# Key Writing Principles

## Guidance for describing structural reforms in ERPs

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We face **several challenges in describing reforms:**

- The content we start with is often complex, highly detailed, and lacking in clear messages.
- In our organizations, it's easy to get focused the details, more than whether the audience absorbs the information.
- There can be pressure to cut and paste language from existing documents, as it's already approved / cleared.
- Too often, writing isn't thought of as an area that adds value.

**How do we make our writing more message-driven?** Basically, by applying a different mindset to the text. You can't really convey messages without:

- Focusing on entities that can perform clear actions.
- Avoiding unnecessary abstraction.
- Choosing the simplest ways to express our points.
- Limiting sentence length and complexity.

If we want **to get messages across:**

- Think about the natural ways you simplify when you convey information verbally: you instinctively communicate to be understood.
- In fact, the way we speak is a surprisingly good guide to clarity.
- This is also an advantage of English for second-language speakers: if you speak the language well, you're well on the path to writing it clearly and effectively.

Let's look at some writing and editing techniques that can help.

- None of these are writing rules: instead, the focus is on judgment about how to make a text feel clearer and more active, and thus more effective at conveying messages.
- Cumulatively, across a document, the aim is to reduce instances where the writing feels passive but could easily become more active.
- I'll also share some real-life examples, to see how these approaches could help.

**1. Use more active than passive sentences.** In passive constructions, the grammatical subject is a person or thing that is being acted on by some other person or thing. The entity performing the action might be dropped altogether:

Examples: *The class was taught. The treaty was negotiated.*

Though it may seem "formal" or "objective," the passive voice undermines writing if overused. It always forces the reader to work a bit harder to understand your points. Don't let it become your default; look for places where you can easily revise to an active sentence.

**2. Keep the action in verbs, not nouns.** Also earn to recognize "verb-derived nouns," where an action that should be conveyed by a verb has morphed into an abstract noun. Abstractions aren't a person or entity who can do things. Write and revise to move the action to verbs.

Compare:

*Our request is that you do a review of the data.*

*We request that you review the data.*

The second version is shorter, easier to read, and more direct about the actions and who's involved.

**3. Clear and brief subject.** Focus most sentences on an entity that can actually do things. That is, align the grammatical subject with someone or something that is performing the actions. You should be able to identify this entity in just a few words.

- Readers can't easily relate to a long phrase as the grammatical subject; across a document, long subjects of sentences make writing feel more abstract and less engaging.
- If a long subject includes modifiers or prepositional phrases, you can usually move these details to a different part of the sentence.
- Avoid having multiple people or things as the grammatical subject, though you can usually group them with a singular noun.

**4. Parts of speech in their proper roles = clearer, more active**

English is extremely flexible in how words can be used, but clarity tends to suffer whenever a word derives from some other part of speech. While verb-derived nouns are the biggest issue, there are several others to watch for:

- **Some abstract nouns derive from adjectives** rather than verbs (e.g., *importance, lateness, hesitancy, likelihood*): it's more active to use the adjective itself (*important, late, hesitant, likely*).
- **Adjectives can be verb-derived**; this makes them less clear and active than using a "true" adjective. For example: "*improved*" really just means "*better*"; "*increased*" means "*more*"; "*decreased*" means "*lower*" or "*less.*"
- **Nouns can often be used as adjectives**, but usually verbs and "real" adjectives could convey meaning better (e.g., "*The guideline improvement priorities discussion took place on Tuesday*" could be "*We discussed priorities for better guidelines on Tuesday.*")
- **Verbs can even be noun-derived**; usually this makes them less concrete than a "true" verb (e.g., "*The storm will negatively impact sales*" becomes clearer and more active with a simpler verb, as in "*The storm will hurt sales*").

**5. Structuring effective sentences.** Even when there's complex content, sentences work better if their content is structured with *three distinct sections: a beginning, middle, and end*. When content doesn't fit well into these sections, it's often a sign that you need to break into two (or more) shorter sentences.

***A. Beginning of the sentence.*** Use an introductory and context-setting section: what the reader needs to know to understand the rest of the sentence. Best for "dateline" items — ***who/what/when/where/why*** (dates, time frames, identification of people, entities, places). Make this section distinct and fairly brief.

- Use a comma to make clear where the introductory part of the sentence ends.
- The reader normally expects ***the main subject after the first comma.***
- Length matters; an introductory section should rarely be the longest part of a sentence.
- Series seldom belong at the start of sentence.

Without introductory phrases, background details often impede the flow of subject / verb / object in the main body of the sentence.

Many writers underuse opening sections, which often results in overlong and abstract phrases trying to function as the grammatical subject. Text also becomes choppier if few sentences have introductory sections: these sections help connect sentences and create a sense of flow.

***B. Middle of the sentence: core connections of subject, verb, object.*** Keep core grammatical connections close together in this essential part of every sentence. Avoid or minimize interruptions between subject and verb, and between verb and object.

- Move anything that interrupts this core grammatical flow to the beginning or end of the sentence.

A text usually doesn't flow well unless many sentences also use beginning and end sections as we're discussing here.

***C. End of the sentence.*** If grammatical connections in the main body are easy to follow, sentences lead the reader to the natural place **to elaborate or introduce something new.**

- The reader can handle more complexity here: more length, more internal punctuation, even a new clause (though generally no more than one).
- ***Series work best at the end,*** where internal punctuation never creates ambiguity.
- Proportion matters: after about 4-5 items in a series, text can get harder to read. It helps if you indicate the number of items first, then maintain clear parallelism among items in the series.

The final one to three words of a sentence are where readers expect ***emphasis,*** a "stress" comparable to what they hear when people are speaking.

- Choose content for ***the last few words to convey an important point.*** The structure of sentences naturally means the words placed here will have more impact.
- Watch for prepositional phrases at the very end; they often signal a context-setting detail (usually better placed in the beginning section).
- Terms "etc." or "among others" are a weak ending for a sentence, because they waste an emphasis point.

The ***emphasis at the end is secondary to the main body of the sentence***; the main verb should be in the middle, never at the end, of a long or complex sentence.

**6. Managing sentence complexity and length.** English allows for long sentences with multiple clauses. But research finds that readers have a harder time understanding as sentences get longer, even when these are clear from a grammatical standpoint.

- ***Reduce complexity:*** generally, two "sentence-level" clauses (explained below) are the maximum you can have in a sentence before you start reducing clarity.

- ***Shorten sentences to create more emphasis points.*** A period (full stop) creates emphasis in a way that a semicolon can't, because semicolons create expectation of more to come.

A ***clause*** is any series of words with a subject and verb. By comparison, a ***sentence*** is all the words from one period (full stop) to the next, often with more than one clause.

There are two main types of "sentence-level" clauses:

*Independent clauses* (all the features of a free-standing sentence) and *dependent clauses* (tied to an independent clause in such a way that it can't stand on its own).

- Simple sentence = one independent clause. [*"She speaks Arabic."*]
- Complex sentence = one independent + one dependent clause (with punctuation between). [*"She speaks Arabic, although she seldom visits the Middle East."*]
- Compound sentence = two independent clauses (with punctuation and sometimes a conjunction between). [*"She speaks Arabic, and she is studying Turkish."* or *"She speaks Arabic; she is studying Turkish."*]
- Clauses should have punctuation to separate them, even when they're short and simple. [*"She spoke, and I smiled."*]

***Two key grammatical rules*** especially apply to longer sentences:

- Always use a comma or semicolon to separate clauses (usually *not* dashes).
- Never put any punctuation between *adjoining* subject/verb or verb/object.

**7. Maintain a coherent focus**, either by staying on the same topic throughout each paragraph or gradually evolving the topic from sentence to sentence. Scan the grammatically subjects of sentences across a paragraph or section to see if these are the same, closely related, or logically evolving.

- Limit your shifts between active and passive constructions; this might add variety but reduces clarity.
- If the grammatical subject changes abruptly and frequently from sentence to sentence, the reader has to work harder to follow you.
- Staying on topic doesn't require explicitly repeating the subject in sentence after sentence. You can use pronouns and synonyms to avoid repeating a word or phrase as the subject.

**8. Ensure a logical flow** between sentences and across paragraphs. For readers, this depends on how well the beginning and end sections create connections between sentences. Check whether these sections of your sentences are making logical connections explicit.

***A. Generic transitional words and phrases*** are helpful but are easily overused. These are "generic" because they don't derive from the content itself.

- Examples of generic connectors: *also, thus, however, hence, therefore, in addition, moreover, nevertheless, so, furthermore;* sequences like *first, second, third;* pairing of *on the one hand / on the other hand.*

The most effective writing doesn't rely exclusively on these terms to establish transitions and connections across the text.

***B. Summative nouns*** can be more powerful, because they're more connected to your specific content. They characterize a point from previous sentences without having to repeat it.

- These usually serve as the subject of an introductory phrase or of the main body of the sentence.
- Along with pronouns and synonyms for the main topic, they allow you to convey easily what the reader already knows, so that you can build on it.

Example:

*Slovenia's tax authority is setting up a special office for the largest taxpayers. This action will enable the country to capture more revenue, a top priority for the current government. Along with the finance ministry, the tax authority is preparing a detailed plan. Both agencies have designated teams to work on it, with rollout set for January 2016. This effort will include public service announcements and a mailing to all households.*

**9. Trim to make text more concise**

When you revise, you can usually trim some text without losing meaning. There are many categories for non-substantive trims; the following are some of the most common.

<u>Long words and phrases with a short alternative</u>

Because English has a large vocabulary, long words often have shorter equivalents. And one word can often replace an entire phrase. The shorter option will often make writing feel clearer

and more direct: it's more likely to match the simpler, more "Anglo-Saxon" terms that that people use when they speak.

- *approximately = about*
- *construct = build*
- *furthermore, moreover = thus, hence*
- *the majority of = most*
- *in order to = to*
- *nevertheless = still*
- *operationalize = implement, put into action*
- *significant = major, big*
- *utilize = use*

Empty specificity

Some words seem to add specificity but end up stating the obvious. Get familiar with terms that can be cut without losing any meaning. Consider how you might overuse:

- *actually*
- *appropriate*
- *certain*
- *currently*
- *different*
- *existing*
- *given*
- *individual*
- *particular*
- *rather*
- *relevant*
- *respective*
- *specific*
- *various*

Unnecessary categories

As you revise a draft, you can often trim phrases that simplify categorize a subject that would be understood on its own *or* that recap the category of a point just made. Examples:

- *in regard to..*
- *with respect to..*
- *the area of...*
- *the field of...*
- *in the context of...*
- *a range of...*
- *the Republic of [+country name]*
- *the year [+ number]*
- *...in this regard*
- *...in this respect*
- *...in this context*
- *...in this field*
- *...in this area*
- *...in the country*

Hedges and intensifiers

A **hedge** backs away from a point, qualifying it or narrowing its scope. Writers use these to avoid overstating or to be more precise. But they are often unnecessary and can make writing seem tentative; for readers it becomes less clear what you're actually saying. Examples:

- *allegedly*
- *apparently*
- *arguably*
- *basically*
- *for the most part*
- *in certain ways*

- *in part*
- *in some respects*
- *kind of*
- *largely*
- *partially*
- *possibly*
- *sometimes*
- *somewhat*
- *sort of*
- *to a degree*
- *to some extent*
- *usually*
- *virtually*

Less often, writers use **intensifiers** to strengthen a point. Used selectively, these add emphasis. Used too much, they exhaust the reader or even raise doubts by "protesting too much." Generally they add little to the meaning. Examples:

- *always*
- *certainly*
- *clearly*
- *entirely*
- *extremely*
- *greatly*
- *in all respects*
- *invariably*
- *much needed*
- *necessarily*
- *overwhelmingly*
- *positively*
- *really*
- *to a great degree*
- *undoubtedly*
- *unquestionably*
- *very*
- *very much*
- *without a doubt*