

# Week 3

Comm 1234

Technical Writing Fundamentals

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# Warm-up

1. She was an interesting talker. A woman who had travelled all over the world and lived in half a dozen countries.
2. My part-time job is excellent, it pays well, provides good experience, and offers a real challenge.
3. Wondering irresolutely what to do next, the clock struck twelve.
4. His mother was caring, supportive, and a source of inspiration.

# Plan for today

- Considering your audience
- Readable sentences
- Coherence in longer passages

# Audience

- The average adult in the U.S. reads at the 8<sup>th</sup>-grade level.
- Nearly 80 percent of adults read below the 10<sup>th</sup>-grade level.
- Nearly 50 percent of adults read below the 8<sup>th</sup>-grade level.

DuBay, W.H. (2004). Your Stake in Plain Language.  
California: Impact Information.

# What is cognitive strain?

- Quick: What's the next letter in this sequence?
  - A, B, C, D, E, ... ?
- Quick: What's  $27 \times 13$ ?
- Cognitive strain is the feeling you had after the second question.

# What are its effects?

- Stress.
- Body tenses up.
- Feeling of stupidity.
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJG698U2Mvo>
- ...We miss important details.

# How do writers unknowingly impose cognitive strain on their readers?

- Unclear pronoun references
- Overstuffed sentences
- Poorly ordered sentences
- Cluttered sentences
- Weak verbs
- Nominalizations
- Negation
- Fluff words
- Excessive hedging

# Keep pronoun references clear

- Pronouns (**she, it, his, their**, and so on) must clearly refer to the nouns they replace.
- Ambiguous referent:
  - **Our patients** enjoy the **warm days** while **they** last.
  - *Are the patients or the warm days on the way out?*
- Clear referent:
  - While these warm days last, our patients enjoy them.
  - Our terminal patients enjoy these warm days.



# Keep pronoun references clear

- Ambiguous:
  - **Sally** told **Sarah** that **she** was obsessed with **her** job.
- Clear:
  - Sally told Sarah, “I’m obsessed with my job.”
  - Sally told Sarah, “I’m obsessed with your job.”

# Avoid overstuffed sentences

- Overstuffed:

A smoke-filled room not only causes teary eyes and runny noses but can also alter people's hearing and vision, as well as create dangerous levels of carbon monoxide, especially for people with heart and lung ailments, whose health is particularly threatened by second-hand smoke.

- Revised:

Besides causing teary eyes and runny noses, a smoke-filled room can alter people's hearing and vision. One of the biggest dangers of second-hand smoke, however, is high levels of carbon monoxide. This is particularly threatening for people with heart and lung ailments.

# Given, then new.

Every semester after final exams are over, I'm faced with the problem of what to do with books of lecture notes (new). They (given) might be useful someday, but they just keep piling up on my bookcase (new). Someday, it (given) will collapse under the weight of information I might never need.

# Given, then new

Lately, most movies I've seen have been merely second-rate entertainment, but occasionally there are some with worthwhile themes. The rapid disappearance of the Indian culture (new) is the topic of a recent movie (given) I saw.

Lately, most movies I've seen have been merely second-rate entertainment, but occasionally there are some with worthwhile themes. One recent movie (given) I saw was about the rapid disappearance of the Indian culture (new).

# Eliminating clutter

- Cluttered:
  - At this point in time I must say that I need a vacation.
- Concise:
  - I need a vacation now.

# Avoid wordy phrases

- At this point in time = now
- Has the ability to = can
- Due to the fact that = because
- The majority of = most
- On a daily basis = daily

# Eliminate redundancy

- [utmost] perfection
- [mental] awareness
- [the month of] August
- [past] experience
- [future] prospects

# Avoid needless repetition

- Repetitive:

In trauma victims, breathing is restored by **artificial respiration**. Techniques of **artificial respiration** include mouth-to-mouth **respiration** and mouth-to-nose **respiration**.

- Concise:

In trauma victims, breathing is restored by artificial respiration, either mouth-to-mouth or mouth-to-nose.



# Practice: eliminate redundancies

- She is a woman who works hard.
- I am aware of the fact that Sam is a trustworthy person.
- Clarence completed his assignment in a short period of time.
- I've been able to rely on my parents in the past.

# Avoid weak verbs

- Weak and wordy:
  - Please **take into consideration** my application.
- Concise:
  - Please **consider** my application.

# Avoid weak verbs

- Give a summary of = summarize
- Make an assumption = assume
- Come to the conclusion = conclude
- Take action = act
- Make a decision = decide

# Avoid nominalizations

- To nominalize is to turn verbs/adjectives into nouns.
- Weak and wordy:
  - **Comprehension** checks were used as **exclusion** criteria.
- Clear:
  - We excluded people who failed to understand the instructions.
- Weak and wordy:
  - Participants read **assertions** whose **veracity** was either affirmed or denied by the subsequent **presentation** of an **assessment** word.
- Concise:
  - We presented participants with a sentence, followed by the word TRUE or FALSE.

Lannon, J. M. (2012). *The Writing Process: a Concise Rhetoric, Reader, and Handbook*. New York: Pearson.

# Make negatives positive

- Indirect and wordy:
  - Please do not be late in submitting your report.
- Direct and concise:
  - Please submit your report on time.
- Confusing and wordy:
  - Do **not** neglect to activate the alarm system. My diagnosis was **not inaccurate**.
- Clear and concise:
  - **Be sure** to activate the alarm system. My diagnosis was **accurate**.

Lannon, J. M. (2012). *The Writing Process: a Concise Rhetoric, Reader, and Handbook*. New York: Pearson.

# Make negatives positive

- Prefer positives to negatives, whenever your meaning allows:
  - Did not succeed = failed
  - Does not have = lacks
  - Did not prevent = allowed

# Clear out clutter words

- Clutter words stretch a message without adding meaning:
  - Very
  - Definitely
  - Quite
  - Extremely
  - Rather
  - Somewhat
  - Really
  - Actually

Lannon, J. M. (2012). *The Writing Process: a Concise Rhetoric, Reader, and Handbook*. New York: Pearson.

# Clear out clutter words

- Cluttered:

One aspect of a relationship situation that could definitely make me very happy would be to have a somewhat adventurous partner who really shared my extreme love of travelling.

- Concise:

I'd like to meet an adventurous person who loves travelling.



# Delete needless prefaces

- [I am writing this letter because] I wish to apply for the position of dorm counsellor.
- [The conclusion we can draw is that] writing is hard.

# Delete needless qualifiers

- Qualifiers are sometimes necessary, but are often implied:
  - I feel
  - It would seem
  - I believe
  - In my opinion
  - I think

# Delete needless qualifiers

- [In my opinion,] you've done a great job.
- [I believe that] abortion is wrong.

# Avoiding sexist language

- Use neutral expressions such as **chair** or **chairperson** rather than **chairman**, and **mail carrier** rather than **postman**.
- Rephrase to eliminate the pronoun:
  - A writer will succeed if **he** revises.
  - A writer who revises will succeed.
- Use plural forms:
  - **Writers** will succeed if **they** revise.
- Use **Ms.** Instead of **Mrs.** or **Miss**, unless you know that the person prefers a traditional title.

Lannon, J. M. (2012). *The Writing Process: a Concise Rhetoric, Reader, and Handbook*. New York: Pearson.

# Fix for weak verbs, negatives, clutter, and sexist language

- I definitely have a preference for Ferraris.
- I am not unappreciative of your help.
- In my opinion, winter is an awful season.
- Never fail to attend classes.
- Every engineer should follow department procedures. He should begin each report with an abstract.

# What we've covered so far.

- Good writing, on the level of the sentence:
  - Uses fewer words rather than more.
  - States ideas clearly, with little repetition.
  - Does not apologize for the complexity of the concepts it discusses.

# Is that enough?

The northern United States and Canada are places where herons live and breed. Spending the winter here has its advantages. Great Blue Herons live and breed in most of the northern United States. It's an advantage for herons to avoid the dangers of migration. Herons head south when the cold weather arrives. The earliest herons to arrive on the breeding grounds have an advantage. The winters are relatively mild in Cape Cod.

Pinker, S. (2014). *The Sense of Style*. New York: Penguin.

# Why was that confusing?

- The logical links between sentences are unclear.
- The reader is only vaguely confident about the topic, which appears to be herons.
- The reader is unsure of the purpose of the passage.



# A demonstration

Half of the room, close your eyes.

The purpose/topic:

Making and flying a kite

You'll be shown a passage, and you'll have  
30 seconds to try to memorize as many  
of the sentences as possible.

- A newspaper is better than a magazine.
- A seashore is a better place than the street.
- At first it is better to run than to walk.
- You may have to try several times.
- It takes some skill but it's easy to learn.
- Even young children can enjoy it.
- Once successful, complications are minimal.
- Birds seldom get too close.
- Rain, however, soaks in very fast.
- One needs lots of room.
- If there are no complications, it can be very peaceful.
- A rock will serve as an anchor.

Write down everything you can  
remember from the passage.

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The first principle of clear passages:

Announce the topic early on.

# Our model of a coherent passage.

- From a newspaper column that responds to readers' questions about birds.
- The question being answered:
  - “A heron showed up at a bog near my house and is unable to feed because the bog has frozen over. Should I be worried?”



Great Blue Herons live and breed just about anywhere in the northern United States and most of Canada. When the cold weather arrives, the herons head south. A few come to Cape Cod where the winters usually aren't too bad. Most of these herons are either inexperienced young birds or lost adult males too stubborn to ask for directions south. Spending the winter here has its advantages, and I'm not talking about the free off-season parking in Provincetown. Herons are able to avoid the dangers of migration, plus they can be one of the earliest to arrive on the breeding grounds.

# Topic: herons.

- Topic has a second meaning:
  - The “topic” or “subject” is the noun phrase at the heart of the sentence. It’s the thing doing the main action.
  - E.g.
    - **The monkey** climbed the tree.
    - Whenever it rains, **the grass** gets wet.

**Great Blue Herons** live and breed just about anywhere in the northern United States and most of Canada. When the cold weather arrives, **the herons** head south. **A few** come to Cape Cod where the winters usually aren't too bad. **Most of these herons** are either inexperienced young birds or lost adult males too stubborn to ask for directions south. **Spending the winter** here has its advantages, and I'm not talking about the free off-season parking in Provincetown. **Herons** are able to avoid the dangers of migration, plus they can be one of the earliest to arrive on the breeding grounds.

passage topic = sentence topic

Great Blue Herons live

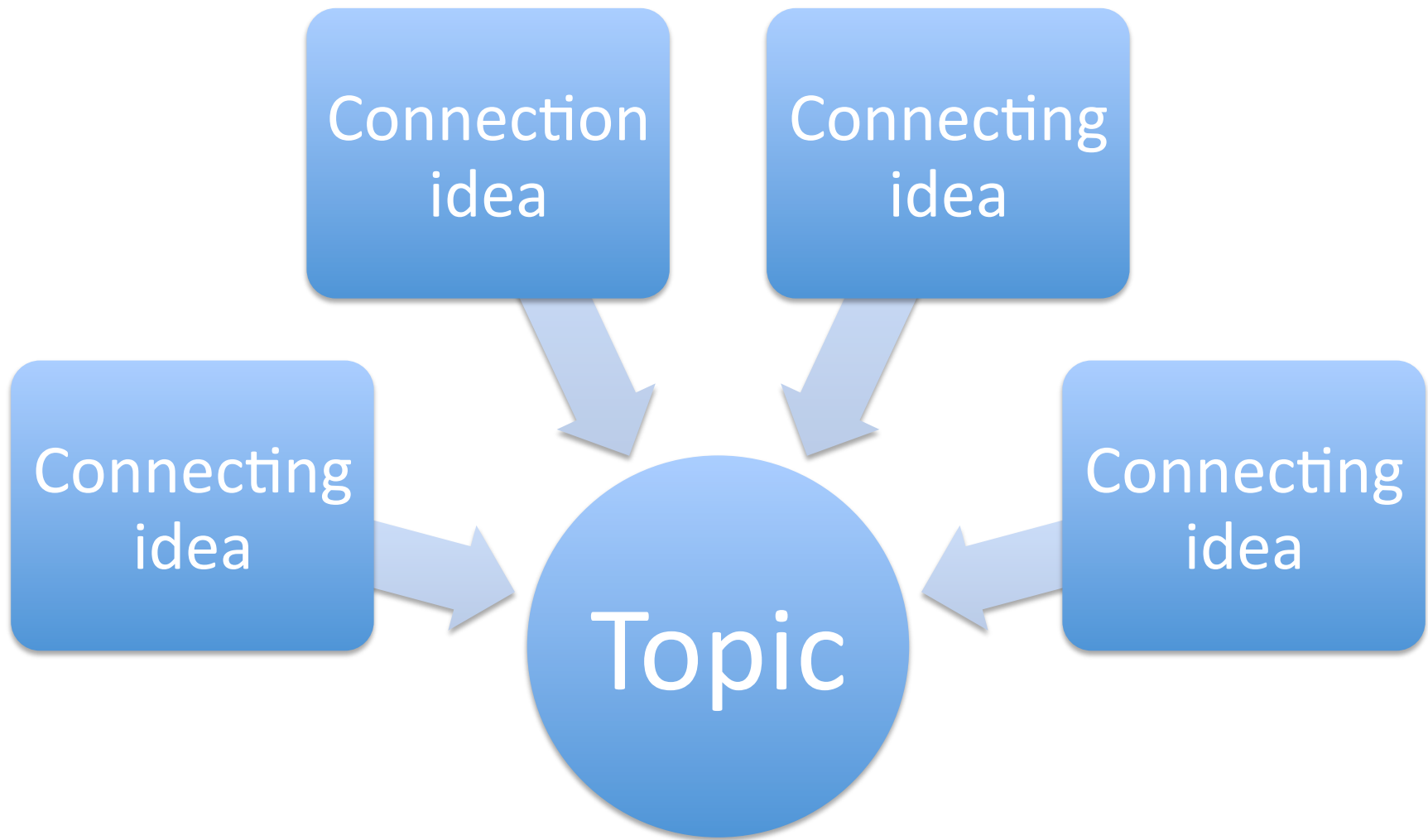
the herons head

a few come

Most of these herons are

Spending the winter here has

Herons are able to avoid



The second principle of clear passages:

Keep the reader's mind's eye focused  
on the topic.

# The curse of knowledge



© J. Stevenson per The New Yorker da The Sense of Style di S. Pinker

# The curse of knowledge

“In the state of {alarm and chime setting}. Press the [SET] key and the {alarm ‘hour’ setting}→{alarm ‘minute’ setting}→{time ‘hour’ setting}→{‘year’ setting}→{‘month’ setting}→{‘day’ setting} will be completed in turn. And press the [MODE] key to adjust the set items.”



# Using abstract words rather than concrete words.

- Abstract:
  - “Participants were tested under conditions of good to excellent acoustic isolation.”
- Concrete:
  - “We tested the students in a quiet room.”

# Using abstract words rather than concrete words.

- Abstract:
  - “We believe that the ICTS approach to delivering integrated solutions, combining effective manpower, canine services and technology was a key differentiator in the selection process.”
- Concrete:
  - “They chose our company because we protect buildings with a combination of guards, dogs, and sensors.”

Pinker, S. (2014). *The Sense of Style*. New York: Penguin.

# Using abstract words rather than concrete words.

- Why might writers be tempted to do this?
- We think of things in terms of how we use them, not in terms of how others see them.

# Using abstract words rather than concrete words.

- Why might this impose cognitive strain on the reader?
- It's harder to understand things you can't visualize.

# Principles of coherence

1. Announce the topic early on.
2. Keep the reader's mind's eye focused on the topic.
3. Avoid abstraction.

# Concepts for test

- Sentence fragment
- Run-on sentence
- Misplaced modifier
- Faulty parallelism
- Unclear pronoun references
- Long sentences
- Poorly ordered sentences
- Cluttered sentences
- Weak verbs
- Nominalizations
- Negation
- Fluff words
- Needless qualifiers
- Curse of knowledge
- Abstraction
- Sexist language