Writing for Results

Kate van Gelder

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March 25, 2015
The Goal
But first...

Understand distractions

• Short attention span
• Information overload
• Short blurb mentality
Today’s Talk

• Developing bottom-line messages

• Writing for a broader audience

• Enhancing readability with graphic elements
Developing bottom-line messages

Interpret for your reader

- Was there an increase / decrease?
- Is the trend upward / downward?
- Are most / few states implementing the policy?
- Did funds increase while participants decreased?
- Is participation greater for Whites than Hispanics?
- Are women more at risk than men?
Developing bottom-line messages

Synthesize

- Group information
- Mind map
- Identify 3 priorities
Developing bottom-line messages

Group information

but limit the number of chunks
Developing bottom-line messages

Group information

but limit the number of chunks
Developing bottom-line messages

Mind Map

Graphic Options
- Countries
- Neighborhoods
- Maps
- Buildings
- Office Layouts

Charts
- Bar
- Line
- Pie
- Scatter Plot
- Stacked

Diagrams
- Flow Chart
- Org Chart
- Venn
- Exploded view

Visuals
- Illustration
- Photograph
- Video

Illustration
Developing bottom-line messages

Mind Map

Graphic Options

- Maps
  - Neighborhoods
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Visuals
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- Photograph
- Video
Developing bottom-line messages

Identify 3 priorities

- **First most important**
  - Support or evidence
  - More support or evidence
  - More support or evidence

- **Second most important**
  - Support or evidence
  - More support or evidence
  - More support or evidence

- **Third most important**
  - Support or evidence
  - More support or evidence
  - More support or evidence
Writing for a broader audience

- Provide context
- Lead with condition
- Inform and educate
- Write concisely
- Use plain language
- Avoid “alphabet soup”
- Write clear topic sentences
- Use “sign posts”
Writing for a broader audience

Provide context

• Time  (At the height of the recent recession...)

• Place  (With a population density like New York City...)

• Program  (Similar to the Head Start program...)
Writing for a broader audience

Lead with condition

Original sentence on criteria:
The April 2012 Executive Order and January 2013 Public Law required VA and other agencies to prevent abusive and deceptive recruiting practices that target the recipients of federal military and veterans’ education benefits by strengthening their enforcement and compliance efforts. (See Table __.)

Revised sentence with the main clause focused on the finding:
In 2014, VA launched a new system that allows veterans to file complaints of abusive and misleading school recruiting practices and other violations of the Principles of Excellence, as required by an Executive Order (see sidebar).
Writing for a broader audience

Inform and educate

Most of VA’s elderly outreach is web-based.

Most of VA’s elderly outreach is web-based, and studies estimate that only one-third of older adults use the Internet.
Writing for a broader audience

Write concisely

- Use plain language
- Avoid “alphabet soup”
- Write strong topic sentences
Writing for a broader audience

Use plain language (and eliminate wordiness)

- “try” rather than “endeavor”
- “live” rather than “reside”
- “enough” rather than “a sufficient amount of”
- “because” rather than “in view of the fact that”
Writing for a broader audience

Avoid “alphabet soup”

- **Acronyms** are read as words—SCUBA—and are useful if their meaning is generally understood.

- **Initialisms** are read as a series of letters—IRS—and may be useful if they are fairly common or can easily be memorized.
Writing for a broader audience

Write strong topic sentences

Objective: What factors contribute to rural road fatalities?

Several factors contribute to the excessive rate of fatalities on rural roads, including human behaviors, roadway environment, vehicle design, and the care victims receive after a crash.
Writing for a broader audience

Use “sign posts”

- Linkage
- Headings and subheadings
- Bullets
- Numbers
Several factors cause the excessive rate of fatalities on rural roads—human behaviors, roadway environment, vehicle design, and the care victims receive after a crash. Human behaviors involve the actions taken by or the condition of drivers and passengers, include use or nonuse of safety belts, alcohol impairment, and speeding. According to NHTSA data for 2010 the most recent data available, rural crashes accounted for about 68 percent of unrestrained fatalities, 63 percent of all alcohol impairment, and 62 percent of speeding fatalities. Also, the lack of prompt and effective medical care contributes to rural road fatalities. For example, NHTSA data for 2008 show that for 30 percent of the fatal crashes on rural highways, victims did not reach a hospital within 1 hour of the crash. In addition, the EMS Division Chief at NHTSA said he thought that EMS service is inferior in rural areas due, in part, to the lack of trauma centers. Roadway environment characteristics that contribute to crashes and fatalities include the design of the roadway and roadway conditions: narrow lanes, sharp curves, lack of medians, small or non-existent shoulders, trees, utility poles, and animals. Roadway environment factors are important in rural crashes—more than 70 percent of the nation’s fatalities from run-off-the-road crashes occur on rural roads. For example, it was reported in a Highway safety Information System report that examined five states’ experiences with motor vehicle collisions involving animals, from 2004-2009, 74 percent to 94 percent of reported crashes involving animals occurred on rural roads. Finally, vehicle factors include the wide variances in vehicle sizes, weights, and configurations that raise compatibility issues when vehicles collide, whether in a rural or urban setting. For example, when heavy sports utility vehicles or pickup trucks collide with small compact cars, the occupants in the lighter and lower vehicles are likely to sustain more serious injuries, particularly if struck in the side.
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Writing for a broader audience

Headings and subheadings

• Four Factors Contribute to Rural Road Fatalities
  • Human Behaviors Include Alcohol Consumption, Speeding, and Lack of Seatbelt Use
  • Roadway Environment Factors Include Narrow Lanes, Sharp Curves, and Animals
  • Vehicle Design Factors Include Size and Weight
  • Emergency Medical Care Factors Include the Quality of Emergency Medical Services and Availability of Trauma Centers
Writing for a broader audience

Bullets

Several factors cause the excessive rate of fatalities on rural roads—human behaviors, roadway environment, vehicles, and the care victims receive after a crash.

- **Human behaviors**—involve the actions taken by or the condition of drivers and passengers, including use…
- **Roadway environment**—characteristics that contribute to crashes and fatalities include the design of the roadway…
- **Vehicle design**—includes the wide variances in vehicle sizes, weights, and configurations that raise compatibility issues…
- **Medical care**—quality and promptness also contribute to rural road fatalities. For example, NHTSA data for 2008 show…
Writing for a broader audience

Numbers

Several factors cause the excessive rate of fatalities on rural roads: 1) human behaviors, 2) roadway environment, 3) vehicles, and 4) the care victims receive after a crash.

1) **Human behaviors**—involve the actions taken by or the condition of drivers and passengers, including use...

2) **Roadway environment**—characteristics that contribute to crashes and fatalities include the design of the roadway...

3) **Vehicle design**—includes the wide variances in vehicle sizes, weights, and configurations that raise compatibility issues...

4) **Medical care**—quality and promptness also contribute to rural road fatalities. For example, NHTSA data for 2008 show...
Writing for a broader audience

Numbers

Several factors cause the excessive rate of fatalities on rural roads: 1) Human behaviors, 2) roadway environment, 3) vehicles, and 4) the care victims receive after a crash. First, human behaviors involve the actions taken by or the condition of drivers. Second, roadway environment characteristics that contribute to crashes and fatalities. Third, vehicle design includes the wide variances in vehicle sizes, weights, and configurations that raise compatibility issues. Lastly, medical care quality and promptness also contribute to rural road fatalities. For example...
Enhancing readability with graphic elements

• For writers, a graphic
  • organizes the information
  • helps with analysis

• For readers, a graphic
  • supports and supplements analysis of the information
  • translates complex data to a visual to aid understanding
  • makes the presentation of the message more understandable, accessible, and memorable
Enhancing readability with a table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Defined Benefit (DB)</th>
<th>Defined Contribution (DC)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>What is it?</strong></td>
<td>A monthly payment during retirement based on the employee's salary and tenure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Who finances the plan?</strong></td>
<td>Employer, who bears all costs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Who manages the plan?</strong></td>
<td>Employer, who selects provider and may select investments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>How do the contribution costs compare?</strong></td>
<td>Costs born entirely by employer, Costs can fluctuate, but are generally smoothed by amortization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Advantages for workers</strong></td>
<td>Dependable lifetime income, Benefit grows with length of service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Disadvantages for workers</strong></td>
<td>Not portable, Workers who change jobs earn a smaller benefit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Advantages for employers</strong></td>
<td>Can serve a worker retention tool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Disadvantages for employers</strong></td>
<td>Employer solely responsible for funding monthly payments and bears all risk of investments</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Enhancing readability with a chart

The Corrosion Office Used a Rigorous Multistep Process to Select Projects for Funding

For the fiscal year 2011 project review and selection, we observed that the Corrosion Office used a rigorous multistep process to determine if proposed projects were acceptable for funding.

1. In mid-June 2010, the military departments submitted 81 CPC project proposals to a Corrosion officer, as shown in table 1 above. At this point, Corrosion Office support staff assembled the project plans into folders for review by the project selection panel convened by the Director of the Corrosion Office. The fiscal year 2011 panel had five members: the Director, Corrosion Office (Chair), Associate Director, Materials and Structures, Office of the Director, Defense Research & Engineering (Director), and the Assistant Director, Defense Acquisition University, Infrastructure and Environmental, and Logistics and Materiel Readiness, Maintenance Policy, and Programs.

2. In mid-July 2010, 2 weeks after project information was provided to the panel, the panel members assembled for their preliminary evaluation of the proposals. This preliminary evaluation, which we observed, was conducted at a meeting immediately prior to the annual DOD Corrosion Forum and resulted in projects being designated as either a “go” or a “no go” (meaning that the projects require additional information or changes in scope to be acceptable to the panel). We observed that the panel used criteria for this preliminary evaluation that are not made available to the submitters of project proposals and are different from those used for final project selection later in the process. ¹²

3. Following the preliminary evaluation and during the Corrosion Forum, the panel held individual feedback sessions with project managers from the military commands, such as Naval Air Systems Command, Army Aviation and Missile Command, and Air Force Civil Engineer Support Agency, so feedback could be done in person. The

4. In mid-August 2010, Corrosion Office support staff used an analytical tool to rank the projects based on the average of the scores recorded by each panel member for three criteria: the five judgment criteria and three quantitative criteria—DOD, Corrosion Office funding as a percentage of total project cost, and the project performance, or implementation, period.

5. Following the ranking of projects using the analytical tool, the selection panel recommended for a final evaluation of the projects. The panel arranged the ranked list that resulted from the analytical tool described above into four categories: best, acceptable—prioritized for funding, acceptable—not prioritized, and not acceptable. According to the staff, the “best” projects would likely all be funded, the “acceptable—prioritized for funding” projects would be funded by priority until the Corrosion Office funding is exhausted. Corrosion Office support staff informed the panel that, based on historical funding levels, they expected to receive around $17 million in available funding.

6. The panel then determined which projects would be recommended for funding. The panel provided feedback on each project, regardless of whether it was designated as a “go” or a “no go.” A panel member told us that the panel provided feedback on all projects so that project managers could address—either if they chose to do so—any perceived weaknesses in their “go” projects and improve their ranking in the final evaluation, as well as review the “no go” project submissions. Following the feedback, the project managers had three options: prepare and submit information addressing the feedback provided by the panel, resubmit project proposals in their original form, or remove projects from consideration for that year’s funding process. Project managers told us that they sometimes need to remove their “no go” projects from consideration and that the military departments may implement such projects using other funding. A project selection panel member told us that if a project manager decided to modify a project proposal to address the panel’s feedback, this modified proposal was due to the Corrosion Office no later than 2 weeks after the feedback session. Upon receipt of any revised proposals, the panel conducted another review of all proposals (original and resubmitted), which involved each panel member independently scoring the projects on judgmental criteria and providing written comments.²³

7. The panel then determined which projects would be recommended for funding. The panel provided feedback on each project, regardless of whether it was designated as a “go” or a “no go.” A panel member told us that the panel provided feedback on all projects so that project managers could address—either if they chose to do so—any perceived weaknesses in their “go” projects and improve their ranking in the final evaluation, as well as review the “no go” project submissions. Following the feedback, the project managers had three options: prepare and submit information addressing the feedback provided by the panel, resubmit project proposals in their original form, or remove projects from consideration for that year’s funding process. Project managers told us that they sometimes need to remove their “no go” projects from consideration and that the military departments may implement such projects using other funding. A project selection panel member told us that if a project manager decided to modify a project proposal to address the panel’s feedback, this modified proposal was due to the Corrosion Office no later than 2 weeks after the feedback session. Upon receipt of any revised proposals, the panel conducted another review of all proposals (original and resubmitted), which involved each panel member independently scoring the projects on judgmental criteria and providing written comments.²³

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¹¹ The criteria used for the preliminary evaluation include whether the proposed project megatrend greater than $S0000 of Corrosion Office funds to complete, new design, built to last, has innovative features, has been completed. The preliminary evaluation did not consider the joint applicability of the project, but this was a factor in the final project evaluation.

¹² The five judgment criteria are: joint applicability, readiness impact, safety impact, logistics impact, and cost of corrosion. The three quantitative criteria—DOD, Corrosion Office funding as a percentage of total project cost, and the project performance, or implementation, period —are also considered.

¹³ The criteria used for the final evaluation include whether the proposed project is megatrend greater than $S0000 of Corrosion Office funds to complete, new design, built to last, has innovative features, and has been completed. The final evaluation did not consider the joint applicability of the project, but this was a factor in the final project evaluation.
Enhancing readability with an org chart
Enhancing readability with a photograph

Source: GAO.
Enhancing readability with a matrix
Enhancing readability with a timeline

Source: GAO analysis of court and OMB documents.
Enhancing readability with a flow chart

1. **Veteran** selects benefit program and submits application to VA.
2. VA determines student eligibility and provides student with a **Certificate of Eligibility**, which provides benefit level.
3. Student enrolls and provides school the **Certificate of Eligibility**.
4. VA processes or amends claim and makes benefit payments.
5. School certifies student's enrollment status and sends VA a **Certificate of Enrollment**.
6. Benefits paid to students:
   - Monthly housing allowance
   - Books and supplies stipend
   - Rural Relocation Payment
7. Benefits paid to schools:
   - Tuition and fees
   - Yellow Ribbon payment

Source: GAO analysis of VA documents; GAO (images).
Resources

- The Back of the Napkin: Solving Problems and Selling Ideas with Pictures
  Dan Roam

- The Elements of Style
  William Strunk & E.B. White

  Dona M. Wong

- Kate van Gelder, (206) 287-4815, vangelderk@gao.gov