

PROJECT PROPOSAL WRITING

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Module Six: Writing Skills: Clarity Part B

The collage contains various project management and proposal writing tools:

- Flowcharts:** A tree diagram with blue, green, and yellow boxes; a flowchart showing 'IMPACTS' and 'EFFECTS'; a 'Problem Tree' with 'LACK OF PRIVACY' and 'HIGH RATE OF HYGIENE-RELATED WATERBORNE DISEASES' as causes, and 'POOR HEALTH OF IDPS' as an effect.
- Tables:**
 - A table with columns: 'Better access to WATSAN', 'Reduced overcrowding', 'Improved hygiene practices', 'Improved responsiveness of NGOs / local government'.
 - A table with columns: 'OUTCOME', 'IMPROVED LIVING CONDITIONS OF IDPS', 'STRATEGY', 'Narrative', 'Comments'.
 - A table with columns: 'Narrative Summary', 'Objectively Verifiable Indicators', 'Means of Verification', 'Assumptions'.
 - A table with columns: 'Severity of Impact', 'Likelihood', 'Negligible', 'Minor', 'Moderate', 'Major', 'Severe'.
 - A table with columns: 'Water trucking', 'Borehole water', 'Providing and maintaining 5 water tanks'.
- Diagrams:**
 - A 'Helpful to achieving the Outcome' vs 'Harmful to achieving the Outcome' matrix.
 - A 'Project Goal' flowchart showing 'IMPROVED HEALTH OF IDPS' leading to 'REDUCED MORTALITY RATE'.
 - A 'SITUATION' diagram with 'CONTEXT', 'CORE PROBLEM', 'EFFECTS', and 'CAUSES'.
 - A 'BUDGET' diagram with 'PURPOSE', 'STRUCTURE', 'EXPERIENCE', 'TOTAL', 'BY OUTPUT', 'COSTS', 'FUNDING'.
 - A 'MANAGEMENT' diagram with 'ORGANISATION BACKGROUND', 'SITUATION', 'PROJECT DESCRIPTION', 'GOAL', 'OUTCOME', 'HOW'.
 - A 'THICKER CENTRE LINES' diagram with 'CONNECT', 'START', 'USE', 'IMAGE', 'COLOUR'.
 - A 'Clear objective' diagram with 'the message' and 'the'.
 - A 'Correct' diagram with 'the message' and 'the'.
 - A 'Water trucking' table with values: 3,600, 550, 200.
 - A 'TIME' diagram with 'TARGET GROUP' and 'LOCATION'.
 - A 'Correct' diagram with 'the message' and 'the'.
- Templates:** 'Context', 'Project Description', 'Monitoring & Evaluation', 'Budget', 'Project Manager', 'Organizational Background'.

How to Reduce Sentence Length and Improve Clarity

These are the main tools you will need:

1. Reduce unnecessary words
2. Get rid of meaningless phrases
3. Cut out emphasising language
4. Reduce nominalisations
5. Reduce passive voice

We will explain and practice each one in this module. Many of the tasks require you to apply the tools to edit sentences or paragraphs. But writing short sentences is not just an editing task – we aim that by the end of this module you will have acquired the habit of doing these things while drafting, also.

The tasks that follow are not a set of rules to be followed. They illustrate an approach to your writing which you should prefer to use, but adapt to your specific circumstances and to your Subject, Purpose and Reader.

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Tool 1: Reduce Unnecessary Words

Reducing unnecessary words is just one way we can reduce sentence length. In the following examples you will see that in each sentence a group of words is underlined. The sentence is followed with a suggested solution, where the number of words has been reduced without changing the meaning.

Example 1

The meeting between community leaders and project staff afforded us an opportunity to share perspectives on progress.

Edited Version:

The meeting between community leaders and project staff allowed us to share perspectives on progress.

Example 2

As a consequence of the awareness raising activities in the district, the number of girls enrolled at primary level has almost doubled.

Edited Version:

Because of (or, Due to) awareness raising activities in the district, the number of girls enrolled at primary level has almost doubled.

Task

For the following sentences, find a way to express the underlined idea in a more concise way. Our solution follows.

1. It is compulsory to follow the application guidelines carefully.
2. Despite the fact that there was a delay in starting the project, all activities were carried out on time.
3. Frequent disputes over land in conjunction with lack of any trained mediators have contributed to social unrest.
4. On numerous occasions we have had to postpone visits to the project site due to road conditions.
5. We will conduct the health camp from July 21 provided that there are no objections from the local authorities.
6. Municipal elections will be held in the very near future.
7. During the course of my visit to Madras I met with the Assistant Project Manager.
8. Can we meet on Monday for the purposes of reviewing the financial plan?
9. The new Representative will arrive in the month of July.
10. The field staff carried out the Vaccination Programme in a satisfactory manner.
11. It would be appreciated if you could make a presentation at Tuesday's meeting.
12. We are pleased to inform you that your application for the post of National Programme Officer has been successful.

Possible Solution

1. You must follow the application guidelines carefully.
2. Although there was a delay in starting the project, all activities were carried out on time.
3. Frequent disputes over land and lack of any trained mediators have contributed to social unrest.
4. Often we have had to postpone visits to the project site due to road conditions.
5. We will conduct the health camp from July 21 if there are no objections from the local authorities.
6. Municipal elections will be held very soon.
7. While I was in Madras I met the Assistant Project Manager
8. Can we meet on Monday to review the financial plan?
9. The new Representative will arrive in July.
10. The field staff carried out the Vaccination Programme well.
11. Please make a presentation at Tuesday's meeting.
12. Congratulations! You've got the job!

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Tool 2: Get Rid of Meaningless Phrases

A lot of phrases used commonly in writing are often just plain unnecessary wordiness and 'hot air'.

For example:

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your contribution to last month's Rights Based Approach workshop.

Can be more clearly expressed as:

Thank you for your contribution to last month's Rights Based Approach workshop.

Why be so indirect? After all, we are saying something positive.

Task

Each of the sentences below is unnecessarily long. To make them shorter, all you have to do is strike out the unneeded phrases.

1. As far as we are concerned there is no need for any major changes at this point.
2. I am of the opinion that Forest User Groups have made an enormous contribution to raising the living standards of the poorest members of the community.
3. I would like to say that there is a strong need for more transparency at community level on how decisions are reached centrally.
4. It should be understood that strong cultural bias in favour of male children limits the opportunities of girl children in education.
5. I am writing to you to inform you that we will be meeting next Tuesday to discuss the effect of the ongoing conflict on activities in the Far Western Region.
6. We are aware of the fact that few people are prepared to speak openly on sexual health issues.
7. Please be advised that extra security measures will be in force throughout the election period.
8. It has been brought to our attention that rebels are threatening to disrupt daily life in the run-up to local elections.
9. I would like to point out that all visitors have to be escorted to the gate.
10. As you are probably aware, one direct result of vocational training has been reduced migration of adult males to neighbouring districts.

Possible Solution

1. There is no need for any major changes at this point.
2. Forest User Groups have made an enormous contribution to raising the living standards of the poorest members of the community.
3. There is a strong need for more transparency at community level on how decisions are reached centrally.
4. Strong cultural bias in favour of male children limits the opportunities of girl children in education.
5. We will be meeting next Tuesday to discuss the effect of the ongoing conflict on activities in the Far Western Region.
6. Few people are prepared to speak openly on sexual health issues.
7. Extra security measures will be in force throughout the election period.
8. Rebels are threatening to disrupt daily life in the run-up to local elections.
9. All visitors have to be escorted to the gate.
10. One direct result of vocational training has been reduced migration of adult males to neighbouring districts.

While this is a straightforward task, do please be alert that you do not let too many unnecessary phrases creep into your language. Being 'indirect' sometimes has a useful function, but there are more reasons for getting to the main point than for delaying it.

One final word on the last example: 'As you are probably aware'. This, and its troublesome sister 'As you know', are definitely ones to avoid. Certainly, they are useful when we do not want to make our reader feel ignorant, however:

- Mentally, your reader may 'switch off'. After all, if your reader already knows what you are going to write, why bother to pay any attention? Saying 'As you are aware / As you know' is the equivalent of saying 'Please don't pay any attention to what I am going to write now.'
- Your reader may even stop reading altogether.

Tool 3: Easy on the Spices!

Here are a number of frequently used emphasising words that were all taken from two or three concept papers we found on-line. Before we discuss these, underline the ones you use in your own writing.

- *Absolute / absolutely*
- *Actual / Actually*
- *Basic / Basically*
- *Clear / Clearly*
- *Considerable / considerably*
- *Critical*
- *Effective / effectively*
- *Efficient / efficiently*
- *Essential / essentially*
- *Extreme / extremely*
- *Fortunate / fortunately*
- *General / generally*
- *High / highly*
- *Imperative*
- *Important / (most) importantly*
- *Inappropriate / inappropriately*
- *Indeed*
- *Meaningful*
- *Obvious / obviously*
- *Quite*
- *Really*
- *Relatively*
- *Serious*
- *Significant / significantly*
- *Simply*
- *Somewhat*
- *Straightforward*
- *Substantially*
- *Suitable*
- *Typical / typically*
- *Undoubtedly*
- *Very*
- *Virtually*



Discussion

I am sure you already guessed what I am going to say: avoid these words! Avoid doesn't mean, however, that you should never use them. Try avoiding the traffic one day – you will never reach your destination. However, we should always stop and think before we use them.

These words are all 'emphasising words'. That is, they are used to strengthen certain points we are trying to make and draw our reader's attention. Their function is to add power to our writing, to add flavour to our ideas – a bit like adding spices to our food.

So what's your favourite spice? Is everything you recommend 'essential' and should everything you do be 'effective'? Just like throwing hot chilli peppers in every dish we cook, there are several main dangers to overusing this type of word.

Firstly, everything will taste the same. Your writing will lose its impact simply because you are using emphasising words. And just like people who enjoy spicy food stop noticing the taste after a while, your emphasising words will lose their flavour. Your reader will stop noticing them. Just like the boy in the children's tale who cried 'Wolf!' too many times and was gobbled up because the villagers didn't believe him, you may use the word 'important' one time too many and fail to get your reader's attention.

Secondly, a lot of these words are 'hard' words. They are going to increase your Fog Index and cause the reader strain if overused, so here's a good place to get rid of them (the unnecessary ones, at least) or develop your ability to use a short word with similar meaning.

A third reason to be careful is that it can be easy to automatically use these words to add power to our writing without carefully considering if they are appropriate. When we say 'significant' is it really true? This applies even more so with some of the expressions. For example, when someone uses the word 'basically', there's a very good chance that what follows will be far from basic!

So, to conclude this exercise: whenever you find yourself about to use an emphasising word like those in the list, ask yourself:

- Is this really necessary, or am I just trying to make my writing sound more important?
- Is there a shorter alternative?
- Am I using it correctly?
- If I don't use it, will I still be able to make my point?

Tool 4: Avoid Nominalisations

I'm sure some of you are scratching your heads already. So what's a nominalisation? A nominalisation is an abstract noun / idea. (An abstract noun is a word that isn't the name of a physical object but a process, method or feeling.) It's foggy. It's indirect. It presents no memorable visual image to our reader. Nominalisations make our writing lose impact and can actually make our reader fall asleep.

The language of international development can be full of unnecessary nominalisations. Here are a few:

- *Collaboration*
- *Consultation*
- *Discrimination*
- *Evaluation*
- *Facilitation*
- *Implementation*
- *Intervention*
- *Investigation*
- *Mediation*
- *Modification*
- *Participation*
- *Verification*

These nominalisations are much weaker than the verbs they come from. Remember verbs are about action. Abstract nouns are just ideas. If the message our writing is trying to send is that we are action-focused rather than academics just theorising, we should consider changing these to verbs. For example:

- *Collaborate* is more powerful than *Collaboration*
- *Consult* is more powerful than *Consultation*
- *Discriminate* is more powerful than *Discrimination*
- *Evaluate* is more powerful than *Evaluation*
- *Facilitate* is more powerful than *Facilitation*

Let's compare those in some short phrases:

More collaboration is needed

We need to collaborate more ...

Consultation should be held with all stakeholders when developing M&E systems.

All stakeholders should be consulted when ...

Discrimination against low caste groups is very common

Low caste groups are commonly discriminated against ...

The purpose of this report is to present an evaluation of ...

The purpose of this report is to evaluate ...

Facilitation of the meeting was conducted by a representative of the Child Club.

A representative of the Child Club facilitated the meeting.

Shorter words, shorter sentences and more dynamic language: convinced?
Remember, you don't have to change every nominalisation into a verb – in fact, it's probably impossible. But just be alert to where you can make improvements.

Task

Rewrite the sentences, changing the nominalisations back into verbs where you can. Our suggested solution follows.

1. We are in agreement with your suggestion.
2. We are sending one of our field officers to the village to make an assessment of the project's progress.
3. We will make our decision by Friday.
4. I had a discussion about it with the team leader.
5. The performance of the team was very good.

Possible Solution

1. We agree with what you suggested.
2. We are sending one of our field officers to the village to assess project progress.
3. We will decide by Friday.
4. I discussed it with the team leader.
5. The team performed very well.

Task

Let's raise the challenge here. The following text which you saw at the beginning of this module has a Fog Index (FI) of 21. There are 18 words per sentence, so some of the wordiness has to be reduced. Hard words make up 35% of the total, so a lot of those will have to be removed or simplified.

- Remove unnecessary words and phrases
- Get rid of emphasising language
- Change nouns to verbs where you can

Irrigation of Hill Systems

The irrigation of hill systems needs to have a foundation in sustainability and cost-effective engineering. The criteria for selection of systems should be based on the consideration of the prevention of influence of politicians. Investment should concentrate on interventions to overcome key bottlenecks in existing systems. Agreement with farmers with regard to the finances and manpower resources for which there is a requirement for maintenance must be reached and is a necessity at the planning stage to ensure that systems are within farmers' maintenance capacities. Alternatively, a specific budget should be allocated from the outset. Moreover, construction work should be of a high quality that will both last and not require significant quantities of material for maintenance.



Possible Solution

First Edit

Hill system irrigation needs to be based on sustainability and cost-effective engineering. Criteria for selecting systems should be free of political influence. Investment should concentrate on intervening to overcome key blocks in current systems. We need to agree with farmers about finances and necessary labour for maintaining systems at the planning stage to ensure that systems can be maintained by farmers themselves. Alternatively, we should allocate a specific budget from the outset. Construction work should be of a high quality that will last and not need a lot of material for maintenance.

FI = 14

15 words per sentence
21% hard words

We still need to reduce the FI a little more. The average sentence length is acceptable now, but there are still a lot of 'hard' words. It's time to look for any other vocabulary that can be changed from complex to simple.

Second Edit

Hill system irrigation needs to be based on sustainability and cost-effective engineering. Criteria for selecting systems should be free of political influence. Investment should concentrate on acting to remove blocks in current systems. We need to agree with farmers about finances and labour needed for maintaining systems at the planning stage to ensure that they can be maintained by farmers themselves. Alternatively, we should set a specific budget from the start. Construction work should be of a high quality that will last and not need a lot of material for upkeep.

FI = 12

15 words per sentence
15.5% hard words

Tool 5: Prefer Active Verbs

If writing tells others ‘who we are’, what message do we send when we use the passive voice? Passive sentences can make our writing longer, less direct, more complicated and, generally, dull for readers. Active sentences are more dynamic, keep our readers’ attention and are more precise.

Although we won’t go into detail here – any good grammar book will give you a full explanation – let’s just clarify briefly what we mean by active and passive voice.

Verbs in the English language have three features:

- Time (past, present, future)
- Aspect (simple, continuous, perfect)
- Voice (active or passive)

Most sentences in English are in the active voice. This is true of both written and spoken English. You may have heard such statements as ‘we use passive more when we are writing’. This is quite untrue, although perhaps more true last century when more people followed the academic ‘rules’ of writing. We don’t use passive voice much more in writing than in speaking. (The only important difference between writing and speaking is that writing should be correct.) The only rule about using passives is you can use them when you have a good reason.

In grammatical terms, the active voice means that the subject comes before the verb, and acts on an object. Another way to say this is that we put the actor before the action.

Two of our Senior Programme Officers	attended	the micro-finance workshop.
(subject or actor)	(verb or action)	(object)

The passive voice, however, starts with the object and then puts the action before the actor:

The micro-finance workshop	was attended	by two of our Senior Programme Officers.
(object)	(action)	(actor)

In both sentences ‘*to attend*’ is the action, but in the active sentence the actor comes first.

Why Use the Active Voice?

As much as possible, you should try to avoid using passives. You should use the active voice because that is how you speak. It will make your writing more natural and easier to read. Active sentences are also more dynamic. Passive sentences are longer. Active sentences make what we write more concise, and therefore carry greater impact.

It is also possible in many cases to use the passive voice without referring to the actor. For example, it is quite possible simply to say, 'the District Health Office was visited'. By using the passive we can often avoid saying 'who did what'. However, in Professional Writing the reader will usually want to know what was done and also who did it. Using active sentences, therefore, means that we credit our sources of information and stand behind our actions.

Another reason for avoiding the use of passive sentences is that your reader may have difficulty in understanding them. Many readers of English as a foreign language find them difficult to recognise, as the verb has two parts. It is the form of 'to be' which indicates the tense, while the past participle never changes. Very often readers mistake passives for past tenses.

Finally, another important reason for not using passives is that, from our many years of language training experience, we recognise that they are very hard to form correctly and often used when they should not be. When writers start to use passives they often demonstrate clearly their inability to use English competently and confuse their readers.

So when can you Use the Passive?

We sometimes do need to use the passive voice. This is true when:

We want to focus on the object (e.g. *'The proposal has been submitted to the Ministry'* – here the sentence focuses on the proposal. Who wrote it is not important.)

We want to be more diplomatic – and, sometimes, to avoid responsibility! For example, when we say *'Farmers were not consulted when designing the irrigation systems'* we avoid naming the responsible person who failed to do this. (No, we are not suggesting you use the passive voice to 'bury your mistakes' – just when it is diplomatic not to focus unnecessarily on the person.) But the other side of the diplomatic use also leads us to failing to credit people's achievements. While the statement *'The polio vaccination campaign was carried out efficiently'* tells us all about the achievement, what about the people who were responsible? How about saying *'The Delhi team carried out the polio vaccination campaign efficiently'* instead?

Sometimes we just do not know who was responsible, or it is unnecessary to say who did it because this does not provide us with any more useful information. For example, *'Our regional support office was broken into, and \$300 of medical supplies was stolen'*. Here we do not know who broke into the office, and to say 'by thieves' is somewhat pointless.

You should try to use the passive voice rarely and with caution. At the risk of repeating what we said earlier, the passive is not as common as you think. Yes, it is more common in writing, but still should be used with restraint. Overall, there has been a continual shift over the past century from a form of English which is formal and rule-bound to a written language that is more direct and natural. As a general approach, if you would not say it, then you should not write it. If you want your writing to be clear, brief and direct, try to use the active voice wherever you can.

Task

Here's a short exercise to practice getting rid of those unappealing passives. Do this in four steps:

1. Underline all the passive verbs
2. Look again at the reasons for using passive voice
3. Change the ones which should be changed

Finally, apply all the other tools from this module – reducing unnecessary words / phrases, emphasising words and nominalisations.

Although progress has been made during the 1980s and 1990s, severe poverty is still suffered by a significant proportion of the population. Rural areas are inhabited by the majority of the poor. Their lower standard of living is caused by high underemployment, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient income generating assets. The economic position of low-income groups may have been adversely affected by Malawi's economic problems of the 1990s and subsequent economic reform initiatives, although the data is ambiguous and the real picture will only be seen from the 2008 census.



Possible Solution

First, the passive sentences have been underlined:

Although progress has been made during the 1980s and 1990s, severe poverty is still suffered by a significant proportion of the population. Rural areas are inhabited by the majority of the poor. Their lower standard of living is caused by high underemployment, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient income generating assets. The economic position of low-income groups may have been adversely affected by Malawi's economic problems of the 1990s and subsequent economic reform initiatives, although the data is ambiguous and the real picture will only be seen from the 2008 census.

Changing those where we thought it was appropriate, we came up with:

Despite progress during the 1980s and 1990s, a significant proportion of the population still suffers severe poverty. The majority of the poor inhabit rural areas. Their lower standard of living is caused by high underemployment, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient income generating assets. Malawi's economic problems of the 1990s and subsequent economic reform initiatives may have adversely affected the economic position of low-income groups, although the data is ambiguous and we will only see the real picture from the next census.

Note that we only left one sentence in the passive voice. Changing it to active leaves the sentence looking very unnatural, with a long list of causes before we get to the main verb. We will deal with that sentence in the next edit, where we apply all the tools from this module.

Final Edit

Despite progress during the 1980s and 1990s, many people still live in severe poverty. Most of the poor live in rural areas. Three causes of their lower standard of living are high underemployment, limited infrastructure, and not enough income generating assets. Malawi's economic problems of the 1990s and later economic reforms may have worsened the economic status of low-income groups, although the data is unclear and we will only see the real picture from the next census.

Number of words = 77		Number of hard words = 7 x 100		
	+		x	0.4
Number of sentences = 4		Number of words = 77		

FI = 11.32

19.2 words per sentence

9.1% hard words

Endnote

We have reached the end of the module – one of just three which are specifically about 'writing'. Of course, this entire programme is about writing better proposals, but language skills are just a small part of the whole process.

Perhaps you came to this programme thinking that you would learn to 'talk the talk' of development: the long words and sentences that impress so much but tell very little. However, achieving our objectives depends on communicating clearly and efficiently. Many writers fail to keep their sentences short enough or language simple enough for most readers, causing a lot of strain.

Writing clearly isn't about over-simplification. But we hope you've recognised that it's possible to increase the impact of your writing and reach more readers more easily using the tools presented.

The next module looks at the second cornerstone of Professional Writing – Organising your Ideas.

Best of Luck!

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