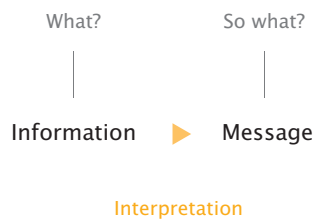


Effective written documents

Jean-luc Doumont



Get your audience to

- pay attention to,
- understand,
- (be able to) act upon

a maximum of messages, given constraints

To optimize communication...

First law

Adapt to your audience

Second law

Maximize the signal-to-noise ratio

Third law

Use effective redundancy

To construct your document...

1

Plan the document

Gather your thoughts

2

Design the document

Define a structure

3

Draft the document

Convey messages

4

Format the document

Reveal the structure

5

Revise the document

Improve iteratively

Planning the document

Find answers to the five planning questions.

Why	Purpose
Who	Audience
What	Content
When	Time constraints
Where	Space constraints

Designing the document

Global component
(on the first page)



Header
Screening

Title
Author(s)

Is this for me?

Foreword
Motivation

Context
Need
Task
Object

Why the need is so pressing or important
Why something needed to be done at all
What was undertaken to address the need
What the present document does or covers

Do I care?

Summary
Outcome

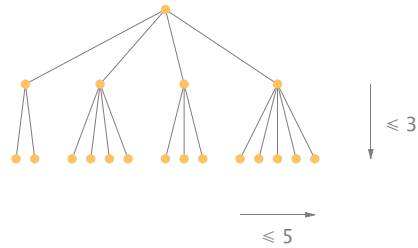
Findings
Conclusion
Perspectives

What the work done yielded or revealed
What the findings mean for the audience
What the future holds, beyond this work

Do I need more?

Drafting the document

Balance your structure across the document

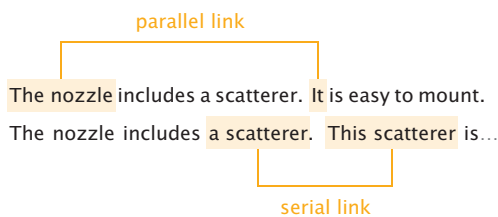


Construct no more than three levels (ideally), typically called chapters, sections, and subsections.

Divide in no more than five branches (ideally), for example, no more than five sections per chapter.

In a table of contents, display two levels only, such as chapters and sections, to allow a global view.

Structure each paragraph in theorem-proof fashion



Convey each message through one paragraph that remains meaningful (to a point) out of context.

First, state your message upfront [*theorem*], ideally in the very first sentence of the paragraph.

Then, develop the message logically [*proof*] into a parallel or serial structure (or a combination).

Construct sentences that reflect your ideas

Also, avoid taxing the readers' short-term memory: keep together what goes together, within and across sentences, and place short items before long ones.

Express each idea by means of one sentence. Complex ideas may well require complex sentences.

Use the idea's topic as grammatical subject and be consistent with this choice across sentences.

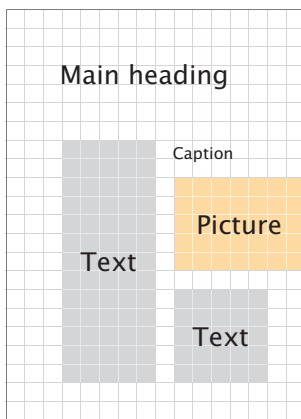
Place your main content in the main clause and any subordinate content in a subordinate clause.

Strive for readability through word choice

Be clear
Be accurate
Be concise

Strive to convey immediate, unambiguous meaning. Tell the truth, the whole truth, nothing but the truth. Be clear and accurate in as few words as possible.

Formatting the document



The format must reveal the structure visually.

Proximity	Close items have related content.
Similarity	Similar items play a similar role.
Prominence	Prominent means more important.

Visual structure is about how the page looks, and not about how individual items on the page look. You can achieve so much with spatial arrangement alone (absolute and relative positions on the page).

Constraints are the key to (visual) harmony, so impose yourself strict constraints (one typeface at one or two sizes set in black, a design grid, etc.), which you can relax (consistently) when necessary.

Revising the document

Be open-minded, not defensive:
listen to what readers have to say,
then decide what requires editing.
If you must argue with someone,
defend your ideas, not your words.

Test	Ask someone else to read it.
Edit	“Think big” ⇒ work on paper.
Proofread	Check one feature at a time.