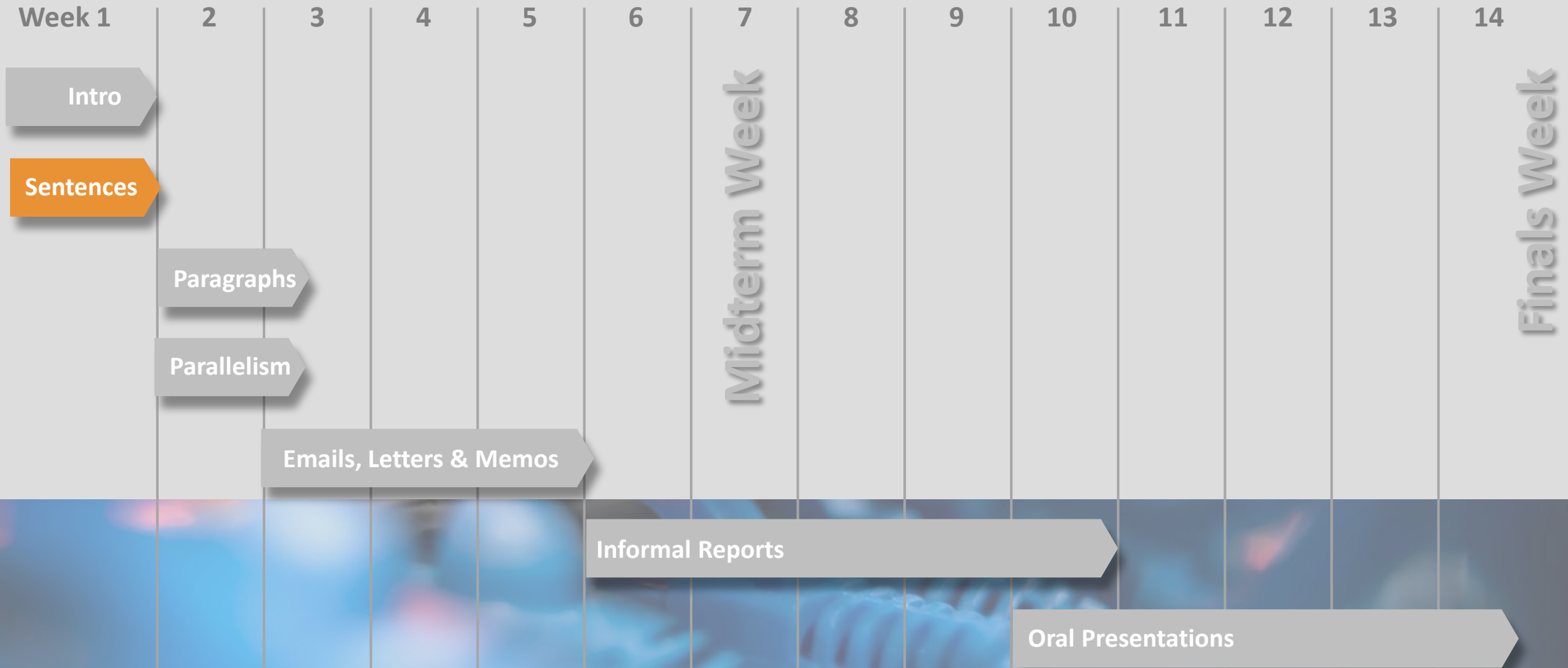




Comm 1116

Week 2: Technical Sentences

Course Schedule



Technical Writing Style ... simple, clear + direct

- In fact, you should make your writing conversational.
- Write the way that you speak:
 - Content
 - Wording
 - Tone
- Three things that prevent effortless, conversational writing:
 1. Nervous writing: trying to sound formal, knowledgeable, and professional
 2. Automatic writing: using pat phrases to get words on the page
 3. Derivative writing: mimicking the bad writing that surrounds us.



Technical Writing Style ... simple, clear + direct

Saanich police fear pipe bombs 1 left over from Halloween

RD SKELLY

to the Sun

VICTORIA — Saanich police residents of this municipal-most prestigious subdivision in the lookout for deadly Halloween leftovers — copper pipe bombs.

Barrie Kidd says police are running a community advisory in Broadmead subdivision in the Oak district. The advisory was issued shortly after Halloween night when officers found a youth in possession of exploded bombs.

sequent investigation picked up three more of the

devices. Seven had allegedly been exploded before the arrest, Insp. Kidd said Thursday.

"They can be quite potent," Insp. Kidd said. "If one goes off in a person's hand it has the capability of producing a fatality."

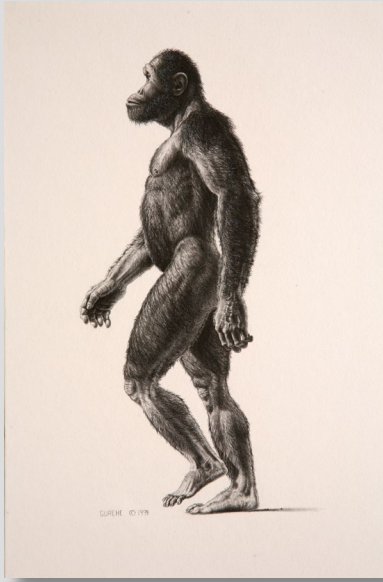
The bombs vary in length from four to 17 centimetres and are made of copper tubing stuffed with gun powder.

A 17-year-old male Saanich youth is set to stand trial Feb. 25 in Victoria Youth Court for possession of an explosive substance. Under provisions of the Young Offenders Act, he cannot be named.

WTAH?

"If one went off in your hand, it could kill you!"

Another example of gobbledygook



“So, could it walk like us?”

“It was completely adapted to **bipedal locomotion**”

Pause. “Er?”

WTH?

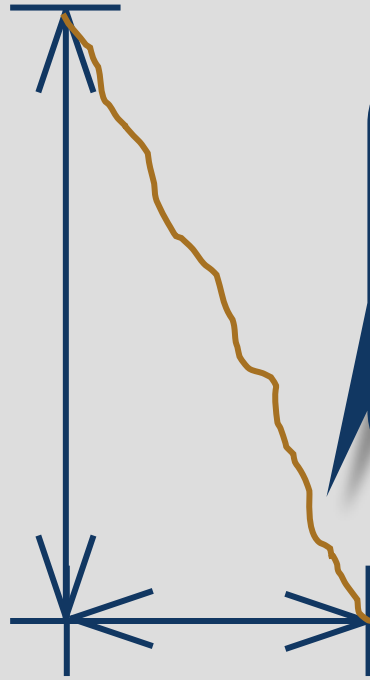
“It was completely adapted to walking on two legs”

“Yes, it walked on two legs”

“Yes, it walked like us”

Gobbledygook 3.0

It is obvious from the difference in elevation with relation to the short depth of the property that the contour is such as to preclude any reasonable developmental potential for active recreation.



This property is too steep for recreational development.

Four techniques to improve your writing

Do this in the following order:

1. Find the real subject of the sentence
2. Find the real verb for that subject
3. Edit the sentence for conciseness
4. Edit the sentence for clarity

It should be realized that the excessive consumption of cholesterol can lead to clogging of the arteries.



Four techniques to improve your writing

Do this in the following order:

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It should be realized that the excessive consumption of cholesterol can lead to clogging of the arteries.

Cholesterol
clogs



Four techniques to improve your writing

Do this in the following order:

1. Find the real subject of the sentence
2. Find the real verb for that subject
3. Edit the sentence for conciseness
4. Edit the sentence for clarity

Cholesterol clogs arteries.

Excessive consumption of cholesterol clogs arteries.

~~It should be realized that the excessive consumption of cholesterol can lead to clogging of the arteries.~~



In fact, doing just the first two, you go from

Original

Also reviewed was the root barrier installation on the upper roof decks, which was progressing during our inspection. It was observed that the root barrier was installed; however, correction of the irrigation scuppers and waterproofing of the anchor back plates was not carried out.

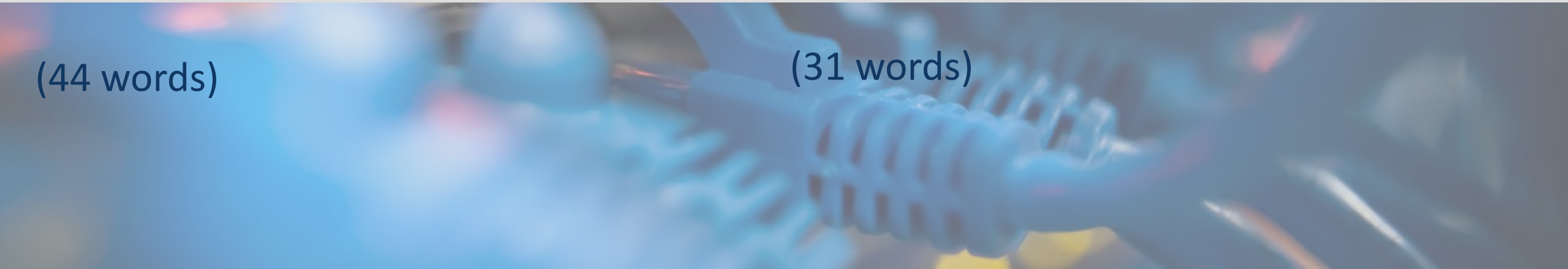
(44 words)

to

Revision

The root barrier on the upper roof decks was being installed during our inspection; however, the irrigation scuppers had not yet been corrected, nor had the anchor back plates been waterproofed.

(31 words)



1. Find the real subject of the sentence

- The subject of a sentence has two meanings:
 1. What the sentence is about (the topic of the sentence)
 2. The main agent of the sentence (the grammatical subject; the thing that is performing the action)
- Sentences work best when the grammatical subject and the topic of the sentence are the same.
- As a secondary consideration, it is always best if the subject is as concrete as possible – that is, if it is as easy to visualize as possible.



The fear on the part of the CIA was that a recommendation from the president to Congress would be for a reduction in its budget. (25 words)

The CIA feared that the president would recommend that Congress reduce the CIA's budget. (14 words)



It appeared that corrosion was present on the steel studs in Exploratory Opening 2.

The steel studs in Exploratory Opening 2 are corroded.



2. Find the real verb for that subject

- With your subject clearly in mind, ask yourself what that subject is doing.
- Describe that action as simply and as visually as you can.
- Sometimes an agent isn't performing an action, it just "is." That's fine.

"The code is complex"

"The task is difficult"

- Sometimes the subject is acted upon. That's fine too.

"The bug was fixed five minutes before we had to go live with the ..."



Frequent culprit: nominalizations

- A nominalization is turning a perfectly good, concrete verb into a stuffy noun that then requires a different, weaker verb or verb phrase.
- Nominalizations lengthen and weaken sentences.



The attached report gives an indication
of my findings. (9 words)

The attached report **indicates** my findings.
(6 words)



The team lead will undertake a review of our usability-testing process. (11 words)

The team lead **will review** our usability-testing process (8 words)



We conducted an architecture review of the database on March 22. (10 words)

We reviewed the database architecture on March 22. (8 words)



Another frequent culprit: weak expletives

- Weak expletives are pronomial phrases (“it is,” “there are”) that form the main subject and verb of a sentence...
- ... but often have absolutely no meaning.
- So, they constitute weak subjects and verbs all at once, but are extremely common.
- However, “it is” can be a perfectly concise sentence start if “it” has a specific meaning:

“Yesterday I drove my car into a ditch. **It is** still there”



It is not necessary that we receive estimates before we order supplies.

We don't need estimates before we order supplies.



~~There are~~ three construction supervisors
~~who~~ have signing authority. (9 words)

Three construction supervisors have signing
authority. (6 words)



~~It was observed that~~ the windows were being installed at the northwest corner of the building. (16 words)

Windows were being installed at the northwest corner of the building. (11 words)



When to use weak expletives

There are times when it is best to begin with a weak expletive.

Times exist at which it is best to begin with a weak expletive.

Some sentences are best to start with a weak expletive. (weak depending on context)



Use the active voice

- The active voice is a strong, direct and professional way to write yourself into a sentence.
- It takes responsibility and sounds confident.
 - “Three bugs were found during the review.”
 - “I/we found three bugs during the review.”
 - “Blackbox Code Works found three bugs during the review. We ...”
- The passive voice is not more professional. It is not more technical or objective.



We use the passive voice correctly

- when you don't know who the agent is:
“This information was leaked yesterday.”
- when you don't care who the agent is:
“The bugs were reported by hundreds of end users.”
- when you are hiding the agent:
“Incriminating papers were shredded and emails were deleted”
- When the agent cannot perform the action:
“The bugs have been fixed”



This means that unnecessary use of the passive voice

- suggests that you don't know, don't care, are trying to hide something, or ducking responsibility
- makes writing sound vague, weak, and evasive
- frustrates the reader's natural desire to attach an agent to an action and to visualize what's going on.
- sounds awkward and stilted because we don't talk that way.



Take note of the difference in tone and impression

“The Walkerton software code was reviewed on Mar. 22, 2021. A bug was found and Stan was called to correct it.”

“We reviewed the Walkerton software code on Mar. 22, 2021, found a bug and called Stan to correct it.”



The investigation into the Johal noise complaint **was conducted** on May 15th. Noise measurements **were taken** at 50 m intervals in a direct line from the wind turbine toward the Johal residence. This line **was deviated from** at the pond, at which point measurements had to be taken around the perimeter of the pond until the original line of travel **was able to be resumed**. (64 passive words)

We investigated the Johal noise complaint on May 15th, **taking** noise measurements at 50 m intervals from the wind turbine toward the Johal residence. We had to deviate from this line at the pond, taking measurements around its perimeter until **we were able to resume** the original line of travel. (50 active words)

3. Edit the sentence for conciseness

- People often write in pat phrases, largely because it's a way to get words on the page quickly:

It is a known fact ...

that at this juncture in time ...

it would behoove us ...

to respond in kind ...

to the email of ...

and make an e-transfer in the amount of ...



**Naked man pulls
knife on police.**



3. Edit for conciseness

- pp. 26-28 in the textbook
- A series of tables of examples of how to avoid wordy expressions and redundancies.

Wordy Expression	Concise alternative
A decreased number of	Fewer
Due to the fact that	Because
During the month of August	During August
Is capable of	Can
On numerous occasions	often



3. Edit for conciseness

- A redundancy is a needless repetition of a word or concept. Why say the same thing twice, except as filler or to sound smart?
- Yet people use them all the time:

We can't proceed at ~~the~~ present ~~time~~.

The transcripts are complete ~~and unabridged~~.

In ~~close~~ proximity to ...

... was ~~completely~~ destroyed ...

... a crisis ~~situation~~ ...

The ~~end~~ result was...

... severe ~~in nature~~ ...

... at a ~~high rate of~~ speed ...



4. Edit for clarity

- Always choose the simplest term or phrasing that expresses your meaning.
- Use simple language and avoid jargon.

Difficult language	Simple language
accomplish	do
bona fide	real
nominal	small, token
numerous	many
substantiate	prove, support



4. Edit for clarity

- Jargon is specific technical terminology: “bandwidth.”
- Using it correctly shows that you know what you’re talking about; it shows your professionalism and expertise.
- It becomes an irritant when it’s used out of context and, especially, pretentiously:

Jargon	Acceptable terminology
Interface (as a verb)	meet, talk
Pursuant to	According to, following
Value proposition	Business case
utilization	use
liaise	Meet, work with, talk to

How do you know when you've done it right?

- On average, your sentences should be no more than 20 words long—on average.
- On average, your paragraphs should be no more than 7 lines long—on average.



Bonus round: something completely different



I want to talk about “myself” (pp. 291-292)

- I want you to meet with myself.
- I want you to meet with **me**.
- I want you to meet with Dave and myself.
- I want you to meet with Dave and **me**.



And a bit about “me” (pp. 291-292)

- Myself killed at the meeting.
- Me killed at the meeting.
- I killed at the meeting.
- Dave and myself killed at the meeting.
- Dave and me killed at the meeting
- Dave and I killed at the meeting.



- She likes calculus more than me.
- She likes calculus more than **she likes** me.
- She likes calculus more than I.
- She likes calculus more than I **like calculus**.
- She likes calculus more than I **do**.



Coordinating conjunctions vs. conjunctive adverbs

Coordinating conjunctions can join two sentences with a comma: and, for, so, nor, but, yet, nor.

- I like coffee, **but** she likes tea.
- It was raining, **so** we stayed indoors.
- It was raining, **yet** the sun shone.

Logically, “however” means the same things as “but,” and “therefore” means the same things as “so.” However, they do not function the same grammatically. “However” and “therefore” are conjunctive adverbs.



Coordinating conjunctions vs. conjunctive adverbs

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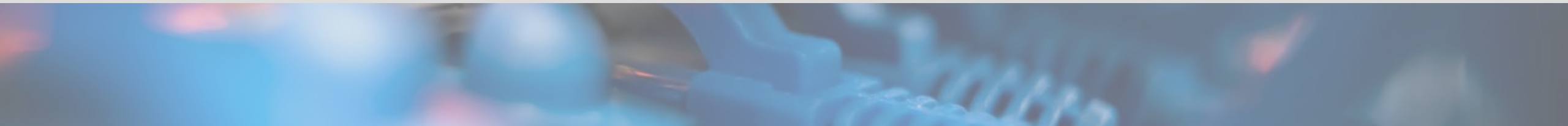
Logically, “however” means the same things as “but,” and “therefore” means the same things as “so.” However, they do not function the same grammatically. “However” and “therefore” are conjunctive adverbs.

- I like coffee; **however**, she likes tea.
- It was raining; **therefore**, we stayed indoors.



In conclusion

- Write the way you speak, at least as a first draft. Imagine yourself sitting across the desk from the person to whom you are writing.
- Find the real subject of your sentence—what is the sentence about? Start with that.
- Find the real verb, the action, that the subject is performing. Make it concrete and visualizable. “Is” is a perfectly fine verb in some cases.
- Edit for conciseness: be brief, eliminate unnecessary words, substitute short phrases for long ones.
- Edit for clarity: replace difficult words with simple ones, foreign words with Anglo-Saxon ones, jargon with plain English.



Homework for Week 2

Quiz due Sunday,
Sept. 17 at 23:59!

Lecture

Read Chapter 2 of the textbook and
do Chapter 2 Quiz in the Quiz section
of the Activities tab in D2L: ≈ 2%





**Thank you and
have a great
weekend**

