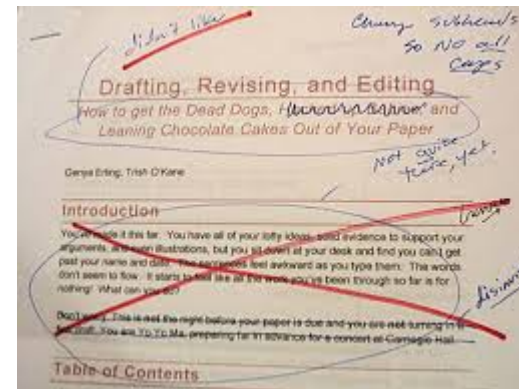# No More Train Wrecks
Strategies for Better Managing Your Staff's Writing Process
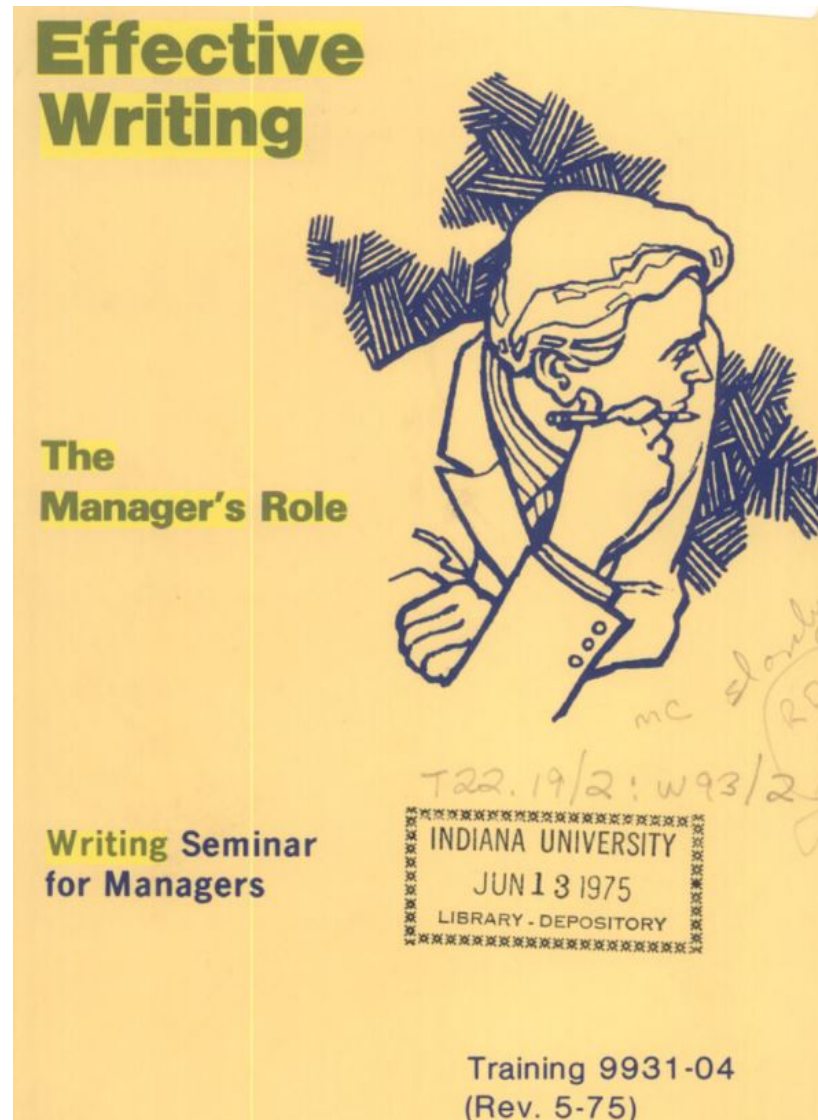

Colin J Fallon, Ph.D.
Supervisory Communications Analyst
US Government Accountability Office

A "train wreck" can be defined as any document that

▶ Substantially misses your expectations

▶ Exceeds the amount of time you want or have to make it useful/presentable

▶ Generally needs a lot of work

▶ Leaves both the writer(s) and you feeling upset

This is not a new issue

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Why do train wrecks happen?
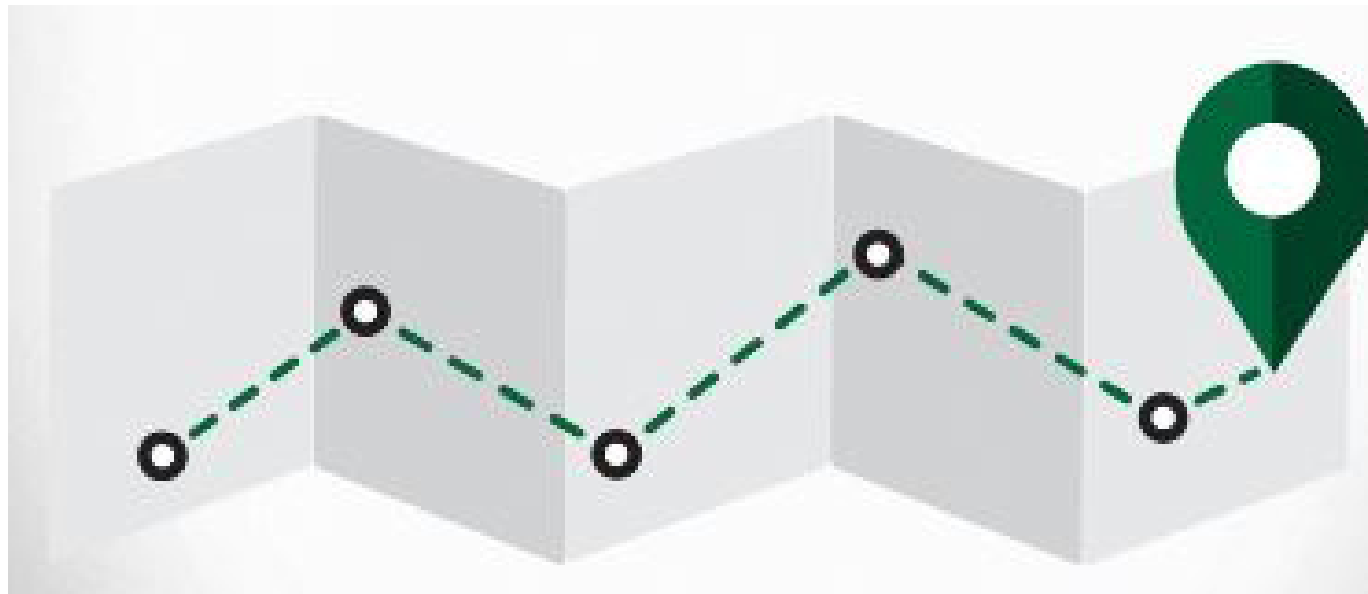
A common answer: people just can't write!

Train wrecks happen when the writing process is not managed

Writing in any organization is a process that can and should be managed

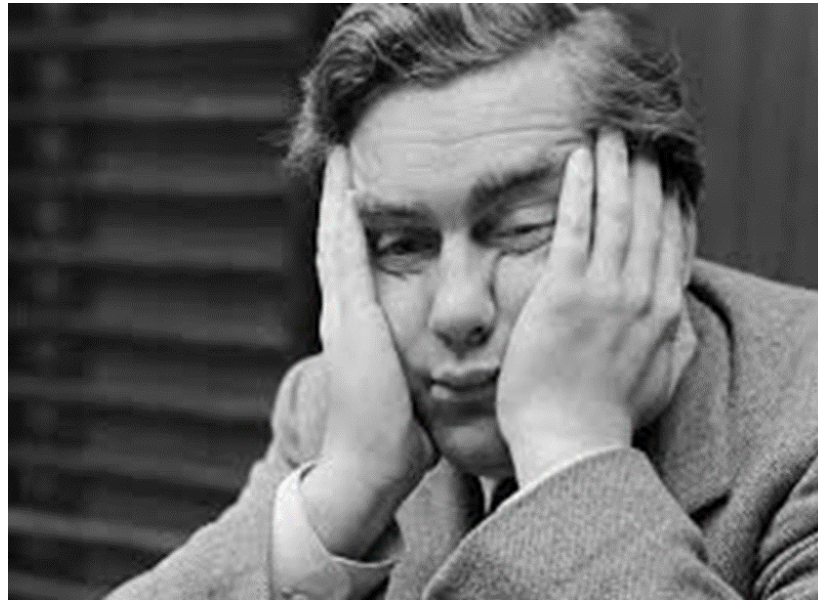# Managing the writing process should result in documents that

▶ Serve their intended purpose

▶ Are reader-friendly

▶ Keep readers' level of interest high, level of effort low, and…

…should keep you from having to take it over and rewrite the whole thing.

What does "managing writing" mean to you?

To avoid train wrecks, manage time, people, and process
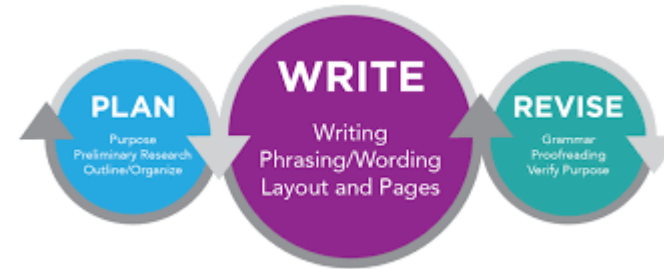
Good writing takes time

Two common goals as reviewer

- Use the information yourself, or move the document to the next level, quickly

- Develop the document-writing ability of your staff so that the first goal can be met more frequently

Managing people begins with knowing yourself
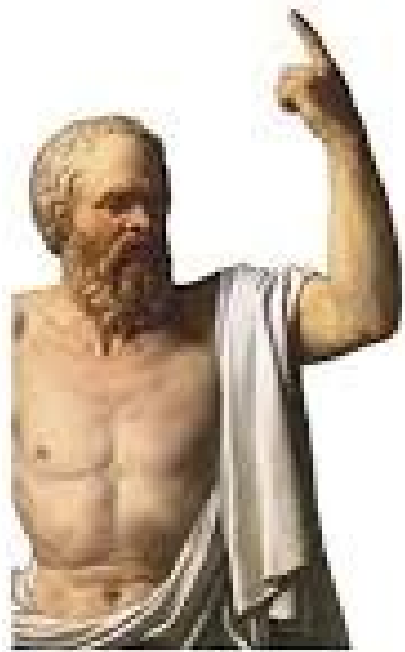
Know thyself.
- Socrates

Periodically refresh your knowledge of your organization's writing standards

Periodically refresh your knowledge of sound writing principles
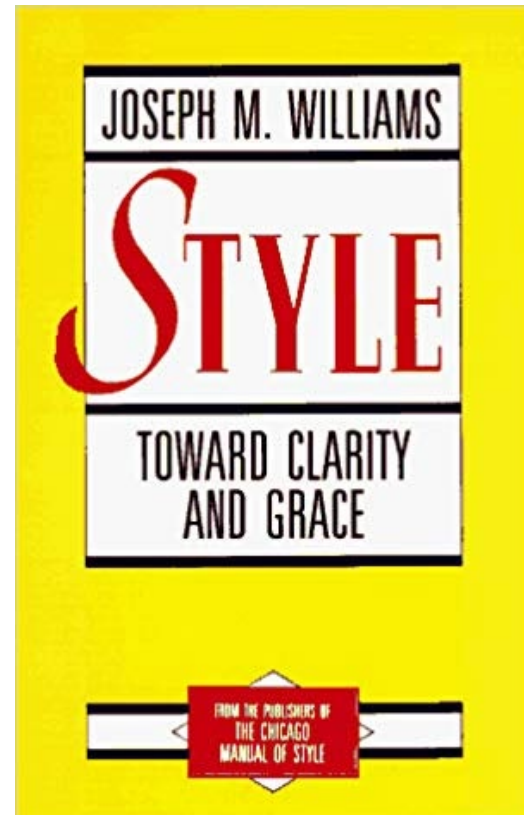
Identify and distribute models of your organization's documents that are written well

Inventory and communicate your preferences about the process

▶ Prefer to see rough drafts early or only more polished documents?

▶ Will you review the document for everything (content and presentation)?

▶ If your people get stuck writing, how quickly do you want them to approach you for help?

An example of expectations about writing

Expectations and Feedback Process for Written Products

his engagement and begin to learn each other's working and writing styles,
us be successful in our writing efforts. Because our engagement will culmir
ct, our writing efforts—from initial interview questions to draft report—will
a common understanding and agreement on how we write and what we e
help us develop a solid final report with impactful findings. In my dual role
written products as well as reviewing others' written work, I understand th
and actionable feedback. I hope this document serves as a framework for o
how we can make the best of our writing efforts in support of our engageme

ws begin with the development of interview questions that are clear, insigh
nding of the audience and its ability to provide meaningful responses. At t
estions are assigned to you, we will have a brief discussion—and brainstor
nterview themes as well as specific areas of inquiry. At that time we will al

Know your writers

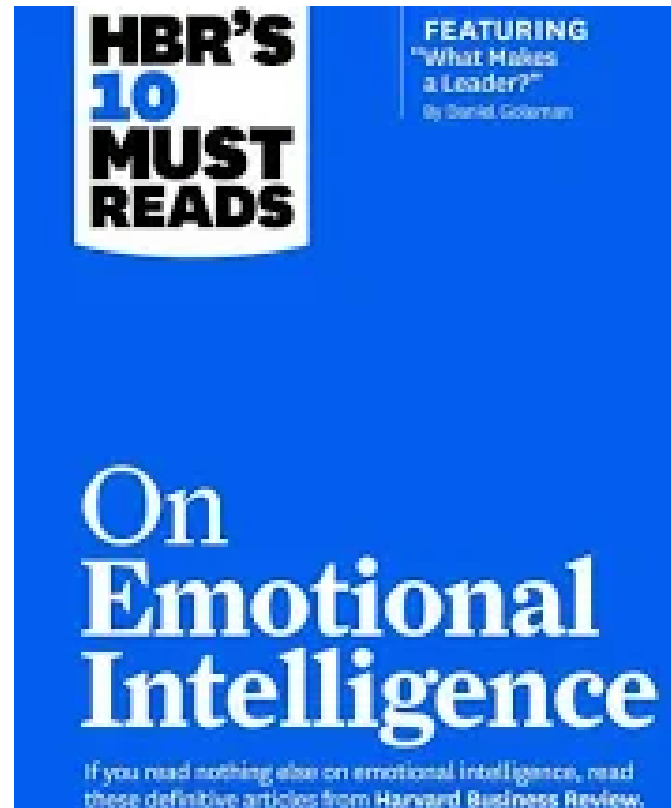| Extraverts	Introverts	Thinking
Prefer to approach things or people by getting actively involved with them	Pause before they speak or act. The pause gives them time to collect their thoughts, anticipate the direction they will take, and look before leaping	When it is time to make a decision, Thinking types prefer to be objective, establishing criteria, looking at pros and cons
Writing	Writing	Writing
Usually write best when thinking out loud and talking to other people, inviting them to interrupt so that a dialogue develops	Usually write best when they can think alone without distractions	Tend to focus on the content of their message; their writing may even come across as being too harsh or curt

Put your people at ease by practicing and promoting emotional intelligence

Promoting emotional intelligence will result in your staff thinking and writing better

Establish and follow a process: planning

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.

Establish and follow a process: monitoring

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		

Establish and follow a process: monitoring

Message "Check-in" Meetings

Coach up fundamental clear writing principles—sentences and paragraphs

"It is good to write clearly, and anyone can."

Joseph M. Williams
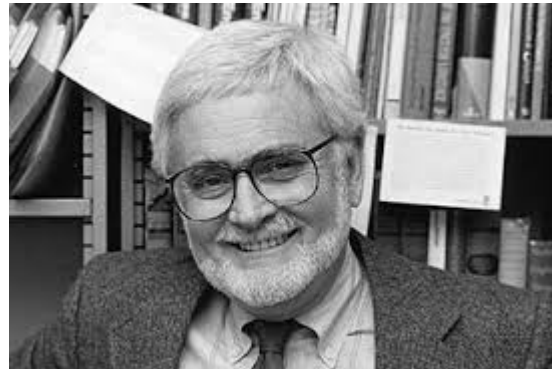
Understand your role as a reviewer, and work to ensure consistency across all reviewers

Establish and follow a process: read, but also analyze documents

Look for Higher Order Concerns (HOCs) first

▶ Content

▶ Organization

▶ Document Design

Organization: Encourage deductive style

Main message

T

Supporting details

Look for Lower Order Concerns (LOCs) second

▶Paragraphs

▶Sentences

▶Word Choices

▶Mechanics

Establish and follow a process: feedback

Better feedback practices

Combine oral with written feedback.

Better feedback practices

Praise the writer for things that work..

Better feedback practices

Focus on the writing, not the writer.

- ▶ "I don't see how these ideas link," *as opposed to*
- ▶ "You didn't make connections at all."

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Better feedback practices

Provide feedback based on where the writer is in the writing process.

▶ For example, if the writer is in the early stages of a draft and asks for help, she doesn't need a copyedit.

Better feedback practices

Suggest potential solutions to issues you flag, if possible.

- ▶ "Suppose we added some transitions to make the relationship between the ideas more clear," *as opposed to*
- ▶ "I'm not getting this."

Better feedback practices

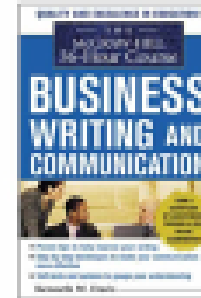Provide reasons for changes that are not self-evident.

Inventory successes and remaining challenges for managing the writing process

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*
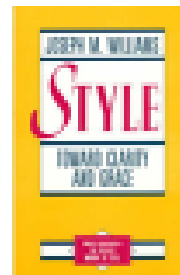
To avoid train wrecks, manage time, people, and process

Design Matrix

Issue Problem Statement:

1. **Put the issue into context.** Provide sufficient background information for the reader to understand the nature of the issue, the significance of the program, potential problem or concern and its magnitude, political environment, and key players.
2. **Identify the potential users of the product.**

Research Question(s)	Information Required and Source(s)	Constraints	What This Analysis Will Likely Allow You to Say
What question(s) are you trying to answer?	What information do you need to address the question? Where will you get it?	What political, resource, or other constraints might affect how you research and write this document?	What are the expected results of the work?

Expectations and Feedback Process for Written Products
(Adapted from actual workplace example)

As we embark on this engagement and begin to learn each other's working and writing styles, I hope this document will help us be successful in our writing efforts. Because our engagement will culminate in a final written product, our writing efforts—from initial interview questions to draft report—will be significant. Having a common understanding and agreement on how we write and what we expect from our writing should help us develop a solid final report with impactful findings. In my dual role of developing my own written products as well as reviewing others' written work, I understand the need for clear expectations and actionable feedback. I hope this document serves as a framework for our future discussions about how we can make the best of our writing efforts to support our engagement.

Interviews
Successful interviews begin when we develop interview questions that are clear, insightful, and reflect an understanding of the audience and its ability to provide meaningful responses. When I assign interview questions to you, we will have a brief discussion—and brainstorming, if necessary—about interview themes as well as specific areas of inquiry.

The interviews will provide critical sources of testimonial evidence for our engagement, so we need to document them appropriately. By putting effort into an interview write-up, we will make our jobs easier later, when we further analyze the information, develop the draft, and index the report.

I use the following principles when reviewing and providing feedback on interview write-ups (in order of importance):

1. **Accuracy**
2. **Clarity/context** (For example, ensuring topic sentences, actors/subjects in sentences, completing thoughts, and clearly indicating relationships. This will help with indexing and stakeholder comprehension.)
3. **Flow/organization** (For example, ensuring that the same ideas are discussed together to facilitate content analysis and stakeholder comprehension. This applies to interview write-ups that do not follow Q&A format.)
4. **Style** (For example, ensuring proper word choice.)

Process: Feel free to use the principles above when developing your write-up and checking your work. I will review each write-up and provide feedback and, if needed, edits/comments based on the principles above. Please take the time to review any suggested edits and comments and feel free to discuss them with me. After developing the next version, please send me the write-up for final review and sign off.

At some point, it may be helpful to discuss any personal writing pet peeves each of us may have so we can be aware of them and try to avoid them in our writing.

Fallon presentation, New England Intergovernmental Audit Forum 2019

Draft Report

We develop a draft by merging our analytical and writing skills to craft a cohesive whole out of disparate elements (analyses, findings from interviews, own perspectives). This is an iterative process, but we want to provide a draft that serves as a critical foundation upon which the rest of the report will be built. Our boss and others will judge our draft on the totality of its presentation, but our unique challenge is to first build a draft that is solid analytically and then ensure that it is well-written. As such, in the early stages of draft development, it is important to keep the goal of developing a strong and convincing argument in mind and avoid getting bogged down in style and other details. We will strengthen our arguments as well as enhance the clarity and lucidity of our draft report over time.

I use the following principles when reviewing and providing feedback on a draft report (in order of importance):

1. **Solid case** (logical and supported argument that explicitly identifies findings and their impact; all elements of a finding as appropriate—condition, criteria, cause, and effect)
2. **Accuracy**
3. **Clarity/context** (e.g., including actors/subjects in sentences, completing thoughts, clearly indicating relationships, etc.)
4. **Flow/organization** (same ideas/arguments are discussed together)
5. **Style** (e.g., word choice, passive voice, etc.)

Process: Before we begin drafting, we will discuss specific parameters, such as draft length, to help guide the writing of the first draft as well as any potential changes to the process below. Your very first draft is the document in which you have the best opportunity to present the message the way you see it. While developing this draft, make the best use of the outline we will have developed beforehand but also use your own judgment (sometimes outlines don't easily translate into paragraphs). As you run into any challenges, please don't suffer in silence; feel free to discuss any concerns with me. Before sending the draft to me, please read it carefully to make sure it conveys your message and apply the principles above to it. When I review your first draft, I will provide feedback based only on the first two principles above: solid case and accuracy. This will help us focus our attention on the most critical aspects of the draft. In future iterations, I will increasingly apply other principles in my review and provide an opportunity to discuss feedback on the draft. I will also share with you the section(s) of the draft report that I develop, and I would appreciate your candid feedback along the same lines. Ultimately, we will develop a draft report that has been considered according to all the principles outlined above.

I look forward to working with you on this engagement and developing strong written products. While writing can be a challenging process, our efforts are worth it—our clear and convincing arguments help maximize the use and usefulness of our audit findings.

Four Easy Ways to Make Your Paragraphs More Reader-Friendly

Check for This!	How?	Why?
Topic sentences A topic sentence provides readers with the one main message of a paragraph.	See if the first sentence of each paragraph has one main subject and one main point.	With a topic sentence, readers can better follow the details contained in the rest of the paragraph. Without a topic sentence, readers must draw their own conclusions about why those details matter.
Unity Each sentence of the paragraph should directly link to and support the topic sentence.	See if the key words and phrases you use in the topic sentence appear in the other sentences of the paragraph. If not, ask yourself if those other sentences really fit. Can you better link them to the topic sentence?	Think of those sentences linking to and supporting the topic sentence as evidence. They validate the message you provide in the topic sentence.

Four Easy Ways to Make Your Paragraphs More Reader-Friendly

Coherence Sentences should flow logically, one to the other.	See if the last few words of one sentence set up information in the next sentence. Ex.: "…and revised draft guidance to qualify teachers for programs. The guidance stated that…" See if you used transitional words and phrases. Ex.: "In contrast," "Similarly," "For example," "Nevertheless."	Coherent paragraphs explicitly show readers how the ideas of individual sentences relate to each other. Incoherent paragraphs, in contrast, leave readers guessing how ideas relate.
Visual Appeal Paragraphs should generally be no longer than one-half of a page; aim for three to eight sentences.	Break paragraphs up with bullets, or consider whether you can convey the paragraph's information via a table, chart, or other graphic.	Readers recoil from long, dense blocks of words. They also struggle to recall the main point of the paragraph as they wade through lengthy text.

Four Easy Ways to Make Your Paragraphs More Reader-Friendly

Four Easy Ways to Make Your Sentences More Reader-Friendly

Check for This!	Why?
Short sentences. Keep sentences to an average of 15-20 words.	Readers can only absorb limited amounts of information at a time. Long sentences force readers to try and absorb too much information all at once.
Sentences that keep the subject, verb, and object close together. **Good**: The agency has not established goals, although Congress directed it to do so 10 years ago. **Not-so-good**: The agency, although directed by Congress 10 years ago to establish goals, has not done so.	Readers fundamentally want to know "who (subject) is doing (verb) what (object)," and you improve readability if you deliver that information in a chunk. If you intersperse other words and phrases between the subject/verb/object, you force the reader to work harder to understand "who is doing what."

Fallon presentation, New England Intergovernmental Audit Forum 2019

Four Easy Ways to Make Your Sentences More Reader-Friendly

Subjects that are concrete, recognizable, and imaginable to your readers. **Good**: "The agency," "Officials," "Studies." **Not-so-good**: "Access to…"; "The provision of…"; "Disbursement of funds…" .	Readers develop pictures in their minds when they read. If they cannot envision the subject of your sentences, (the "Who"), they have a more difficult time understanding what you wrote.
Active voice. **Good**: Agency officials checked the forms. **Not-so-good**: The forms were checked by agency officials.	When you write in active voice, you more clearly identify "who is doing what." You also more readily identify a recognizable subject, and you often reduce the number of words in your sentence.

Four Easy Ways to Make Your Sentences More Reader-Friendly

Message "Check-in" Meetings

What are they? Message check-in meetings bring the CA (me) and the engagement team together regularly throughout the information-gathering phase of the engagement to 1) encourage the team to consider possible messages and the evidence needed to support them and 2) keep me abreast of the engagement as it develops. Such meetings collectively result in a "rolling" message development process that routinely turns the teams' focus to potential messages and their presentation throughout the information-gathering phase of the audit.

What are the meetings' products, if any? Different teams have approached products differently. Some have developed straw outlines that became increasingly populated as the engagement progressed, while others have opted to keep informal notes only. Further, some teams have occasionally used the meetings as mini "writing-on-walls," in which team members brainstormed ways to organize and present specific objectives, complicated processes, etc.

How should teams prepare? Attached are some questions—not exhaustive—that teams might consider during these meetings.

Potential question	Why it matters
How would you answer your researchable questions today if you had to?	Asking this question helps the team keep focused on the ultimate task—answering the objectives—and will also help prepare teams should they be asked to support a hearing on their engagement before the report is complete.
For data-rich (number-heavy) objectives: What are the most important things to show? How many different ways do you want to cut and present the data? Why?	This question helps remind teams that data-rich objectives can lose cold readers if the data are cut in many ways or introduce multiple variables. Thinking early about how we want to employ the data we have to support our messages, as well as presentation strategies, can help the team use the data to maximum effect in the final report.
For evaluative objectives: Can you chart the elements of a finding yet?	As the engagement develops, teams will begin collecting information that they can begin categorizing as criteria, condition, cause, and effect.
What is the agency's position to our findings, generally? Does it think that it has good reasons for doing what it is doing, and if so, how do we argue against?	This question can sometimes shed light on "cause" (e.g., "Agency officials said that their practices were just as valid as the leading practices we identified, and that is why they had not adopted the leading practices,"), while it can also help us prepare our argument why we still think the agency should do things the way we say.
What parts of the report will be the hardest to write, and is there a way to start drafting now to ensure enough time for multiple revisions?	Complicated concepts, processes, arguments, etc., usually require multiple drafts before readers can readily understand them. Teams can begin writing such complicated topics even before the information-gathering phase of the audit ends.

Extraverts	Introverts	Thinking	Feeling	Judging	Perceiving
Prefer to approach things or people by getting actively involved with them	Pause before they speak or act. The pause gives them time to collect their thoughts, anticipate the direction they will take, and look before leaping	When it is time to make a decision, Thinking types prefer to be objective, establishing criteria, looking at pros and cons	Feeling types prefer to concentrate on the special needs of the individuals involved; they are more concerned with harmony, establishing and maintaining relationships with others	Judging types like to take charge of the outer world in a planful and orderly way. Their purpose is to structure their lives so things get done. They like being decisive.	Perceiving types prefer to leave the world around them as unstructured as possible. They are inquisitive, curious, and spontaneous, and they like to take in as much information as possible before they make a decision.
Writing	**Writing**	**Writing**	**Writing**	**Writing**	**Writing**
Usually write best when thinking out loud and talking to other people, inviting them to interrupt so that a dialogue develops	Usually write best when they can think alone without distractions	Tend to focus on the content of their message; their writing may even come across as being too harsh or curt	Focus on how the message is affecting the audience; often searching for just the right word, the word that they hope will capture the reader's attention	Likely to make a plan of how to complete a writing task, starting to write long before the deadline nears	Likely to cover all possible angles on a topic; they want to research a topic as much as possible before they begin to write (close to deadline)
Leap into writing	Think before writing	Focus on what they're saying	Focus on how material is expressed	Narrow options to decide on topic	Keep topic options open and flexible
Outline after first draft, if at all	Outline or jot down ideas prior to first draft	Seek to be clear	Seek to stimulate and motivate	Set and follow a schedule toward completion	Let deadlines motivate completion
Talk out ideas before writing	Write ideas before talking	Critically analyze arguments	Qualify and soften points	Work on one project at a time	Let unfinished projects assist one another
		Seek organization of ideas	Guide writing decisions by a sense of flow	Write short first drafts	Include everything related in first drafts