

Refining your draft

- **Take a break before you start**
Put your first draft to one side and do something else before refining it. This will allow you to look at it more objectively and with a clearer mind
- **Ask for a second opinion**
Ask a colleague or friend whose opinion you respect to look at your draft.
- **Edit on paper, not on the computer screen**
You can scan through text on paper more easily. Double space the text, so you have room to write comments and make alterations.
- **Check for clarity**
Use plain English
- **Check through your draft systematically**
An efficient approach is to refine the text on three levels: paragraphs, sentences and words. Trying to refine the text word by word is very time-consuming and tedious

Constructing effective paragraphs

- Using topic sentences
- Managing paragraph length
- Making transitions between paragraphs
- Using key words
- Laying out the paragraph
- Using bullet point lists

Using topic sentences

A topic sentence summarises a paragraph. It should:

- be the first sentence in the paragraph
- make a single point
- contain no more than about 15 words
- say something new
- connect logically to the sentences before and after it

This paragraph needs a topic sentence -

Some innovative initiatives have emerged in the health sector in African countries over the last five years that attempt to overcome the problems associated with the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in a way that would allow them to more effectively deliver health care on the continent. Some of these initiatives...

A topic sentence for this paragraph could be -

Initiatives in Africa have sought to develop information and communication technologies in health care. Some of these initiatives...

Managing paragraph length

- Try to have at least three paragraphs on any one page
- Vary the length of paragraphs on each page as much as you can
- Aim to include between three and six sentences in most paragraphs
- Use a short paragraph to open and summarise a section
- For maximum impact, you can use a paragraph that contains only one sentence. However, don't overuse this technique – using lots of such paragraphs can look messy.

Making transitions between paragraphs

- Read the topic sentences of your paragraphs in order. They should follow each other logically.
- Use **transitions** (link words or phrases) to show the connections between paragraphs.

A list of common transitional words and phrases is shown below:

for example	thus	in addition to
for instance	next	besides
because	then	in other words
given that	before	again
since	after	in conclusion
on account of	meanwhile	in brief
that is	similarly	to sum up
such as	in the same way	at the same time
so that	on the other hand	later
due to	alternatively	previously
owing to	although	moreover
in order to	however	first, second...
for this reason	by comparison	likewise
as a result	also	in contrast to
therefore	nevertheless	consequently
as well	on the contrary	subsequently

Using key words

In the following passage, the writer has used a small number of key words to join ideas across paragraphs. Can you work out what the key words are?

In Chenda, most of the population are indigenous people, most live in rural areas and most are subsistence farmers. Although many studies have concentrated on crop improvement, very little attention has yet been paid to exploiting indigenous people's own traditional knowledge. One exception is Kesiya, a local youth group.

The project aims to maintain and improve indigenous traditions of rice growing. Kesiya has modified the design of the huud, a traditional tool for levelling rice fields. By levelling the ground a little at a time, rather than all at once, the huud helps to preserve the topsoil.

Answers: indigenous, traditional

Paragraph layout

Depending on the type of article you are writing, you might consider numbering sub-paragraphs.

This paragraph would benefit from the use of sub-paragraphs to make the meaning clearer -

Farmers store seeds in a variety of ways. For almost all of the seeds, adequate sun-drying precedes storage. This destroys any eggs laid on the seed by pests. Pulses like greengram and blackgram are stored in airtight baskets made of palm. Sorghum is stored, along with layers of neem leaves and ash, in baskets. The top is covered with cowdung and mud. Varieties with a hard seed cover – foxtail, millet, for example – are left, unsealed, in the open, with no specific treatment.

Here is one solution:

Farmers store seeds in a variety of ways. For almost all of the seeds, adequate sun-drying precedes storage. This destroys any eggs laid on the seed by pests.

1. Pulses like greengram and blackgram are stored in airtight baskets made of palm.

2. Sorghum is stored, along with layers of neem leaves and ash, in baskets. The top is covered with cowdung and mud.

3. Varieties with a hard seed cover – foxtail, millet, for example – are left, unsealed, in the open, with no specific treatment.

Using bullet point lists

- **Don't make the list too long**

About six items is probably right

- **Use parallel construction**

Write every item in the list to the same pattern.

This might be a single word, phrase, sentence or short paragraph. The items should all have the same grammatical construction.

- **Make full use of the 'platform'**

The platform is the line of text that introduces the list. If you find that you are repeating elements in each item of the list, put the repeated phrase in the platform instead.

- **Make the platform and list work together consistently**

If the platform is an incomplete sentence, each item on the list should be able to fit on the end and make sense.

- **Consider using numbers**

Numbering is better than bullet points when you want to suggest that the points must be followed in a certain order.

- **Punctuate the list coherently**

This example includes a platform that is an incomplete sentence. However, the bullet points don't logically complete the platform. Can you make it work properly?

Proposals will be selected on the basis that the project:

- *Addresses a priority area*
- *Research activities that contribute to fund strategies*
- *The project must include development activities that provide community benefits*

One solution is presented below:

Proposals will be selected on the basis that the project:

- *addresses a priority area*
- *includes research activities that contribute to fund strategies*
- *includes development activities that provide community benefits*

Improving sentence length

Sentences become problematic for two main reasons:

- **The sentence is too long**

If you use too many words to express an idea, the reader will get lost. As a rough guide, aim for an average sentence length of 15 to 20 words.

- **The sentence is poorly constructed**

Sentences are built with phrases: groups of words that express a single element of meaning. If the reader has to hold too many phrases in his/her mind at once, they will struggle. If phrases become over-complicated, reading will become more difficult. As a general guideline, aim to express one idea per sentence. If you *must* put two or more ideas in one sentence, think carefully about how you do it.

Three types of sentence

Simple sentence

Children with learning disabilities are not included in the survey

Compound sentence

*Indigenous scientists have similar concerns to western scientists **but** they differ in their approach*

Complex sentence

*Disability rights groups are also new to this area of research, **although they have been active in their areas for a long time.***

***In developing the proposal,** we met with several community leaders, each of whom expressed interest in collaborating with us.*

You can strengthen weak sentences in four main ways:

- Breaking up long sentences
- Separating ‘multiple’ sentences
- Reducing the length of sentences
- Using strong subjects and verbs

Breaking up sentences

The quickest and simplest way to improve a long sentence is to break it into pieces.

Several members showed interest in undertaking workshops but it was stressed that members or the institutions in which they work should not apply for funds yet.

One possible solution:

Several members showed interest in undertaking workshops. It was stressed, however, that members or the institutions in which they work should not apply for funds yet.

Separating 'multiple' sentences

'Multiple' sentences are sentences joined together without a conjunction.

The different responses were evaluated and two projects chosen as case studies, one of these is a centre for children with physical disabilities and the other a regional CBR programme.

One solution is shown below:

The different responses were evaluated and two projects chosen as case studies. One of these is a centre for children with physical disabilities and the other a regional CBR programme.

Reducing the length of sentences

Any sentence that is more than about 25 words is probably too long. A sentence that is too long usually contains not only too many words but too many ideas.

If CBR programmes are to succeed in rural areas, they must take into account the different ways in which locally-expressed needs may affect the sustainability of the programme and include them in their plans.

How could you reduce the length of this sentence? One solution is presented below:

CBR programmes can succeed in rural areas. To do so, they must take into account the different ways in which locally-expressed needs may affect the sustainability of the programme and include them in their plans.

Using strong subjects and verbs

At the heart of every sentence is a relationship between a **subject** and a **verb**. In clear sentences, the subject and verb are specific and placed at the beginning. In poor sentences, they tend to be general or meaningless and placed in the middle or at the end of the sentence.

It [subject] is considered [verb] likely that the new wheelchair design will be available within two years

To maintain a productive and sustainable CBO, planning and discussion by local leaders [subject] is [verb] essential

Possible solutions:

The new wheelchair design [new subject] will probably be [new verb] available within two years

Local leaders [new subject] must plan and discuss [new verbs] in order to maintain a productive and sustainable CBO

Choosing your words

- Using plain English
- Activating passive verbs
- Using strong, clear, specific words
- Removing unnecessary words
- Using short words

Using plain English

Promoters of plain English use these core guidelines. Remember that they are **not** rules.

- Make your average sentence length 15 to 20 words
- Only use words that your reader is likely to understand
- Prefer active to passive verbs
- Use the strongest, clearest and most specific verbs you can
- Use only as many words as you need
- Say what you mean. Be positive and avoid standard expressions
- Punctuate accurately and simply

Activating passive verbs

Verbs can be either **active** or **passive**. An active verb expresses what the subject does or is. A passive verb expresses what its subject has done to it.

Farmers grow maize on land surrounding their homes

Maize is grown by farmers on land surrounding their homes

To activate a passive verb, ask ‘Who is doing the action?’ Put the ‘operator’ at the beginning of the sentence, as the subject, then ask ‘What is the operator doing?’ Put the verb directly after the subject and construct the rest of the sentence.

All applications are reviewed by the Selection Committee

Who is doing the action? *The Selection Committee*

What is the ‘operator’ doing? *Reviewing*

The Selection Committee reviews all applications

Using strong, clear, specific verbs

Often, the action of sentences is expressed by a noun rather than a verb. This smothers the energy of your ideas and makes your writing dull and lifeless. The technical term for this is ‘nominalisation’ (itself an example of such a noun!), which means turning a verb into a noun.

Here are some examples of nominalisation. Note how, in each case, the key action in the sentence is expressed by a noun. Because the sentence needs a verb, the writer has to use a weak verb that adds little meaning.

*The committee will give the application urgent **consideration***

*The committee **will consider** the application urgently*

*The team has performed an **evaluation** of the project’s success*

*The team **has evaluated** the project’s success*

Removing unnecessary words

Your first draft probably includes some unnecessary words and phrases. Remove them at the editing stage and leave only those words that you need. Here are some examples of words and phrases that add nothing to your meaning:

in the event that	in anticipation of
with reference to	with regard to
each and every	first and foremost
generally speaking	and so on
final outcome	right and proper
initial preparation	the reason for
due to the fact that	to all intents and purposes

How do you tell if a word is necessary?

- Simply remove it. Then see if the sentence still makes sense without it.
- Imagine speaking what you have written. How does it sound? How would it sound to your primary reader?
- Be sincere but don't try too hard to be polite. Too much politeness sounds insincere.

- Avoid referring to the fact that you are writing (eg. avoid saying ‘I am writing about...’, ‘At this point we will consider...’)
- Avoid value-loaded words (several, numerous, extensive, excessively, insufficient, massive, enormous, big, tiny, undersized, minimal, to a considerable extent etc). If you must use words like this, use numbers to show what you mean.
- Avoid cliches (take on board, at the cutting edge, at this point in time, at the end of the day, the bottom line, a key player, state of the art, a whole new ball game, conventional wisdom etc)

1. The time constraint did not allow as detailed interviews as we would have liked to have done with regard to certain projects that seemed particularly innovative.

2. It should be appreciated that there is almost always an element of underestimating of numbers of people affected by learning problems, particularly in those occurrences when individuals do not suffer immediate or visible problems.

Here are some possible solutions:

1. *Time stopped us from interviewing teams from some projects that we thought were particularly innovative.*

2. *The recorded number of people affected by learning problems is almost always an underestimate, particularly when people are not immediately or visibly affected.*

Using short words

Your reader is more likely to understand short than long words.

accordingly	so	establish	set up, create
acknowledge	thank	expenditure	spending
acquaint	tell	purchase	buy
acquire	get, buy	regarding	about
additional	more	remittance	payment
alleviate	reduce	request	ask
concept	idea	require	need
concerning	about	sufficient	enough
consequently	so	supplementary	more
dispatch	send	terminate	end
discontinued	ended	utilise	use
erroneous	wrong		

Don't ignore long words

Your choice of word will depend on more than its length. You will need to know:

- whether the reader knows the word
- the associations that you or your reader might bring to the word
- whether the word has a specialised meaning in the context in which you're writing

