

1 Logical Organization: the So What? Test

You make your readers' lives easier by beginning every document, email, and paragraph, with a *key point*, not a detail. If your reader can respond to the first lines of your document by asking "so what? How is this relevant to me?" you have failed the So What? test—consider revising the sentence to emphasize its key point.

1.1 Examples

Baffling paragraph buries the key point:

"What is the use of living, if it be not to strive for noble causes and to make this muddled world a better place for those who will live in it after we are gone." -Winston Churchill

Philosophers have long argued over the origins and benefits of human altruism, and in this light I hope to recommend a course of action that is both beneficial to Google's employees and to Google's board. The kerfuffle over the nap pods, while energetic, must be stopped. The elimination of all nap pods is unfair to our fellow engineers, and if there are issues with nap pods, these issues should be addressed directly with the engineers themselves! The engineers deserve a chance to change their behavior—ceasing to leave food in the nap pods—before the nap pods are, themselves, eliminated.

Revision passes the So What? test:

Instead of eliminating nap pods entirely, the Google board should give engineers six weeks to stop leaving food in the pods. If they do so, the Google board should let the nap pods stay.

Another example that buries the key point:

Since Friday, PM-CI01, PM-MAIN1, and PM-MAIN2 are all showing the following issue in the Post-Install test which validates that Orchestrations are installed and running. With this test showing failure, there are downstream test fail outcomes as well but this one needs to be dealt with as critical consequences will be incurred by this issue.

Another revision that passes the So What? test:

We need to address critical Orchestration failures in Post-Install tests on PM-CI01, PM-MAIN1, and PM-MAIN2. There are also downstream test failures, but this one needs to be dealt with first and as soon as possible.

1.2 Exercises

Revise this email and memo to lead with the key point.

Exercise one

Hello Keith,

My name is Timmy. I have cared deeply about ethics for the past ten years, starting seriously when I was given Aristotle's book for my birthday in 8th grade. As a result of my interest in ethics, I'd like to audit your class, even though I don't have enough units to take it.

Thanks,
Timmy

Exercise two

Recently, five different pieces of gym equipment have increased in popularity at Facebook: the leg press machine, the bench, the adjustable bench, the pull-up bar, and the patterned yoga mat. Since the adjustable bench has been the most popular item, I propose that we order more adjustable benches.

2 Visual Organization: the Eyeball Test

Your readers don't have hours to puzzle over what you've written, so your key points and logical organization should be immediately and visually obvious to them. Pass the Eyeball test by:

1. **using headings and subheadings** to prioritize important and less important information.
2. **using typeface variety** to highlight your most important points.
3. **keeping paragraphs below indecent lengths**.
4. **using bullets and numbering** to organize information (with *parallel structure*).

Parallel structure means using the same structure of words for each element in a list. All elements in your list should be nouns, or they should be verbs with the same tense or ending. Look at the first words in the list above: “using,” “using,” “keeping,” and “using” all end in *ing*. Parallel structure makes it clear that list elements are connected and at the same level of importance, but is also a source of rhetorical power. Consider the following excerpt from a speech by Winston Churchill: “We shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.” Part of this quotation's power comes from the repetition inherent in parallel structure. In fact, parallel structure is very common in political speeches and religious texts for this reason.

2.1 Examples

Wall-of-text example:

Hi all,

We received permission from the Facebook team to shadow the designers into the product production room while they attempt to prototype new versions of BookFace. Timmy is very eager to learn what we discover about their production, design and prototyping, and what we think of the current template that is used for printing many pictures of a person's face on a book. They would like to know if the borders distract from the face pictures and if the color schemes are coherent across all books. Finally, it is unclear if the current method of aggregating the pictures from Facebook to BookFace is reliable enough to guarantee no pictures of other peoples' faces end up in a given customer's BookFace.

We already know that each designer has a unique approach on how they choose color scheme and layout for a given BookFace template. Shadowing will allow us to observe the design process and evaluate design skills in this new, physical medium of the book.

Timmy requested it be explained to each designer that we are shadowing and why during the introduction with the designer and his or her shadow. Be respectful! Wear your visitor badge and do not tailgate through the doors.

Kudos to Other Timmy for suggesting active in-process shadowing, elevating it, and not backing down when meeting passive resistance.

Let me know if you have questions.

Visually accessible revision uses bullets and boldface:

Hi all,

Please use the information in this email next week when you shadow the BookFace designers.

Requirements for shadowing

Please:

1. explain to your designer that you will be shadowing them to assess their creative process
2. wear your visitor badge

3. do not tailgate through the doors.

Information to collect while shadowing

Timmy would like you to take notes on:

1. **If the current BookFace template is effective.** Do the designers' border choices distract from the pictures of faces? Are the color schemes coherent?
2. **If any pictures of other people end up in a given person's BookFace.**

Kudos to Other Timmy for suggesting active in-process shadowing, elevating it, and not backing down when meeting passive resistance.

Let me know if you have questions.

2.2 Exercises

Revise the following memo and email to make sure they pass the Eyeball test and the So What? test.

Exercise One

Before beginning to use the invisible cubes, it is imperative that each engineer pass the invisibility test up to level three. The engineers must tell me when they have passed this critical test. Afterwards, it will be essential that they register for their yearly continuing education, taking the online Continued Invisibility course, without exception.

Exercise Two

Visible cubes and invisible cubes are both types of cubes. For interacting with invisible cubes, there is extensive coursework—certification up to level three and Continued Invisibility courses—for the safety of the engineers. It is important to prevent engineers working with invisible cubes from becoming invisible, as well. For interacting with visible cubes, the coursework is less strenuous, just involving the Visibility Seminar and the Visibility Retreat Weekend. We encourage engineers to work with visible cubes as soon as possible, but to delay their certification for invisible cubes until they have a good amount of free time.

3 Sentence Organization and Clarity: the Einstein Test

In Einstein’s words, clear business writing **keeps it as simple as possible, but no simpler**.¹ To eliminate useless words and information that may distract your readers from the key point, this section encourages five strategies:

1. planning your argument before you start writing.
2. eliminating TBU: true but useless information.
3. letting your speech guide you.
4. using the active voice.
5. putting the action in the verb.

In the next sections, we discuss that last four strategies, since the first, planning and constructing an argument, is a main focus of CS181 itself.

3.1 Eliminating TBU

Irrelevant detail distracts your reader from the key point of your argument.

Example cluttered with distracting information

Currently, Hawkeye only services the overhead crane market. Its products are not suited for tower cranes (construction usage) or mobile cranes (infrastructure, mining applications). Overhead cranes are found in industrial environments such as warehouses, factories, and agricultural facilities. They consist of parallel runways with a traveling bridge, moving heavy objects or material containers through the overhead space in a facility. Crane travel is directed by an operator using a wireless control unit. The objects handled by the overhead crane hang with cables or claws. This makes having an operator necessary to carefully control the movement and swing motions of the objects. So far, the operational process has not been automated, due to safety constraints and the reliance on operator skill. This factor makes operator control units crucial, leading to continuous demand for Hawkeye products.

Revision eliminates TBU

Hawekeye serves the overhead crane market, and its products are in demand because they include control units that let operators safely control the cranes’ moving claws.

3.1.1 Exercise

Revise this paragraph to eliminate TBU:

Nap pods were introduced at Google in 2013 because some engineers are not productive if they are tired. Since then, the nap pods have been a popular Google staple, and visitors will even try them out or take pictures with them. Recently, however, engineers have begun to leave food—most often sandwiches—in unoccupied nap pods. If this doesn’t stop, Google management will be forced to remove the nap pods.

3.2 Letting your speech guide you

Would you say “increase the efficacy of the cattle prod” or “make the cattle prod more effective”? “The utilization of the cattle prod has increased” or “we are using the cattle prod more”?

¹Full disclosure, he was not talking about business writing.

Passive voice (action → doer order)	Active voice (doer → action order)
Specifics about gnome preferences weren't included by Timmy in the last report.	Timmy didn't include specifics about gnome preferences in the last report.
If an opportunity is found to pursue this project, a proposal will be developed as soon as possible.	If we decide to pursue this project, we will develop a proposal as soon as possible.
These new protocols were designed by the team to ensure compliance with Invisibility Regulations.	The team designed these protocols to ensure compliance with Invisibility Regulations.
Several issues were identified at the meeting and a response has been developed.	We identified several issues at the meeting and developed a response.

Figure 1: Comparing passive voice to active voice

3.2.1 Exercise

Let your speech guide you to make this recommendation sound like it was written by a human being:

The negative customer response to BookFace was not wholly unexpected by the shadowing team, because they discovered a number of errors via which the faces to be included in certain customers' books were not those customers' faces, but instead the faces of other individuals.

3.3 Using the active voice

If you let your speech guide you, you'll automatically use the active voice because you already speak in the active voice. You use it all the time: "the frat bought the beer" compared to "the beer was bought by the frat." Active voice just means that the sentence organization starts with the subject—the frat—and follows it with the verb, or what the frat did—bought. Since this organization immediately identifies who is doing what, it is **more specific and clear** than the passive voice. See Figure 3.3 for more examples of the difference between passive and active voice.

Passive voice example that sounds like it was translated from Martian

Degradation of quality has been experienced by the Zoom platform in recent days, causing decreases in customer satisfaction, specifically with regard to the video quality metric, not the audio one. Similar obstacles have been overcome by Zoom in the past, notably in 2018. The decreases in quality will be addressed by Zoom in coming days, and we regret that delays are caused by the current situation affecting the whole world. The many places of business relying on Zoom for work from home have overloaded the service.

Revision uses the active voice, leads with the key point, and eliminates true but useless information

Though Zoom video quality has degraded because of overload from people working at home, we expect to fix this issue within a few days.

3.3.1 Examples

Make this sentence clearer by using the active voice:

Exercise One

Poor style (action not in verb)	Good style (action in verb)
We have demonstrated a substantial commitment to the development and maintenance of a seasoned and experienced team of magical gnomes.	We are committed to maintaining an experienced team of magical gnomes.
For your review, we provide below a detailed summarization of our unique approach to the magical interface issue.	Below, we summarize our approach to the magical interface issue.
The purpose of this document is to provide a description of the current process and requirements of our team with regards to the tracking and reporting of BookFace customer complaints.	This document describes our team's process and requirements for tracking and reporting BookFace customer complaints.

Figure 2: Putting the action in the verb

Zoom video quality will be improved by the inclusion of more magical gnomes within the app itself.

Make this email clearer using the active voice, the So What? test, and the Eyeball test:

Exercise two

Subject: magical gnomes

Hello all,

The advisory board reassembled on Tuesday. The need for more magical gnomes caused by the push to improve Zoom video quality was discussed by the board. Gnomes have had a willingness to enter the app to perform their magic, but have been unsatisfied with the magic-to-processor interface instantiated by the app. To keep the gnomes happy, the interface will need to be improved, and feedback will need to be collected from the Test Gnomes ASAP.

3.4 Putting the action in the verb

Avoid turning verbs into noun phrases: “he partied all night” should not become “he engaged in partying all night.” The latter construction *obscures* the action in the sentence, making it harder for your reader to understand what the subject of the sentence is doing. Figure 3.4 shows three examples of sentences revised to be clearer and more powerful by putting the action in the verb.

Example that includes unnecessary words that confuse the reader

The BookFace team will perform an investigation of the failures of the aggregation algorithm to correctly identify customer faces.

Revision puts the action in the verb and uses the active voice

The BookFace team will investigate why the aggregation algorithm failed to identify customer faces.

3.4.1 Exercises

Revise these sentences to put the action in the verb.

Exercise One

The BookFace team will continue the investigation of whether there exist further applications of its face printing technology.

Exercise two

The BookFace team has regrets about the handling of the incident.

4 Acknowledgments

Many thanks to Be A Brilliant Business Writer, from whom I have stolen (with permission) all of these concepts.