

Food Security Information for Action

Writing readable sentences

(Annex to the lesson "Writing Effective Reports")



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Dividing Sentences

Sentences that mirror thought processes often end up containing far too much information than a reader can digest. For example:

The annual budget, which was recently approved by the sub-committee, needs to be reviewed by the board, ensuring that all expenses, particularly those related to distribution mechanisms, monitoring and evaluation systems, and logistic and transportation support, are consistent with those originally projected, and whatever modifications that are made should be submitted for review no later than 3 January.

Although all of these ideas are integrally related, it does not mean that they have to be jammed into one sentence. Here, the optimum solution is to divide the sentence into shorter sentences:



The annual budget, which was recently approved by the sub-committee, needs to be reviewed by the board. The review must ensure that all expenses are consistent with those originally projected. Particular attention should be given to expenses related to distribution mechanisms, monitoring and evaluation systems, and logistic and transportation support. Whatever modifications made should be submitted for review no later than 3 January.

In this particular case, words have been repeated and the overall length has increased. But clarity often means repetition – as long as it is deliberate – and longer constructions.

Avoiding ambiguity

Ambiguity often arises because important details have been accidentally left out of the sentence.

For example:

In its recent policy amendment, the Ministry of Agriculture made it clear that it wished to limit food safety initiatives to highly marginalized resource-poor communities.

This sentence can have **two possible meanings** that run counter to each other. Does the MOA want to limit the number of initiatives that take place among these communities, or does it want the initiatives to take place only in these communities? Adding just one more detail would make the meaning clear: "...wished to limit the number of food safety initiatives that take place in high marginalized..."

Ambiguity can crop up in very short sentences as well. For example:

The Ministry advocated a change in its initiatives to empower smallholders.

This sentence can have two possible meanings: Is the Ministry advocating a change in those initiatives that empower smallholders? Or is the Ministry advocating a change in its initiatives (i.e. all of its initiatives) so that the initiatives will empower smallholders?

Remember: it is often the small words that guide the sentence to its unambiguous meaning!

Avoiding redundancies

Clarity is not enough. Decision makers also want economy. Without making your writing too dense, try to say the same thing in fewer words. Focus on unnecessary descriptive words, colloquialisms and bureaucratic jargon.

For example:

As a first step, this would involve a detailed comparison process of the major differences between the two approaches and a determination of their numerical and conceptual importance within the overall framework established for agricultural statistics.

Removing all of the “word fodder” would produce the following result:



A first step would involve comparing the two approaches and determining their importance for agricultural statistics.

Here are some overused words that are often unnecessary in a sentence:

- Overall (framework, objective, goal...)
- Detailed (analysis, description...)
- Particular (goal, objective, group...)
- Sustainable (development, livelihood...)
- Basic (issue, need, requirement...)
- Primary (goal, objective, responsibility...)
- Necessary (condition, requirement)
- Key (factor, component, issue, input...)
- Brief (summary)
- Past (experience)
- Currently
- Existing
- Critical, urgent, key

As examples, read the following sentences, and how they have been rewritten avoiding repetitions and unnecessary words.

Original sentence	Optimum alternative
<p>At the end of the budget cycle, the cumulative value of external assistance amounted to over US\$ 18 million. This amount includes funds earmarked or committed, as well as those already disbursed.</p>	<p>At the end of the budget cycle, external assistance amounted to over US\$ 18 million, including earmarked, committed and disbursed funds.</p>
<p>Detailed quantitative information on the activities of the organization for the period 2000-2004, including the level of expenditure and the work-months of headquarters staff and the number of field staff supporting the programme, is contained in the annex below.</p>	<p>The annex provides information on the activities of the organization from 200-2004, including expenditures, work-months of headquarters staff and number of field staff.</p>
<p>The technical studies are widely distributed among the developing countries. Several of the studies have been translated into Arabic, French and Spanish, and the others also will be available soon in the three languages. The studies have proved useful in national and regional training programmes, and they serve as valuable reference materials for practicing field staff and consultants.</p>	<p>The technical studies are widely distributed among developing countries and some have already been translated into Arabic, French and Spanish. The studies have proved useful in national and regional training programmes and as reference materials for field staff and consultants.</p>
<p>Some services were provided for the planning of the project concerned, and other services were provided for the implementation of the project. In addition, some advisory services were concerned with the follow-up activities related to the completed projects.</p>	<p>Services were provided for project planning and implementation, and advisory services for follow-up activities related to completed projects.</p>
<p>Once a database for a particular subject area is established, retrieval of data for the production of tables on a regular basis, as well as on an ad hoc basis, can basically be done very quickly.</p>	<p>Once a database for a subject is established, data to produce tables can be done very quickly.</p>

Avoiding nominalizations

One technique that addresses clarity, economy and straightforwardness in one fell swoop is to **use verbs instead of nouns**.

Many verbs have noun forms – for example “reduction” (reduce), “decentralization” (decentralize), “increase” (increase).

Choosing the noun over the verb is called “nominalizing”, and the result is always a longer and denser sentence. For example:

A recovery in the agricultural sector will have to take place before there will be an improvement in the national economy.

The underlined words are nominalizations. If you turn them into verbs, the sentence will read:



The agricultural sector will have to recover before the national economy improves.

The original sentence has 21 words and is more difficult to digest. The de-nominalized sentence has 12 words and is more readable.

Please have a look at the following sentences, and how they have been rewritten avoiding nominalizations:

Original sentence	Words #	Optimum alternative	Words #
Among our <u>plans</u> for next year is more efficiency in the <u>utilization</u> of resources.	14	Next year we <u>plan</u> to <u>use</u> resources more efficiently.	9
Our <u>anticipation</u> is that the <u>increase</u> in production costs during the next budget year will be approximately 15 percent.	19	We <u>anticipate</u> production costs to <u>increase</u> 15 percent during the next budget year.	13
If an <u>identification</u> of minor flaws in our humanitarian inputs can be made before shipment, there will be fewer <u>rejections</u> of inputs by our beneficiaries.	26	If minor flaws in our humanitarian inputs can be <u>identified</u> before shipment, beneficiaries will <u>reject</u> fewer inputs.	17
The time <u>requirement</u> for the <u>identification</u> of food-insecure areas experienced a sharp <u>decrease</u> after the <u>installation</u> of the new system by the country office.	23	The time <u>required</u> to <u>identify</u> food-insecure areas <u>decreased</u> sharply after the country office <u>installed</u> the new system.	17
We made a careful <u>consideration</u> of costs before reaching the <u>decision</u> to commence <u>implementation</u> of the project extension.	18	We carefully <u>considered</u> costs before <u>deciding</u> to <u>implement</u> the project extension.	11

Using parallel constructions

Another technique to keep your sentences unambiguous is to use parallel constructions. In other words, whenever you are writing a series, try to give the parts of the series a parallel grammatical structure so that your reader will know where one entry ends and the next entry begins.

Let's take a look at a seemingly simple example:

All of the team members contributed to the operation with dedication, responsible and alert attitude.

Because of the lack of parallel structure, this simple sentence can be interpreted in three ways:

- 1) All of the team members contributed to the operation with dedication, responsibility and an alert attitude. (3 contributions)
- 2) All of the team members contributed to the operation with dedication and a responsible and alert attitude. (2 contributions)
- 3) All of the team members contributed to the operation with a dedicate, responsible and alert attitude. (1 contribution)

Some of your readers will interpret this sentence in one way and others in another way. And some readers will see the multiple interpretations and not know which one you meant.

A more common – and serious – result from a lack of parallelism can be seen in the following example:

The main objectives are to assist food-insecure households to improve their standard of living and income by restoring efficient sustainable agricultural production on small holdings with emphasis placed on improving the utilization of water for irrigation, create on-farm employment, the optimization of the cost of fishing and promote income-generating activities targeted towards individuals and groups of landless families and female heads of household.

This is a classic example of **describing objectives**.

Unfortunately, it will be impossible for your reader to know just how many objectives you are talking about. Besides, your reader will probably abandon this sentence well before completing it anyway!

Please have a look at the following sentences, and how they have been rewritten using parallel constructions:

Original sentence	Optimum alternative
The disadvantages of the reduction were seen not only in the restrictions imposed on the use of outside consultants, but also it became difficult to maintain essential services.	The disadvantages of the reduction were seen not only in the restrictions imposed on the use of outside consultants, but also in the difficulty of maintaining essential services.
Five of the applications were approved and rejections were decided in three other cases.	Five of the applications were approved and three [were] rejected.
A biennial review would afford an opportunity for a broad appraisal of past performance and to draw there from implications for the future.	A biennial review would afford an opportunity to broadly appraise past performance and draw implications for the future.

<p>These will be aimed at improving food production and storage, better use of scarce water resources, sanitation, easier access through improved tertiary roads and the protection of the environment.</p>	<p>These will be aimed at: improving food production and storage; maximizing use of scarce water resources; enhancing sanitation; facilitating access through upgraded tertiary roads; and protecting the environment.</p>
<p>Development agencies have advocated changes in anti-poverty programmes to address women's needs for social empowerment, provide access and command over food, enabling women to have a substantive say in the design of these programmes and support in upgrading and diversifying skills to increase the opportunities to improve their condition.</p>	<p>In order to address women's needs for social empowerment, development agencies have advocated changes in anti-poverty programmes. Changes include: providing women with access to and command over food; enabling them to have a substantive say in the design of these programmes; and supporting them in upgrading and diversifying their skills. Introducing these changes will increase women's opportunities to improve their condition.</p>