



BITS F112: Technical Report Writing

**Dr. Kumar Sankar
Bhattacharya
BITS Pilani**

Principles of Effective (Report) Writing

Effective writing depends on the following:

- Choosing the right words
- Arranging them properly in sentences
- Developing the points into paragraphs
- Organizing them into a reader-friendly text

All these create what we call STYLE.

Style

- It is difficult to specify the elements that constitute the “style” of a piece of writing.
- It is a total effect of various components.
- All writing has style, call it poor, good, excellent, personal, impersonal or any other suitable epithet.
- In this respect, style is like the character attributed to people, good or bad.
- In a nutshell, style is the way one writes.

Characteristics of an “ideal” report

- Language is clear and readable, precise and concise.
- Literary figures of speech and emotive words are avoided.
- Impartial analysis of data and correct presentation of facts
- Careful in using “I” or “We”

Components of Effective Writing

- Readability
- Choice of words and phrases
- Precision
- Conciseness
- Plainness
- Avoid using clichés, jargons and foreign words
- Construction and Length of Sentences
- Construction and Length of Paragraphs

Readability

- Intellectual ability, education, background knowledge make the readers. So, knowing target audience is imperative to make one's report “readable”.
- Readability of a report can be checked by a simple formula as given by Robert Gunning in *The Technique of Clear Writing*.

Readability Contd.

- Gunning calls it the “fog” index. Fog index includes number of words, number of sentences, difficult words (words with three or more syllables) and works out the formula through division, percentage and multiplication.
- A fog index of ten or less indicates easy reading level. Anything above twelve is considered “heavy” reading.
- Majority of popular magazines like *Reader's Digest* and *Time* have fog index of nine or ten.

Choice of Words and Phrases

- Words sometimes can have different effects on different people. E.g. democracy, civilization, freedom
- Words need to be chosen carefully to evoke in the mind of the reader the same thought which is in the communicator's mind.
- Wrong choice of words may lead to embarrassment, confusion and misunderstanding. E.g. A candidate filling out a job application came across the column of "Salary Desired" and wrote "Of Course" before passing on to the next column.

Precision

- Precision refers to specific thing or idea.
 - Precise means concrete instead of vague or abstract.
E.g.
1. He reads a particular newspaper daily. (name of the newspaper is essential to make the statement more effective)
 2. The company's publication explains how to write formal reports. (manual)

Precision Contd.

- Of the different classes of words, adjectives and adverbs by their very nature tend to be most subjective and vague. E.g.
 1. This room is big.
 2. This room is big enough for 40 desks.
 3. The area of this room is 320 sq. ft. and since we need 8 sq. ft. for a desk, it can accommodate 40 desks.
- Use adjectives and adverbs sparingly in report writing.

Conciseness

- Effective report writing demands conciseness. Make sure that every written word contributes something to the meaning.
 - “You can suffocate a thought by expressing it in too many words.” **Frank Clark**
1. It is difficult to make an approximation of how much money it would cost.

Revision: It is difficult to estimate its cost.

Plainness

- Plain words are usually short and familiar, and catch readers' attention easily and quickly.
- Effective writing does not mean displaying one's vocabulary; rather, how successfully one can communicate to the readers.
- Few examples: accentuate: stress, envisage: foresee, endeavor: try
- Avoid clichés, jargon and foreign words as much as possible

Clichés

- Clichés are words that suggest another set of words. They are used to save the communicator the trouble of inventing new phrases.
- They are used as they are prefabricated and hence readily available.
- Indiscriminate use of clichés makes the communicator ineffective as it points to his/her lack of creativity.
- Some examples of clichés are: burning question, acid test, part and parcel, fish in troubled water, toe the line etc.

Jargon

- Jargons are technical or special words attached to particular professions.
- Though it is necessary to use jargons in technical presentation, overuse can ruin the effectiveness of communication.
- Use of too much jargon is also looked down upon as it may show the communicator's inability to convey complex thoughts in plain words.

Foreign Words

- Foreign words make a writing/presentation difficult and hence should be avoided most of the time.
- Rather than saying “vide supra” it is always better to say “see above”.
- However, there are certain foreign words which are used regularly. For example, etc., et al., i.e.

Construction and Length of Sentences

- Sentences should perform the function they are intended to perform.
- They should contribute to the total meaning of the text.
- Most sentences in a report are likely to be:
 1. Simple or Compound in structure
 2. Statement in form
 3. Expository or Descriptive or Narrative in terms of function

Types of Sentence: Structure

- **Simple:** contains one independent clause.
- **Complex:** contains two or more clauses, at least one of which is a dependent clause.
- **Compound:** contains one independent clause and one or more coordinate clause/s.

Types of Sentence: Form

- Statement
- Command
- Request
- Question
- Exclamation

Types of Sentence: Function

- **Illocutionary**: mainly used for socialization. E.g. Good Morning. How are you?
- **Emotive**: expresses strong feeling or sentiment. E.g. Long live the king!
- **Expository**: generally explains a process, plan or theory in concise, clear and accurate terms.
- **Descriptive**: portrays things or states what qualities, elements or properties an object has.
- **Narrative**: gives an account of events, shows their sequence and establish relationship among them.

“Ideal” Sentence Construction

- No hard and fast rule, but certain conventions are followed for effective communication.
1. If a sentence has more than three conjunctions, split it into two or more smaller sentences for greater clarity.
 2. Remove repetitive words that do not perform a function. E.g. He has prepared this report in a not too technical style which should be of a simple enough nature to be understood by the average layman in the street.

Contd.

1. To avoid monotony, vary the construction and length of the sentences.
2. A sentence in a report should have a clear subject and predicate. Sentences like “what?” or “If so, then?” have no place in report writing.
3. The different parts of a sentence should be effectively arranged to provide proper emphasis. E.g. for selling something: instead of “The device will cost Rs. 50,000, but save Rs. 5000 annually on fuel”, “The device will save Rs. 5000 annually on fuel and cost only Rs. 50,000” will be much more effective.

Construction and Length of Paragraphs

- A paragraph is a group of sentences related to one core idea and arranged in a logical order.
- The core idea is generally expressed in a sentence called topic sentence or the theme statement.
- All other sentences in a paragraph clarify, compare, contrast , support or illustrate the core idea.
- The topic sentence can be at the beginning, middle or end of a paragraph, but for communication to be plain and effective, it is better to put it right at the beginning.

Contd.

- The most important factor that should govern the length of a paragraph is whether the development of the core idea is adequate.
- The paragraph must have unity of theme and cohesion.
- The sentences are semantically linked by suitable sentence linkers.

Examples of Sentence Linkers

- **For reinforcing an idea already expressed:** also, certainly, furthermore, in addition, indeed, moreover
- **For contrast:** but, except for, although, however, in contrast, nevertheless, on the other hand
- **For illustrating:** for example, for instance, such as, thus
- **For comparing:** similarly, in the same way, both, equally important
- **For concluding:** therefore, as a result, consequently, accordingly

Rule of Thumb For Paragraph Construction

- Provide “eye relief” to the readers. Solid running matter page after page tires the readers.
- Have at least one or two breaks on every page.



THANK YOU!