

Writing for Real People

(not your professors)

Introduction

- **Are you ready to write?**
- **Overall structure**
- **Paragraph level tips**
- **Sentence level tips**
- **Final Polish**

Are You Ready to Write?

Elements of A Finding

Old Reliable for Any Kind of Report:

- Criteria – What should be?
- Condition – What is actually occurring?
- Cause – What is the reason for the difference between the criteria and the condition?
- Significance – Why do we care that the condition does not match the criteria?
- Conclusion – What should be done to address the difference between the criteria and the condition?

Is Your Story Complete?

Organize your thoughts:

- What issue or problem are you trying to fix?
- Why is the issue or problem important?
- What action do we want taken in response?
- How will your recommendations fix the highlighted problem?

Overall Structure:

Make it easy for your readers

Use a Deductive Presentation

- **Conclusion first, followed by supporting points**
- **The dog bit the man**
 - Three witnesses saw the attack
 - Man's bite mark matched dog's teeth
 - Dog had bad rep
- **This is the opposite of most academic work**

Give Your Reader A Map

- **Write for busy readers**
- **Provide features that make it easy for busy readers to quickly grasp the report's major messages**
- **The headings' order should parallel the points in the introduction**

Choose A Logical Flow of Information

- **This is a matter of judgment**
- **Possible ways of ordering information include**
 - By significance
 - Chronologically
- **Write major points on post-it notes, then organize**
 - The team can help decide which order is best

Keep the Report Focused

- **If your ideas fall into two or more disparate categories, consider splitting them into multiple reports**
 - Raises the visibility of the parts
 - Faster to write than working hard to force two unlike pieces together

Provide a Report

Introduction

- Provide an introduction summarizing the message and providing a guide to what follows
- Example
 - “Mary’s dog bit the man. Three facts support this conclusion. First, three of her neighbors witnessed the incident. Second, the bite mark on the man matches her dog’s mouth. Third, her dog has a history of biting.”

Keep the Background Short

- **Does some of the background information belong in the finding or questions and answers section?**
 - Busy readers may skip the background section completely
- **Would some material be better placed in an appendix? (Such as methodology?)**

If in Question and Answer Format, the Answer Should Directly Follow the Question

This:	Not This:
Did Mary's dog bite the man?	Did Mary's dog bite the man?
Yes, Mary's dog bit the man. Dog bites can pose serious health risks including infection and disease.	Dog bites can pose serious health problems including infection and disease. Mary's dog bit the man.

Paragraph Level:

Set up your flow

Paragraph Level

- **The topic sentence rules the paragraph**
- **It presents the subject and controlling idea**

Paragraph Level

- **Tip 1:**

Ensure that the first sentence is indeed the topic sentence.

Paragraph Level

- **Tip 2:**

Ensure that the rest of the sentences support or explain the first.

Paragraph Level

- **Are related thoughts together?**
 - **Code the different topics/subjects in the report**
 - **Sentences with the same code should be put in the same paragraph**
 - **Sentences that essentially repeat the same information should be deleted**

Example-Sentence Coding

Mrs. Jones saw Mary's dog bite the man. (1) She says it's not the first time that dog has bitten someone. (3) She also points out that it is a large dog, with canine teeth 2 inches long. (2)

The forensic report showed that the length of the dog's canine teeth, 2 inches, matched the puncture wounds on the man's arm. (2)

Mrs. Smith also saw Mary's dog bite the man. (1) She says that Mary has been warned about keeping the dog muzzled. (3)

Mrs. Reed saw Mary's dog bite the man. She reported ... (1)

Example-Reordering Ideas

Three witnesses saw Mary's dog bite the man, Mrs. Jones, Mrs. Smith, and Mrs. Reed. They reported...(1)

The mouth of Mary's dog matches the bite wound. The forensic report showed that the puncture wounds in the man's hands were two inches long. This matches the dog's 2-inch canine teeth. (2)

Mary's dog has a history of biting people. Mary has been warned that she will have to pay a fine if she does not keep the dog muzzled. (3)

Paragraph Level

■ Tip 3:

If extra actors join the paragraph, introduce them in relation to the main subject.

The dog, bred by Tom Cruise,

rather than

Tom Cruise bred the dog...

Paragraph Level

- **Tip 4:**

Use transitions among sentences to help flow.

Paragraph Level

- **Tip 5:**

Make sure who or what pronouns refer to is clear.

Example-Fuzzy Pronouns

National research has shown that community-based alternatives to residential placement can effectively address these risk factors. They have led to several hypotheses.

Paragraph Level

- **Tip 6:**

Be consistent in your references.

Example-Inconsistent Labels

The Criminal Justice Training Commission oversees training for all certified law enforcement officers. The commission determines the hours and type of training each cop must complete. Many trainees become correctional officers in prison; these guards have a hard job. Low pay drives many officers to change jobs.

Paragraph Level

- **Tip 8:**

Lend the reader a hand.

Example – Reader Assistance

- **Overly-long paragraphs appear daunting**
 - Break them up
- **Use organizers such as bullets, tables, or charts for detailed information**
- **Be sure exhibits have message titles**

Group Exercise 1

Sentence Level:

Time for fine-tuning

Sentence Level

- **While a small unit of thought, a lot goes on here.**

Sentence Level

- **Tip 1:**

Check the subject/verb agreement.

Group Exercise 2

Sentence Level

- **Tip 2:**

**Voice: Sometimes, but rarely,
passive is needed.**

Example-Passive Voice

In Fiscal Year 2005-06, 33,464 offenders were released from prison.

The decision to retain the inmates was made in 2004.

Sentence Level

- **Tip 3: Use care with words!**
 - Accuracy
 - Tone
 - Jargon
 - Robust but not superlative

Sentence Level

- **Tip 4:**

Don't use a \$50 word when a 5 cent word will do.

Example: Brevity = Clarity

due to the fact that	since
for the purpose of	to
has the capability	can
in the near future	soon

Sentence Level

- **Tip 5:**

Curb your phrases and clauses.

Example-Tell What Not How

Mary's dog bit the man.

vs.

After interviews, dental analysis, and a review of police files, we reached the conclusion that the man had been bitten by Mary's dog.

Example-Cut Excess Phrases

Consolidating the monitoring staffs would strengthen the internal monitoring system.

vs.

The consolidation of the monitoring staffs into a single monitoring unit would facilitate the strengthening of the internal monitoring system.

Example-Check the Modifiers

The students at community colleges that do not pass competency tests must take college preparatory classes.

You can call your mother in London and tell her about George taking you out to dinner for just sixty cents.

Sentence Level

- **Finally, Tip #7:**

W.O.F.A.

Final Polishing

Is the Report Too Long?

- **Does it contain extraneous information?**
 - “The dog’s name is Fido”
- **Is it too detailed?**
 - “The dog’s canine teeth were 2.543 inches apart”
- **Is it unnecessarily repetitive?**

Is the Report Too Short?

■ Is it missing

- Points that are essential to understanding the message?
- Sufficient explanation of critical information?
- Examples or data needed to make it convincing

What if we reported only Mary's dog's history of biting?

What if we didn't mention a previous warning Mary received about muzzling the dog?

Is the Tone Appropriate?

- **Is it overly harsh given the circumstances?**
- **Is it overly lenient?**
- **How is it likely to be received by key stakeholders?**
 - If they will like your major finding, make that your headline
 - If they will dislike your major finding, perhaps putting the criteria first will help soften the message

Questions & Comments