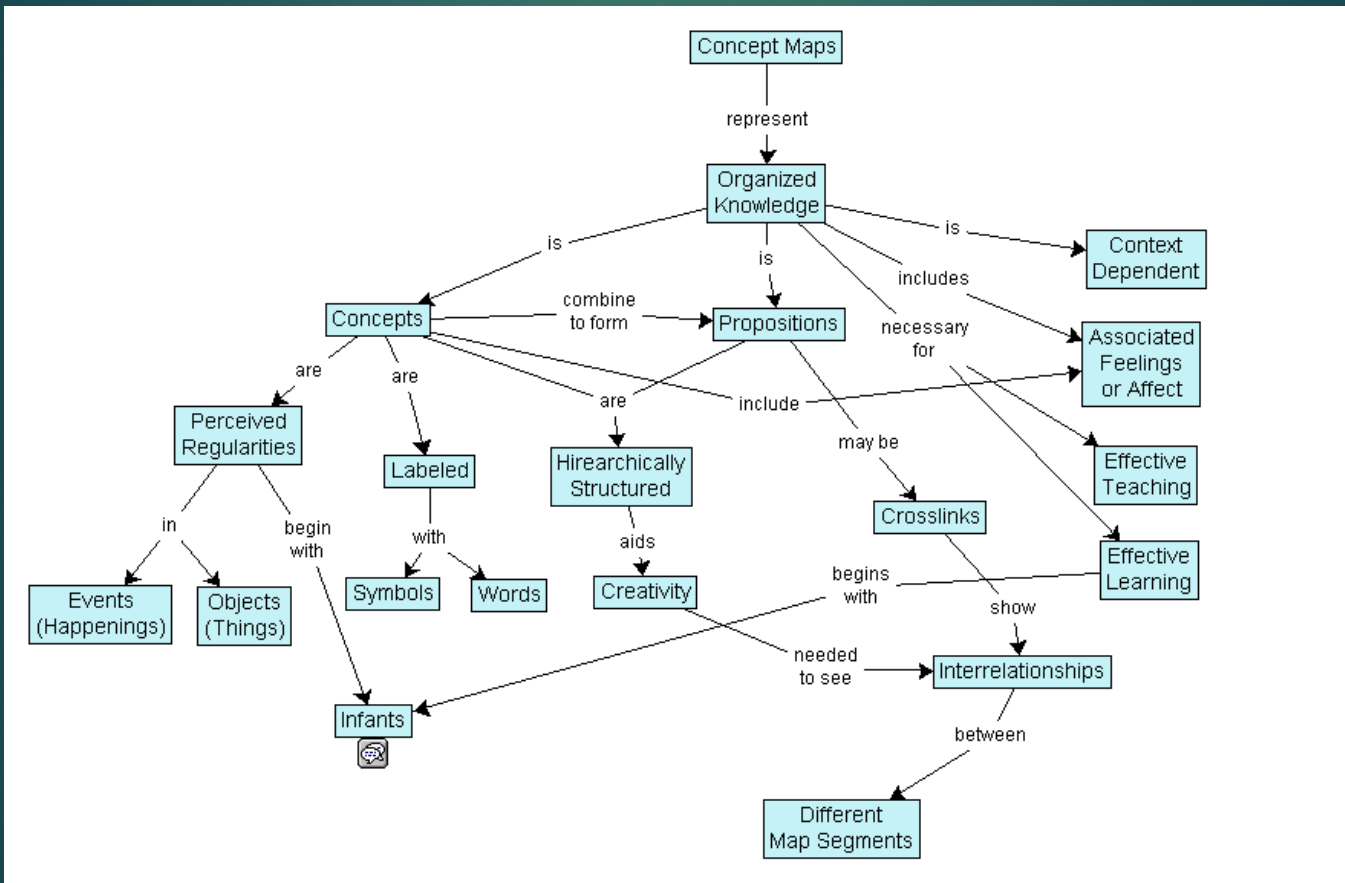
EVIDENCE TRACKER

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		

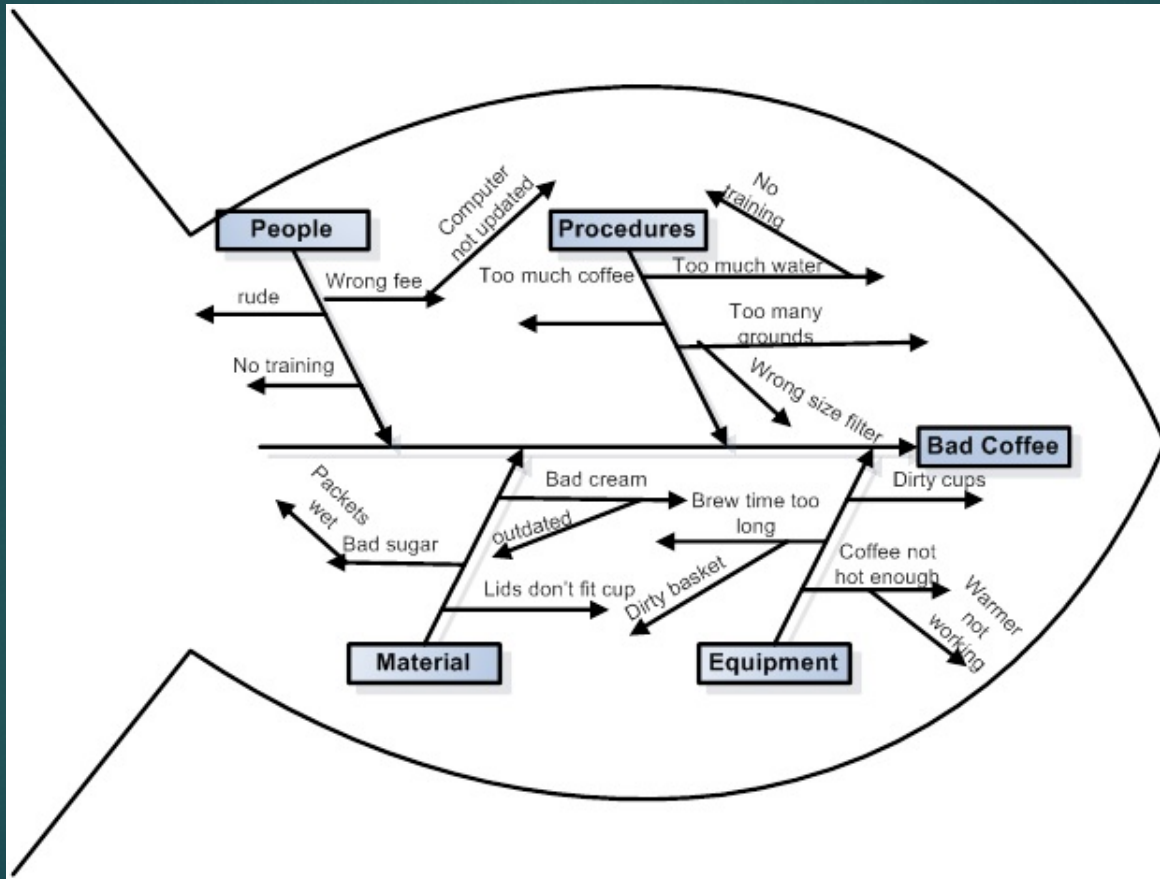
Planning: Identify finding elements during the audit

FINDINGS AND COLLECTIVE EVIDENCE ASSESSMENT MATRIX				
	Elements of a finding	Is evidence sufficient for this element Y/N	Remaining work	Is remaining work planned or New? If new, H, M or L LOE?
Objective				
Finding 1	Condition:			
	Cause:			
	Criteria:			
	Effect:			
Finding 2	Condition:			
	Cause:			
	Criteria:			
	Effect:			
Objective				
Finding 1	Condition:			
	Cause:			
Other Findings not directly relate to obj	Condition:			
	Cause:			

Planning: Analyze your information



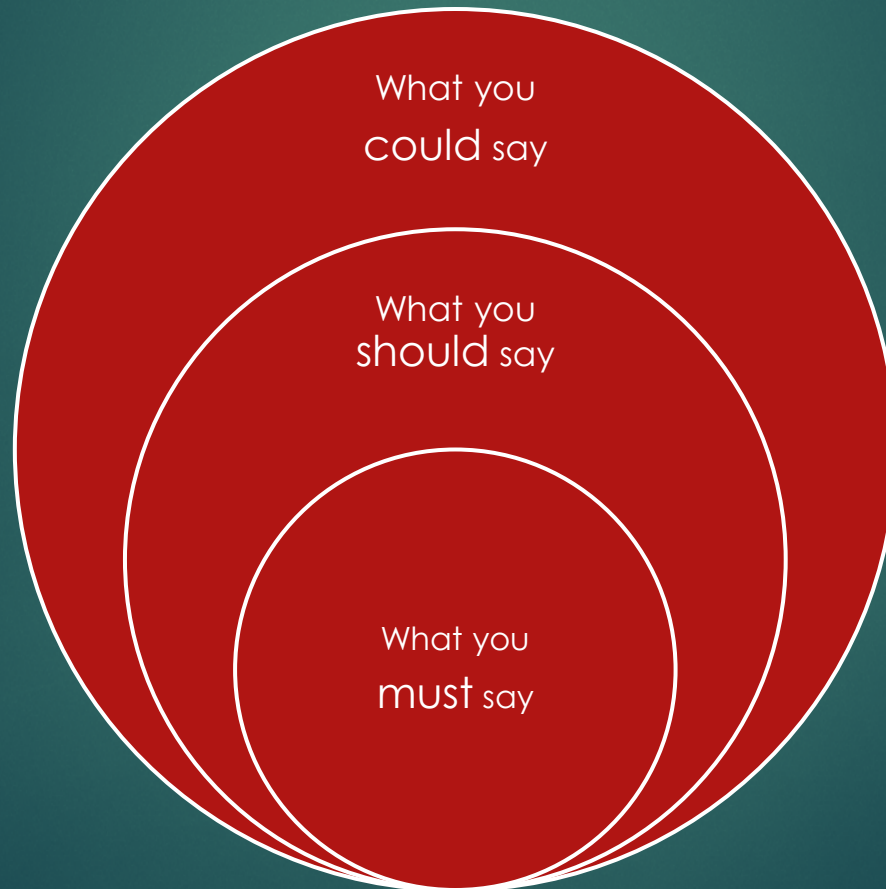
Planning: Analyze your information



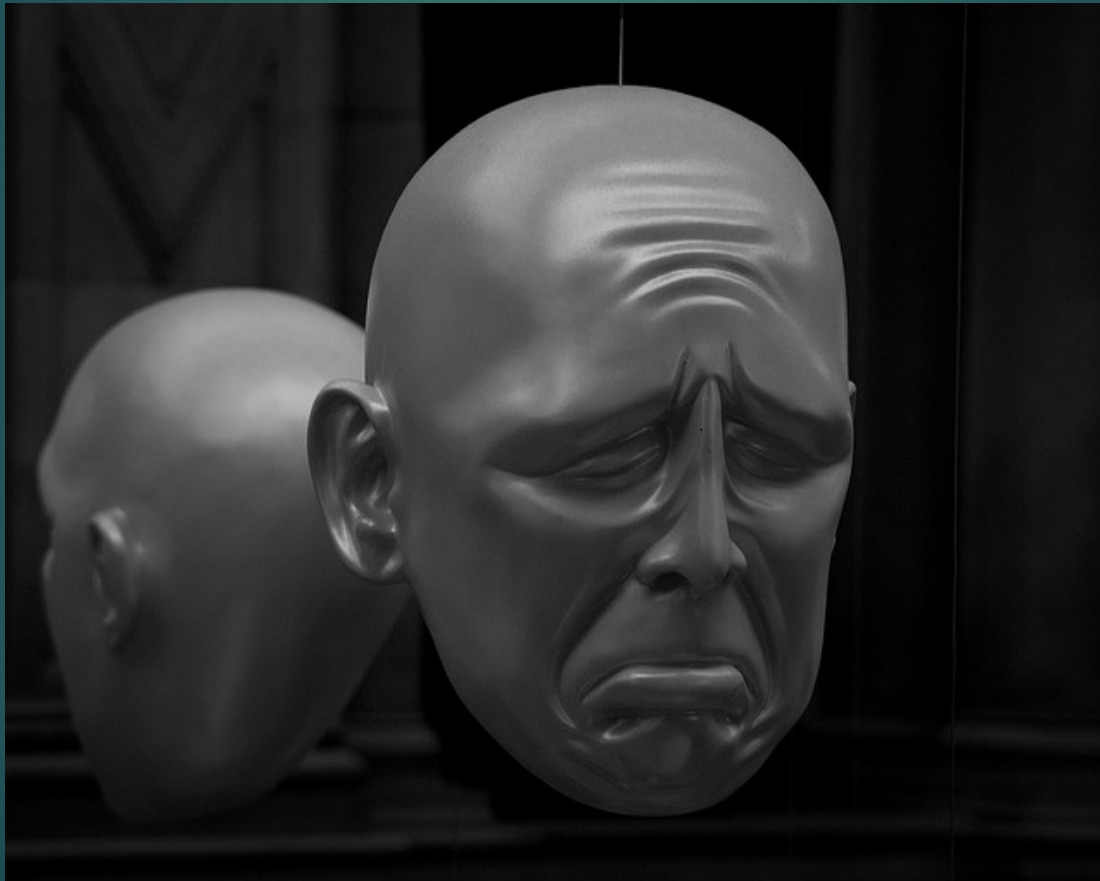
Planning: Identify and organize your main ideas



Planning—Deciding between “Nice to Know” and “Need to Know”



Planning



Planning: Outline your report

- I. The park's background history and how it is connected to current problems, particularly the dredging of the marsh and creation of the lake.
- II. How the parks department's design and development of the park and suburbanization created serious water management issues:
 1. Pollution: industry, houses
 2. Eutrophication
 3. Invasive species
- III. How public use of the park, particularly fishing practices, is exacerbating water problems.
- IV. Conclusions: potential solutions involving the parks department, local fishermen, and park neighbors

Writing—Don't try to do it all at once



Write a first draft knowing
it will change



**IT'S NOT
BRAIN
SURGERY!**

Unlike brain surgery, we don't need to get it right the first time

Revise for message

- ▶ Test your finding elements

What should be happening?

Why has it happened? What is happening? What is the result?

What should be done about it?

Exercise

Concerns raised about how “Ntrax” manages its food and beverage service



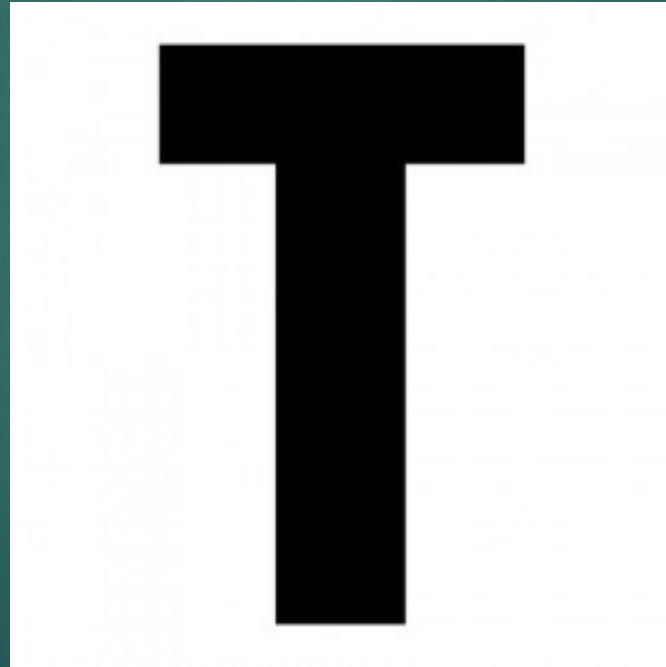
Revise for message

Examine your document, asking yourself whether your message is

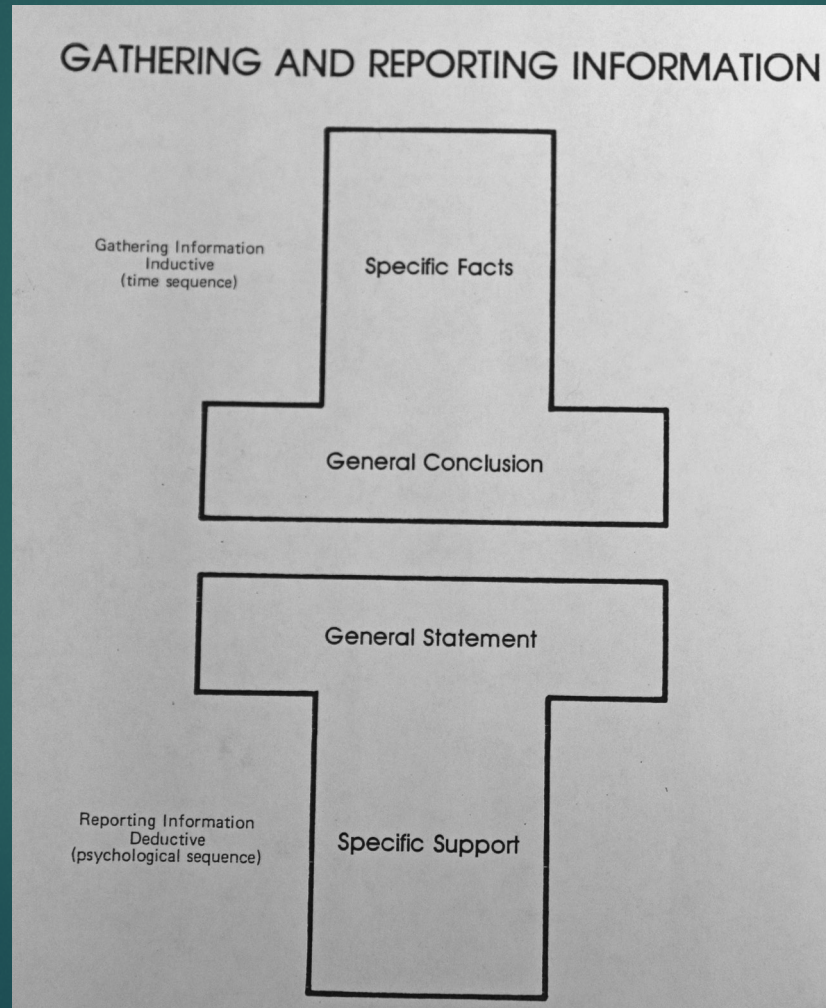
- Near the beginning of the document
- Succinctly stated
- Supported by details

Revise for message

- ▶ Present your message deductively



Revise for message



Revise paragraphs



Revise paragraphs

Remember: One point per paragraph.



Revise paragraphs

Check each paragraph to ensure that it has:

- A topic sentence that explains the message of the paragraph
- Unity, meaning that all the sentences clearly relate to that topic sentence
- Coherence, meaning that the sentences flow one to the other

Revise paragraphs

A topic, or point, sentence, explains the subject of the paragraph and something about that subject.

Example

The army (subject) developed plans to establish a new training ground in Kentucky (something about the subject).

Revise paragraphs

The officials discovered that employees bought several prohibited items with their agency purchase cards, such as large-screen tvs, jewelry, and fine cutlery. For example, the officials discovered that employees visited Best Buy stores near their homes to obtain tvs with their purchase cards. The employees also used the cards to buy diamonds and Wusthof knives over the Internet.

Revise paragraphs

- ▶ Strive for unified paragraphs
- ▶ A paragraph is unified when all the sentences are clearly linked to the topic sentence.

Revise 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.

Revise paragraphs

- ▶ Strive for coherent paragraphs
- ▶ A paragraph is coherent when sentences flow one to another in a logical sequence.

Revise paragraphs

- ▶ Thunderstorms can be categorized as **single cell** or multicell. Basically, a **single-cell** thunderstorm is the lone thunderstorm that forms on a **hot humid day**. The **heat and humidity** of the day is the only trigger for the **storm**. This type of **storm** forms in an environment with little difference in the wind speed and direction—or wind shear—between the surface and cloud level.

Revise sentences

Examine your document, asking yourself whether your sentences have

- Identified “Who is doing what?”
- Active voice
- Action verbs

Revise sentences

Keep sentence core together.

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.

VS

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

Revise sentences

Use active verbs, not nouns

- ▶ 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.

Revise sentences

Avoid passive voice



Exercise

Cap

i have learned to look on nature not as in the
hour of thoughtless youth but hearing oftentimes the
still, sad music of humanity, nor harsh nor grating,
though of ample power to chasten and subdue.

2/4

the

2/4
1/4

low
#

ital

Get feedback



Revise from feedback

Higher Order Concerns (HOCs)

- ▶ Message
- ▶ Evidence
- ▶ Organization

Lower Order Concerns (LOCs)

- ▶ Paragraphs
- ▶ Sentences
- ▶ Punctuation

Optics of the pages matter, too

Schoeffer, which he (Bergel) had heard confirmed in conversations with Mainz citizens; he had also seen some old tools prepared for the work by the originators which were still in existence. Gutenberg invented it in 1450. (xli.) About 1561 Jan van Zuren (born at Haarlem in 1517) and Dirk Volkerts Coornhert (born at Amsterdam in 1522) established a printing-office at Haarlem. Of the former it is alleged that he had compiled a work on the invention of printing, which is presumed to have been lost during the siege of Haarlem in 1573. This work was not publicly mentioned before 1628, when Peter Scriverius published his *Laurecrantz voor Laurens Coster*, in which he says that he had only found the title, preface and introduction, in which Van Zuren contended that the first foundations of the art were laid at Haarlem, and that it afterwards accompanied a foreigner to Mainz. In this introduction he does not mention the name of the inventor, nor a date, but points in indefinite terms to the house of the inventor as still existing. (xliii.) In the same year (1561) Van Zuren and Coornhert published an edition of the *Officium Ciceronis*, in which the latter, in a dedication to the magistracy of Haarlem, refers to the rumour that the art of printing books was invented first of all at Haarlem, and was brought to Mainz by an unfaithful servant and much improved there. He adds that very old

Mitigation Strategies

Lighting

Adequate lighting can go a long way toward making the parking lot a safer place. It serves as a natural deterrent to criminals, and increases the effectiveness of both officers and CCTV by improving visibility.

Maintenance

A lack of maintenance in a parking lot or garage can give the impression that it is not secure. Trash and graffiti should be removed. Landscaping should be trimmed so that it cannot be used as a hiding place.

Checklist

	Have I considered my audience?
	Have I considered my purpose?
	Have I identified my main message(s) and the supporting details?
	Have I clearly communicated my main message, placed it as close to the beginning of the document as possible, and supported that message with adequate detail?
	Have I written paragraphs that are introduced with a topic sentence, generally cover only one topic, contain sentences that link back to the topic sentence, and flow?
	Have I written short sentences that clearly communicate “who is doing what,” use active voice, and include action verbs as much as possible?
	Have I broken up the text with white space, bullets, graphics, etc. (if necessary)?

Additional considerations: writing about numbers

Use tables, graphics, or even bullets to show numbers.

Original:

- ▶ Based on our sample, we estimate that about 24,000 addresses could be confirmed as ineligible. About 300 of these were CMRAs, 2900 were vacant and 19,000 were invalid addresses. Additionally, about 40,000 address could be determined to be eligible. Finally, we estimated that eligibility could not be determined for about 42,000 addresses.

Additional considerations: writing about numbers

Use tables, graphics, or even bullets to show numbers.

Revision:

Based on our sample, we estimate that:

- About 24,000 addresses could be confirmed as ineligible. Nearly 300 of these were CMRAs. 2,900 were vacant and 19,000 were invalid addresses.
- About 40,000 addresses could be determined to be eligible.
- About 42,000 addresses could not be determined eligible or ineligible.

Additional considerations: writing about numbers

When writing about numbers in paragraphs, highlight the main point about those numbers in the topic sentence without using any numbers in that sentence, if possible.

Original:

The beneficiary received prescriptions for a total of 3,655 pills (a 1,679-day supply) from 58 different prescribers in 2008. The beneficiary received a prescription for at least 1 of the 14 selected drugs from at least 66 different prescribers.

Additional considerations: writing about numbers

When writing about numbers in paragraphs, highlight the main point about those numbers in the topic sentence without using any numbers in that sentence, if possible.

Revision:

The beneficiary received a multi-year supply of drugs from multiple prescriptions dispensed at multiple pharmacies. Specifically...

Additional considerations: writing about numbers

Minimize the frequency of numbers included in any given sentence.

Original:

- 367,000 applied and the agency found that 222,000 were eligible for the new cash benefit, of whom all enrolled in the program, receiving an average of \$132 a month over 3 years.

Revision:

- Out of 367,000 applicants, the agency identified 222,000 as eligible to receive the new cash benefit. These applicants are enrolled in the program. They received an average of \$132 a month over 3 years.

Additional considerations: writing about numbers

- ▶ **Explain a number's size relative to a broader population, if appropriate.**

Original:

- ▶ We found 10,000 beneficiaries who improperly received the cash award.

Revision:

- ▶ Of the 75,000 beneficiaries receiving cash awards, 10,000 (or about 13 percent) improperly received them.

Additional considerations: writing about numbers

Explain whether the highlighted number is generalizable to a broader population.

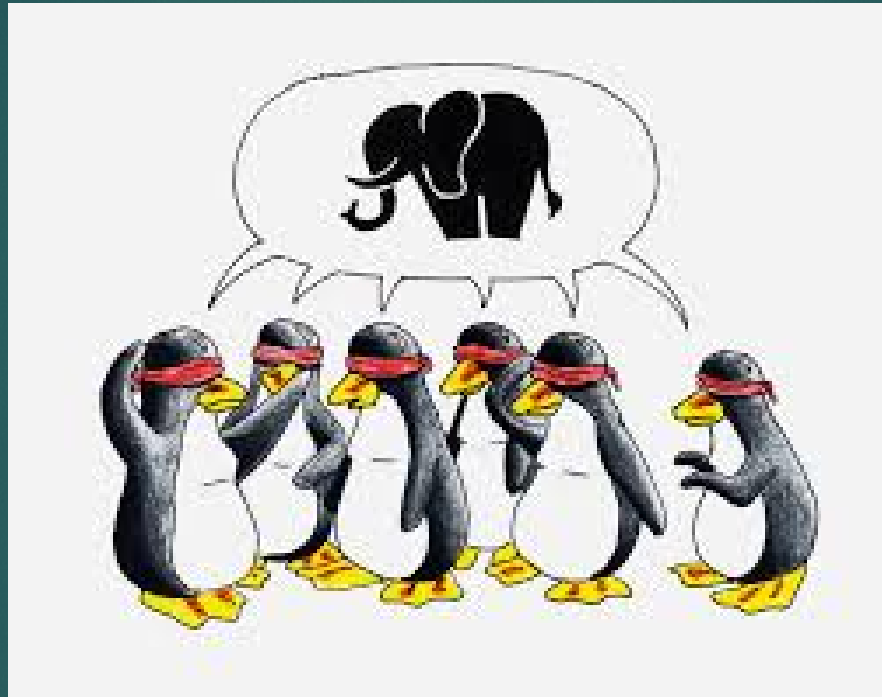
Generalizable:

- ▶ The generalizable stratified random sample of 140 passport issuances included 70 passport issuances from both fiscal years 2009 and 2010.

Nongeneralizable

- ▶ Our reviews of these five recipients are nongeneralizable (i.e., cannot be projected to the entire population of individuals) but identify possible instances of SSN misuse.

Additional considerations: writing in groups



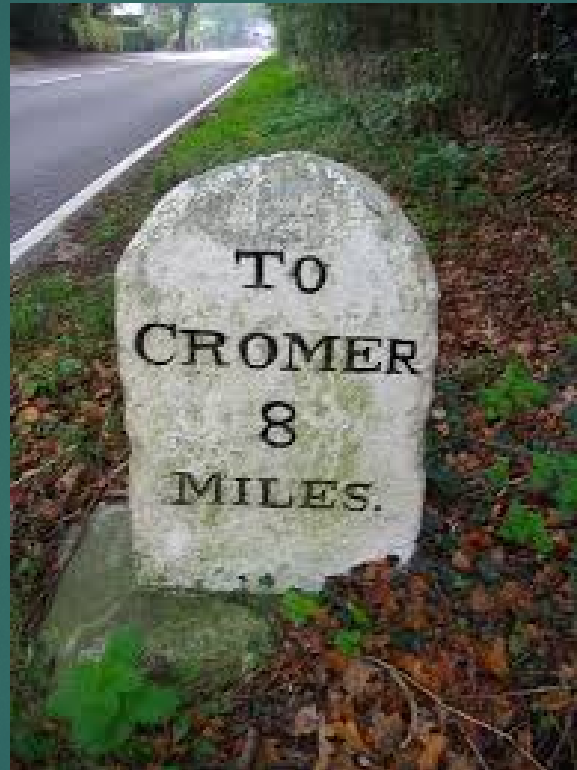
Ensure that the entire group holds a common understanding of the assignment.

Additional considerations: writing in groups



Establish clear roles and responsibilities.

Additional considerations: writing in groups



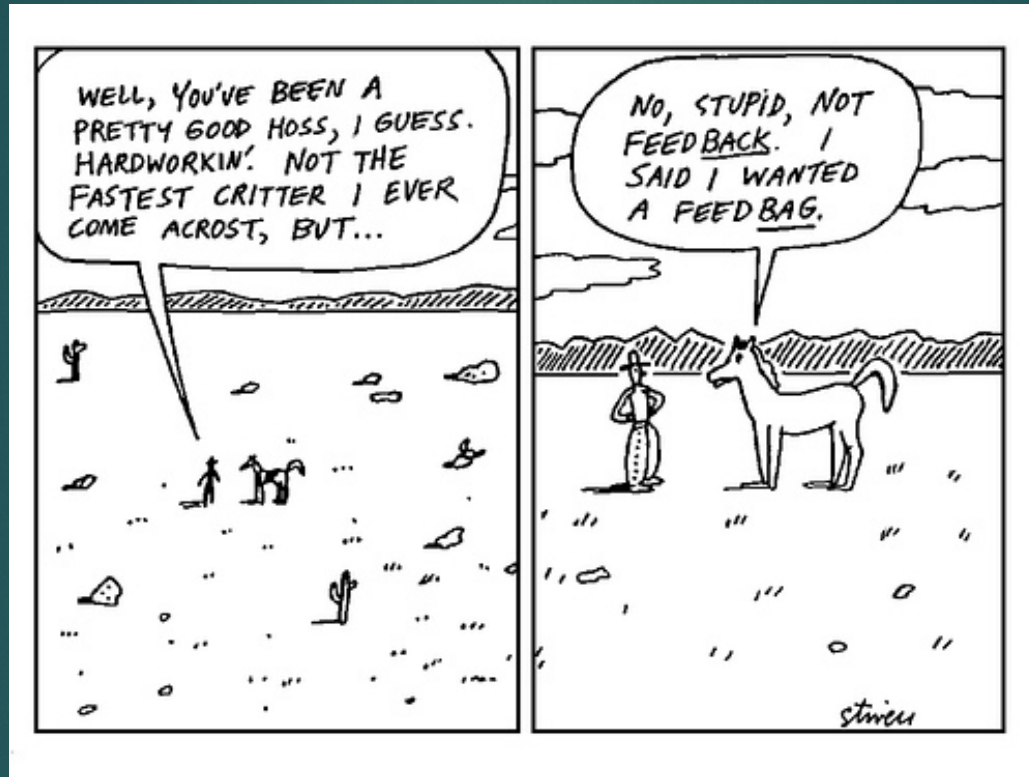
Establish milestone deadlines well in advance of the final deadline.

Additional considerations: writing in groups



Keep a clear record of versions and alterations.

Additional considerations: writing in groups



Provide honest feedback on others' work.

Additional considerations: managing others' writing

- ▶ **Ensure that the writer understands the audience and purpose of the document**
- ▶ **Set explicit expectations for page length**
- ▶ **Communicate how you prefer to see drafts (e.g., outline, rough draft, nearly finished product)**
- ▶ **Check in judiciously to ensure that writer is on track**
- ▶ **Provide oral and written feedback on draft products**

In closing...



“It is good to write
clearly, and
anyone can.”

Joseph Williams

Books, parts of books, and other recommended resources on writing

Stephen Armstrong and Timothy Terrell, *Thinking Like a Writer*

Jacques Barzun, *Simple and Direct*

Kenneth Davis, *Business Writing and Communication*

John K. DiTiberio and George H. Jensen, *Writing and Personality*

Stephen King, *On Writing*

Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird*

Richard Lanham, *Revising Prose*

George Orwell, *Politics and the English Language*

Joseph Williams, *Style*

Plainlanguage.gov

Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL) <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>

Colin J. Fallon, Ph.D.

Senior Communications Analyst

Forensic Audits and Investigative Service

US Government Accountability Office

202-512-3837

fallonc@gao.gov