Clarity and Effectiveness: Writing Workshop

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.

2. **Keep the action in verbs, not nouns.** Learn 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:** someone or something who can perform an action. Align the grammatical subject of sentences with the person or entity that is performing the actions. You should be able to identify this person or 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.

- Keeping your focus on this subject is the simplest way to avoid writing passive sentences.
- Avoid having multiple people or things as the grammatical subject, though you can usually group them with a singular noun.
- Limit the sentences that begin with phrases like *There is, There are, It is...* These constructions make the sentence focus on the fact that something exists, rather than an action. They also move the entity that's performing the action to a secondary role.

4. Simpler words are clearer. Because English has no separate convention for formal writing, the way we speak is a reliable guide to the best ways to communicate. This is an advantage for second-language speakers: if you speak English well, you should be able to write it well.

So, as you write, choose words and parts of speech that are closest to the ways you would speak. It's almost always clearer to **use shorter, more "Anglo-Saxon" words** rather than their longer (usually Latin-derived) equivalents.

Adjectives

- Some abstract nouns derive from adjectives (e.g., *importance, lateness, hesitancy, likelihood*): it's more active to use the adjective itself (*important, late, hesitant, likely*).
- Adjectives that are verb-derived are less clear and active than "true" adjectives. For example: "*improved*" really just means "*better*"; "*decreased*" means "*lower*" or "*less.*"
- Nouns can 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.*")
- Consider whether you really need an adjective: text could be clearer with just the noun (e.g., "*we work with various line ministries*" vs. "*we work with line ministries*").

Verbs

- Actions are clearer when you keep verbs simpler and more concrete (compare "*The storm will negatively impact sales*" vs. "*The storm will hurt sales*").
- Where verbs have adverbs (e.g., "*considerably*") or other modifiers (e.g., "*to some extent*"), text is often clearer with just the verb alone.

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 is 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.
- Exception: if an interruption is critical for emphasis, dashes are the best way to set it off.

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 here**, 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).
- The term "**etc.**" (or the equivalent) can especially signal a missed opportunity.

6. Managing sentence 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.

Generally, **two "sentence-level" clauses are the maximum you can have in a sentence before you start reducing clarity.** Using shorter sentences also gives you more emphasis points.

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."* <u>or</u> *"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:

- <u>Always</u> use a comma or semicolon to separate clauses (usually *not* dashes).
- <u>Never</u> 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 between sentences 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. Highlight key messages

In finalizing a text, think about the **main messages** for the reader. This is important even when your audience is expert about the subject matter: every reader needs help to care and take an interest.

- Consider whether you can **communicate broader priorities—objectives that transcend the individual update**. Can your explicitly connect your document to a larger strategy or long-term objectives for your organization?
- **Move background or supporting data down**, rather than place it at the beginning of a section. It may be critical information, but its significance will be clearer if it's framed first by key messages or priorities.
- Scan through the **first sentences of paragraphs** to ensure that they function like topic sentences: could a reader get a sense of the main points just be scanning these?
- Use **bold or italic to highlight key content** to make it more scannable for the reader. This could be a few words identifying the topic of each paragraph, or entire topic sentences. Be consistent in how you use this formatting, and don't overdo it (e.g., never full sentences other than at the start of paragraphs).
- Use **bullets, but in proportion:** rarely less than 3 or never more than about 8 bullets in a section. If you have a larger number, group some of them or break the list into more than one set of bullets.
- Use **numbers or letters** for long lists in the text, to make information more scannable.
- Include **visually highlighted content in most sections**: tables and graphics, as well as content set apart in text boxes (e.g., brief write-ups of successful reforms, background about the status of a sector).
- The **first text items that readers see** are the most important: they should be **the *last* things you review** and edit as you finalize a document.

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

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: headings, bold, italic, bullets.
- Shorter attention spans, more distraction: people more often 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, first paragraph.
- Content needs to be front-loaded: put "keywords" of the topic near the start
- Search results show first 65-70 characters, then an ellipsis.
- First paragraph often functions as a default "short description": needs keywords, should make sense when read out of context.

Think digitally, even for a traditional printed document

- Since we all live in a digital world today, there's no reason not to think about ways to connect with it.
- Consider whether your document should have any online promotion: a press release, any mention in social media that that could help interested audiences learn about and access it.
- Tweets might seem unrelated to your work, but they illustrate how much information a broad audience can absorb as a single point. The first paragraph of every section would be more effective if at least one sentence is short and simple enough that it could work as a tweet.
- At a minimum, alert communication colleagues to see whether they have suggestions on how the material you're producing might support outreach to the public or more specific audiences.

9. Revise to make text more concise

When you revise, you can usually trim some text without losing meaning. As you shorten the text, it will make points clearer and more direct.

<u>*Prepositional phrases.*</u> In revising, scan text for heavy use of prepositional phrases: they tend to signal that you can use fewer words. Frequently, they also point to other writing issues that

we've talked about: overuse of passive constructions, verb-derived nouns, complex or unclear subjects, interrupted flow between subject/verb/object.

Repetition. Repetitions are dull, because they typically restate things the reader could be expected to know.   Techniques to limit repetition:

Pronouns. A single word can usually avoid having to restate a subject or name in full. Several types may be useful:

- Subject pronouns (*it, we, they, he, she, you*…)
- Demonstrative pronouns (*this, that, these, those*): pronouns in this group can also be combined with a noun (e.g., *this reform, these projects*)
- Indefinite pronouns (like *everyone, all, each, every, some, one, none*)
- "determiners" (e.g., *enough, few, fewer, less, little, many, much, several, more, most, all, both, every, each, any, either, neither*).

Synonyms. You can usually find more than one term to signify your topic. This is especially helpful to avoid repeating a specific name, term, or phrase in its entirety.

- Usually one or two synonyms for a term in a given text will be sufficient
- Use **common terms** (e.g., for a country name, it's better to use simple terms like "*the country*" or "*the republic*" versus longer or less common terms like "*the ex-Yugoslav republic*" or the "*the Adriatic nation*").

Short forms. Longer names, terms, and phrases are tiring for the reader if they're mentioned over and over. Unless there's a risk of ambiguity, don't repeat what your reader already knows.

- Use the shortest version you can without creating ambiguity (e.g., "*Ministry of Education and Culture*" can be referenced as "*the ministry*" after the first mention).
- If the short version is a common noun, there's no need to capitalize it (e.g., "*the government*," not "*the Government*").

Restating, usually signaled by terms like "*i.e.,*" "*in other words,*" multiples of parallel terms (adjectives, adverbs, nouns, verbs) usually with the word "*or*." Scan to see whether you can trim; maybe you're restating because you didn't use the right words to start with.

Redundancy, where multiple words or phrases express the same concept. This usually points to where you can trim. Examples: *can / could potentially, past history, final outcome, full and complete*. Where the context is obvious, even terms like "economic growth" can feel redundant.

Long words with a short alternative

Because English has a large vocabulary, long words often have shorter equivalents. Using the shorter one can make writing feel more direct.

- *approximately = about*
- *construct = build*
- *furthermore, moreover = thus, hence*
- *in order to = to*
- *nevertheless = still*
- *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*
- *certain*
- *currently*
- *different*
- *existing*
- *given*
- *individual*
- *particular*
- *rather*
- *respective*
- *specific*
- *various*

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 not necessary, 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 in institutions 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*
- exclamation point [!]

Change negatives to affirmatives

Scan your text for frequent use of negative sentence constructions (generally **with the word "not"**). Though they only add one word each, collectively they undermine the clarity and impact of your writing.

- It is slightly harder to process negative constructions, since the negative—in English usually a single word—changes the meaning to the opposite of the rest of the words are saying
- More than one negative in a sentence can reduce clarity
- If used frequently across passages of text, negatives can also turn readers off, as most people instinctively prefer for writing to be more direct and upbeat

But most negatives can be easily changed into affirmatives, or positive statements.

Examples: *not many > few, not often > seldom, not include > omit, not allow > prevent, not notice > overlook*

Regional Networking for Structural Reforms

Specific suggestions for workshop participants, March 2020

1. Start all sections on specific sectors with explicit mention of priorities, before going into data, background, or supporting facts. For clarity, just three or fewer priorities in this paragraph.
2. Review the first sentences of paragraphs; revise as needed so that they function as topic sentences.
3. Use some formatting (bold or italic) for topic sentences of paragraphs.
4. Ensure that most of your sentences are active constructions: a minimum of 50%, preferably much more.
5. Make the country (or the government) your subject: structure sentences as much as possible to reflect this, to make it easier to relate to the country's priorities while also making the writing more active.
6. Use pronouns to avoid repetition of names (e.g., the country name, the names of ministries and other government entities, specific laws).
7. Create some text boxes: these could include brief stories of successfully completed reforms, possibly also discussions of background or contexts (e.g., key numbers about the current status of the sector, or about trends/progress on reforms).
8. Avoid long paragraphs: look for ways to break up anything longer than 200 words.
9. Avoid having sentences longer than 25 words; use some of the tools from this workshop to make text easier to read, with more frequent emphasis points.
10. Avoid lists of bullets longer than 8 items: if you have more, group some of them or create multiple sets of bullets.