

## Conveying Messages for Impact

Guidance for describing structural reforms in ERPs

Webinar with Center of Excellence in Finance, December 2020

### Highlighting Key Messages

Whether or not they realize it, readers always seek evidence of what really matters. Even when content is complete and solid, you need to think about what will ensure that main messages get through to the reader. This is important even when language is technical—and when your audience is specialized or expert about the subject matter. **Every reader needs help to care and take an interest.**

For most readers today, **a key reality is shorter attention spans.** Hence it becomes more important all the time to “front load” main points and accommodate readers who would prefer at-a-glance information.

**Anything that can make information easier to see and grasp makes it more likely to be absorbed.** Tables, charts, and graphics can guide the eye to essential points. And the text itself can use headings, bold, bullets, and shorter paragraphs and text sections to help key information jump out.

**The most visible content inevitably gets more of the reader’s attention,** so these components are the most critical places to focus editorial effort. Make these the last parts of the text you review and edit before finalizing a document.

#### ***A. Specific enhancements that can help:***

- First content that readers see is the most important: **titles, headings, first paragraphs; summaries** in longer documents; first sentences of paragraphs. It’s important to ensure that, even if these are only things a reader focuses on, they will get the most important points.
- **Front load** content in these places. Get the topic into the first few words.
- Think about **2-3 main messages** you want to convey for any text section. It may be simpler to do it separately from drafting the document itself. Decide what you would tell someone in your own words if you needed to explain your points. This can help guide how you revise a draft. You might not use these actual words, but your text should get these points across to the reader.

- **Move background information down**, rather than place it at the beginning of piece. It's rarely the main message of a piece. So it usually won't engage a reader—and having a lot of it to get through could actually drive the reader's attention away.
- **Guard against an insider viewpoint:** relentlessly ask yourself whether you're giving readers enough reason to care about what you're writing. For example, the topic covered by a new law may interest everyone, but it's name may be long, bureaucratic, and uninteresting.
- **In English, effective writing sounds much like actual speech.** When speaking, even experts tend to speak in short sentences and accessible terms. They rarely use long series or complex sentence structure. This kind of simplicity helps get messages across.

### ***B. Broader messages / priorities / taglines***

If users need to access each edition of your document or report, this context is actually an opportunity to **communicate broader priorities—objectives that transcend the individual documents or update.**

Can you explicitly connect your piece to a larger strategy or long-term objectives? This could help your work seem more integrated, less piecemeal. You have **a chance for readers to really get to know what's important**, not just to your government or ministry, but to your country and people.

If you're writing about an area of reform, for example, you want to **help the reader grasp what are the 2-3 top overall priorities** for a sector. These are usually broader or longer-term than what has been done in the past year, or what is planned in the year ahead.

Also look at **what has been said by top government officials, in speeches, interviews, and statements** (maybe also in social media). Often in these "real words," they have made an effort to convey key priorities in a striking way. Try to reflect some of that language in what you write—you might even consider brief quotes or paraphrases.

Above all, think about **key messages for your audience.** Some organizations, including governments, have even formulated some specific language or guidelines on how long-term priorities should be included in documents and communications.

For example:

- *As part of the bank's commitment to improving access to finance, we analyzed...*
- *The year we saw the most progress on one of our three priorities...*
- *To reach this goal, the country needs to focus on two key reforms...*

### ***C. Digital has changed the context for most reading—even of traditional documents***

- Onscreen is the main way most our content is experienced, even “print” products
- This share of content consumption will only increase—especially on smaller devices
- >>> **We are now writing most often for digital, whether we think that way or not**

#### *Onscreen reading is different*

- All text looks longer than in print—even on most desktop screens
- On computers, an “F-shape” pattern for where the eye moves: navigation, top row, left column are all the most visible places for content
- After about 7-8 lines, an online paragraph starts to look long, much more so than in print
- After 3-4 paragraphs, we need formatting / visual guidance: subheadings, bold, italic, bullets
- Shorter attention spans, more distraction: people are more likely to scan than read in-depth
- Long sentences and complex structure make it more likely that people will click away
- The U.K. government has made 25 words its length limit for sentences online
- On most phones’ screens, about 80 words display before the user has to scroll

#### *Online search focuses on specific, prominent content*

- Google / other search engines focus on about 100 words: headline, lede
- Content needs to be front-loaded: put “keywords” such as region/country, sector near the start
- Search results show first 65-70 characters, then an ellipsis
- First paragraph often functions as a “short description”: needs keywords, should make sense when read out of context

#### *Is digital really so different?*

- Digital reading habits intensify the reader’s expectation for briefer, simpler text and more compelling, actionable content
- But in fact, this reinforces long-standing good practices
- Distilling key messages, making people care = these should be goals in everything we write

## ***D. Strategies to ensure written content addresses a digital mindset***

It's increasingly important to keep digital reading in mind even as you write and edit "traditional" or "print" products.

### ***1. Frontload key content***

- Applies to all main elements: headlines, ledes, quotes
- Keywords for topic (e.g., sector, country, region) in the first few words
- First 65-70 characters display in search results; first 100 words matter most to search
- Also helps mobile reading—but for that matter, desktop and even print

### ***2. Create some sound bytes***

- The "gold standard" is actual speech
- Even experts communicate best when their statements are:
  - Short, to the point
  - Simple structure
  - Accessible vocabulary
- Every paragraph can benefit from key sentences that would be "shareable": brief but with enough context to make sense if shared on social media or other digital channels
- Sentences like this help any reader understand your main points

## **Formatting for the Reader**

How can formatting help retain and guide the reader's attention? How can the format help tell a story and convey your main points?

### ***Introductions / summaries***

- Always think of the first part of the text in any section as the only part that some people may read
- Don't use up space with background or context that the reader already knows
- Make sure main points or findings are included here, for anyone needing to understand your points at a glance
- Unless what follows is must-have information for the reader, this section also needs to provide reasons to read further
- Briefly establish a roadmap or navigation for the content that follows

### ***Topic sentences***

- Assume some readers will be in a hurry and may not want to read everything
- Make sure the first sentences of paragraphs and sections convey main points; consider using bold and italic

### ***Tables, charts, graphics***

- Make data more visual and accessible
- Text boxes (key examples of initiatives, successes, special challenges or concerns)
- Callouts (short bits of text, visually highlighted in the layout)

### ***Make the text itself more visually appealing***

You should always assume that some of your readers want to see your points at a glance. Some main approaches:

- Subheadings, at least every few paragraphs
- Bold and italic, on specific terms or even topic sentences
- Bullets
- Numbers and letters for key points (as bullets or within the main text)
- “Rag right” margin

### ***Manageable / digestible amounts of text***

Even the most expert readers are human; no one wants a document to be more of a chore to get through than necessary. No matter how much information you have to convey, less is always more.

In addition to the writing principles already discussed:

- Limit paragraph length: 50-100 words for “lede” paragraphs of sections, about 150 words or less for later paragraphs
- Don’t shrink the point size or margins to fit more text in
- Use some bold or italic
- Consider using a “rag right” margin
- Headings or subheadings every few paragraphs

### ***Three types of bullets***

Sets of bullets may have different grammatical connections to the main text and are thus punctuated differently:

- Continuations of a main text sentence
- Free-standing sentences
- Items in a simple list

Bullets guide the reader's eye, but they can overwhelm:

- If lists are too long: a good range is 5-8 items, whereas longer lists can be broken up
- If text gets repeated; any text that applies to all items should precede the bullets.

### ***Hierarchies of information***

In addition to the table of contents and the headings and subheadings across the text, make effective use of

- Footnotes or end notes
- Glossaries of key terms and abbreviations
- Annexes or separate fact sheet sections

Visually highlighted content, such as tables, charts, and graphics or text boxes, can have its own list in the table of contents.