

10 Principles for Clearer Communication

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Principle #1: Know Your Audience

Writing is communication. You write a report and you assume (or at least hope) that your message will be successfully communicated to the reader.

You want the person who receives the report to read it and take action. Realistically, however, a range of actions are possible: The reader may:

- Set it aside and read it later.
- Set it aside and eventually throw it away.
- Start reading and lose interest.
- Read only the executive summary.
- Read the title and go no further.

Evaluation reports are written for readers who:

- Come from different educational and professional backgrounds.
- May have limited knowledge of the topic.
- Are very busy.
- Do not have time to read a long, difficult report.
- Want to know the main points.
- Want to understand the report the first time they read it.

Who are the potential audiences for documents that follow these principles?

- Decision makers and policy makers
- Government officials
- Congress
- Your evaluation clients.
- Foundations
- The press
- The general public
- Maybe a professional journal, but...

- Probably NOT your academic advisor, professor, or doctoral committee

Identify your reader(s), be aware of what they want and need to know, and then determine the most effective way(s) to communicate your message.

Principle #2: Develop an Outline¹

Why create an outline?

- Aids in the writing process.
- Helps you organize your ideas.
- Presents your material in a logical order.
- Shows relationships among ideas.
- Constructs an ordered overview.
- Defines boundaries and groups.

How to create an outline:

- Determine the purpose of your document.
- Determine the audience you are writing for.
- Develop your main point, finding or thesis.

Then:

- **Brainstorm:** List all the main points you want to include
- **Organize:** Group related ideas/facts together.
- **Order:** Arrange material in subsections from general to specific.
- **Label:** Create main and sub headings.

Creating an outline before you write will make it easier to organize your thoughts. Making any kind of outline will help your writing process.

¹ Adapted from The Owl at Purdue, <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/544/02/>

Principle #3: Be Consistent

Why is this important?

- External readers can easily identify the documents and know in advance how they are laid out.
- Readers with limited education, reading ability or prior knowledge of the subject can easily understand the document because it is written logically and relevant information is in the appropriate section.
- The writer's job is easier because he or she will know what format to follow.
- Reviewers within the organization will be able to review documents quickly.

The consistency principle applies to all facets of the document. Thus:

- Use a consistent format throughout the same document and the same format in similar types of documents.
- Present information in the proper section of the document.
- Follow a consistent writing style.

Principle #4: Use Headings

Headings (sometimes called Advance Organizers) can range from titles to section banners to captions in the margin. They tell the reader what a document is about without having to read the entire document.

Headings can be words, phrases, or sentences. To be effective, they should be concise and consistent throughout the document.

The Table of Contents is a collection of major headings. It is a roadmap for the reader of what follows and the order in which it will occur. The Table of Contents can direct both the writer and the reader. It helps the writer organize and unify the material. It helps the reader understand the document's main points and overall flow.

Why are headings important?

- Headings tell the story.
- Headings can capture the reader's interest.
- Some readers will go no further than headings.

Consider using statements for the title and findings in your next report.

Principle #5: State the Main Point First

A well-written document helps the reader to understand the writer's message easily and quickly. To achieve this objective, the writer should distinguish between *gathering* information and *reporting* information. That difference is one of *induction vs. deduction*.

➤ **Induction**

Induction is a process used to reach a generalization or conclusion. We examine many bits of data, and then generalize from that data. Induction is used in scientific research. The scientist starts with a hypothesis and gathers data to confirm or disprove it. Often, the scientist will modify the hypothesis to suit the data as the experiment progresses.

Induction is also used in evaluation. The evaluator collects information from different sources. At some point, the evaluator arrives at a theory based on the information collected. Eventually, the evaluator reaches a conclusion that takes all information into account.

When writing is inductive, the main point (or conclusion) appears at the end.

Inductive writing gives the reader little or no help in determining the relative importance of various facts. This arrangement hinders communication. Only the writer knows where the facts are leading; the reader remains uncertain of the general message that the facts support. Without this knowledge, the reader is unable to assess the importance of any one item and must recall a whole series of facts until the conclusion. This structure places a heavy burden on the reader, especially if the material is complex.

➤ **Deduction**

Deductive writing states the main point first. It provides the reader with a general context before presenting specific facts. By understanding the significance of information from the beginning, the reader is spared the task of interpreting relationships between facts; the writer has already done so. Deductive writing also helps the writer because it directs the writer to organize ideas around a central point.

Deductive writing is the most effective structure for communicating technical or complex information because it is easier for the reader to follow and understand.

Principle #6: Write Effective Paragraphs

Effective paragraphs have four characteristics: topic sentences, unity, coherence, and conciseness.

➤ **Use topic sentences.**

The first sentence in a paragraph is the topic sentence. It is the most important sentence in the paragraph and signals the reader what the sentence is about. This is known as deductive writing.

➤ **Write unified paragraphs.**

Unity means that every sentence in the paragraph after the topic sentence is related to and supports the topic sentence. Sentences can explain, provide examples, compare and contrast, or form a chronology.

➤ **Write coherent paragraphs.**

Paragraphs are coherent when each sentence leads logically to the next sentence. Repetition, parallel structure, and transitions can be used to make paragraphs coherent.

➤ **Write shorter paragraphs.**

If a paragraph contains many sentences, or long sentences, or many long sentences, the reader may have difficulty following it. Dividing a long paragraph into two or more paragraphs will increase its readability. The ideal paragraph length is 3-6 lines and 2-4 sentences.

Principle #7: Write Concise Sentences

Writers of evaluation reports may have a tendency to write long complex sentences. The resulting written product can be difficult to understand, especially by readers with limited prior knowledge of the subject. Even readers with advanced degrees or technical background will struggle with documents filled with long sentences. They may need to reread sentences before the meaning becomes clear.

To reduce sentence length:

- **Use active voice.**
 - In active voice, the subject performs the action.
 - There is one fewer preposition in the sentence.
 - The sentence contains fewer words.
 - The language is more forceful and direct.
- **Use parallel structure to organize related ideas.**
- **Write shorter sentences.**
 - Limit sentences to 20-25 words.
 - Limit each sentence to one main idea.
 - Write two shorter sentences instead of one long sentence.
 - Use numbers or bullets to separate parallel phrases.
 - Limit prepositions to 4 per sentence.
 - Eliminate wordy phrases and unnecessary words.
 - Use shorter words.

Principle #8: Avoid Jargon & Limit Acronyms

Jargon

Jargon is the language of a specialized group generally understood only by members of that group. It is an easy, efficient way for group members to communicate with each other. However, people outside the specialized groups may not understand jargon.

Follow these simple rules:

- Do not assume that your reader understands jargon.
- Use words that your audience will understand.
- If you must use jargon, consider defining it in a footnote first time it appears or adding a glossary in an appendix.

Acronyms

An **acronym** is a word formed from the first letter or letters of a proper name or a series of words, e.g., *Local Area Network* becomes *LAN*; *radar detecting and ranging* becomes *radar*. An **abbreviation** is a shortened form pronounced letter by letter, e.g., IBM, PhD, p.m., HHS, OIG, CMS.

Help the reader by following a few simple rules.

- Keep acronyms and abbreviations to a minimum. Use them only when they will help the reader.
- Spell out the term the first time you use it, and follow it immediately with the acronym or abbreviation in parentheses. If you do not use the abbreviation again for several pages, spell out the term again, with the abbreviation in parentheses.
- If you use the term only once in the document, spell it out and do not include the acronym or abbreviation.
- If your report contains a lot of acronyms or abbreviations, consider adding a page of abbreviations at the end of the report.

Principle #9: Know When to Stop

Readers' time and interest in your subject will vary widely.

- Most readers have a broad range of interests and limited time.
- They have different reasons for reading your report.
- Few readers are as interested in your subject as you are.

Consider these factors and write accordingly.

- Abstract (one-paragraph)
- Executive Summary (a few pages)
- Table of contents
- Short reports
- More detailed technical appendices (e.g., methodology, site-by-site findings, data collection instruments, statistical results)

Each piece of writing must be a complete, stand-alone presentation of your evaluation.

Principle #10: Review Your Draft

Use a cold reader.

It is much harder to see errors in your own work than in a document written by someone else. Since you are so close to your document, when you attempt to proofread it you are likely to “see” what you think you wrote. Another person does not know what you intended, and is more likely to see what is actually written on the page.

Review your own draft.

- Set your draft aside for a day or two before proofreading it.
- Read very slowly.
- Read one word at a time.
- Read the document out loud.
- Cover the page with a blank sheet of paper. Then slide the paper down the page as you read. This will force you to do a line-by-line review.
- Put yourself in the reader’s shoes, and read the document as if seeing it for the first time.
- Identify the types of errors you typically make, and look carefully for them.
- Pay special attention to “small” mistakes, such as using the wrong preposition or misplacing a comma.