Shaping Texts for Readers

Part 1: Markers for Readers

The structural contours of reports and other technical documents help readers tune in to the points being made, and these contours are cued at three levels.

1. **Global organization**: the sections of the report, the announcement of organization in the opening material (for the whole report) and the openings of sections (for a particular section), and the markers that point readers to the global organization (table of contents, headings, indices, etc.).

2. **Visual organization**: page (or screen) layout, typographic plan, pictures, graphs, and tables.

3. **Wording of text**: transitional words and phrases, parallelism in lists, and memorable “hooks”.

In the tightest writing, these levels work together.

Global Organization

The structure of the technical report uses a basic “beginning, middle, end” framework. Technical reports begin with an opening, continue with a multilevel discussion, and end with a conclusion. But technical reports are not generally read from beginning to end at one sitting. Instead, different types of readers may begin at any point in the document, or even look through all the illustrations before reading anything. Portions may be read immediately, and then other portions read some weeks later. It takes some time to get used to this idea, and to learn how to write a document that continues to make its points, without being read in its entirety.

The structure of the report accommodates the multiple readings, and it is one of the ways that meaning is shaped for readers who expect to find certain types of information in particular places in the report. Another way that the structure creates its contours is through the purposes it announces for itself at the outset (usually in the summary and introduction).

Typical **Purposes** of Technical Reports:

- **Informing** an interested community (technical, scientific, or popular) of major findings
- **Explaining** how X works or why Y is the case
- **Effecting change** in behavior because of findings
- **Proving** that the findings are valid and significant
- **Entertaining** the public with information about scientific and technical breakthroughs
- **Publicizing** work in order to attract funding

Announcing the writing roles to the readers helps them figure out how to read the document as an introduction to the subject; or as a proposal for action; or as an argument for some procedure, policy, or technical explanation; and so on. That is, the general structure of the report should be shaped to fulfill the announced purposes.

The critical items for the type of report or document being produced need to be clearly marked in the superstructure; that way, the critical elements can be found by thumbing through the
document. For example, a report that proposes action on a project should include the sections
normally found in proposals (introduction, background, proposed plan, schedule, budget,
qualifications of investigators). If readers receive a proposal that does not discuss (or seem to
discuss) the schedule or the budget—two critical items—they may not bother to read it.

“Thumbing through” or glancing at each page to get a sense of what happens in a document, is
important to most readers of technical reports. That is why sections have to be clearly marked,
headings need to make a point, visuals need to work strategically to make the most important
points, and so on. This issue becomes problematic, however, when documents are distributed
electronically: how do you flip through the pages of a 50–screen online book? Because
developers strive to make online texts synonymous with paper texts, casual navigation is an
important problem.

Visual Organization

Why is visual organization important? Several “voices” are active in a textbook, sometimes
issuing, sometimes ruminating, sometimes offering examples, and sometimes presenting
exercises. The textual examples and exercises often are “live” text. If readers think of these
examples as perfect, but then see flaws in the examples, those readers lose faith in the
textbook. By creating a set of typographic conventions, the textbook tries to signal readers that
examples are not intended to be flawless.

Wording of Text

In addition to global and visual methods, you can use special words and phrases that direct
readers’ attention to the points you are emphasizing:

- Transitional words (thus, therefore, however, first, secondly …)
- Conjunctions (and, or, but, if yet, for, so)
- Repetitions
- Pronouns (he, she, it, you, they …)
- Summary words and phrases (finally, in conclusion, in the end …)
- Memorable turns of phrase that repeat

Cues

Cues are words or structures that provide readers with hints about the structure or hierarchy of
a text. Bolded words, for example, typically signal that the words are more important than
unbolded text near them. Likewise, larger fonts usually cue readers that the information is more
important than text in a smaller font.

Cues that Preview

Title
Table of Contents
Abstract
Introduction
Headings
Openings purpose statement
Topic Sentences in paragraphs
Cues in the Visual Organization

Pictures, graphs and tables
Typography: \textit{type face variations underlining}
Numbering and bullets
Layout and visual placement
Use of colors and shading
Boxing
Multiple margins and indentation

Cues that Summarize or Illustrate

Abstracts and executive summaries
Sentence summaries that end paragraphs
Last few sentences of each section
Conclusions

Cues in the Wording of the Text

To show addition

\begin{tabular}{|l|l|}
\hline
again & finally \\
and & lastly \\
and then & moreover \\
besides & nor \\
first, second, etc. & next \\
equally important & too \\
furthermore & what's more \\
\hline
\end{tabular}

To show time

\begin{tabular}{|l|l|}
\hline
after a few hours & formerly \\
afterwards & immediately \\
and then & later \\
at length & next \\
finally & previously \\
first, second, etc. & soon \\
\hline
\end{tabular}

To urge comparison

\begin{tabular}{|l|l|}
\hline
After all & In the Meantime \\
Although & Meanwhile \\
Although it is true & Nevertheless \\
And yet & Nonetheless \\
At the same time & Notwithstanding \\
But & On the contrary \\
Conversely & On the other hand \\
For all that & Simultaneously \\
However & Still \\
In contrast & Yet \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
To show development or summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Giving an example</th>
<th>Emphasizing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>For instance</td>
<td>Obviously</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For example</td>
<td>In fact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To demonstrate</td>
<td>As a matter of fact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To illustrate</td>
<td>Indeed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As an illustration</td>
<td>In any case</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In any event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>that is</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Repeating</th>
<th>Introducing a conclusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In brief</td>
<td>Hence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In short</td>
<td>Therefore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As I have said</td>
<td>Accordingly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In other words</td>
<td>Consequently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>As a result</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summarizing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In brief</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On the whole</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summing up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To conclude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In conclusion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some Audience Precepts to Keep in Mind

It is false to assume that the …

- person addressed is the audience.
- audience is a group of specialists.
- report has a finite period of use.
- writer and the audience will always be available for reference.
- audience is familiar with the assignment.
- audience is involved in daily discussions of the material.
- audience awaits the document.
- audience has time to read the document.

Shaping Texts for Readers

Part 2: Using ISIS as a Tool for Inspecting Text

ISIS (image, structure, information, and style) is a tool for analyzing audience, purpose, and genre. Used systematically, ISIS can help consider the global issue of image first and then move to the more local issues of the text.

To employ ISIS, readers build a grid and list the documents to be critiqued. They then inspect the articles from the outside in—concentrating first on global issues and moving
to more detailed considerations until the analysis takes up word choice. The components of ISIS, described below, help readers locate and articulate differences in purpose and audience in the documents under discussion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Image</th>
<th>Structure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Publication Look</strong></td>
<td><strong>Genre Invoked</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>layout</td>
<td>lab report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>typeface and font size</td>
<td>literature review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>focus</td>
<td>news story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>emphasis</td>
<td>narrative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>feature story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Visuals</strong></td>
<td><strong>Adherence to Genre</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>percentage of space</td>
<td>digressions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>complexity</td>
<td>blending multiple genres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>placement of graphics</td>
<td>breaking conventions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Information</strong></td>
<td><strong>Style</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Abstraction Index</strong></td>
<td><strong>Scientific/Technical Proving</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>percentage of abstract vs. concrete material</td>
<td>qualified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>passive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>impersonal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Technical Index</strong></td>
<td><strong>Explaining</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>percentage of technical and terms explained</td>
<td>interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>examples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>conclusions first</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>impersonal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Density Quotient</strong></td>
<td><strong>Celebrating</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ratio of technical terms to ordinary words</td>
<td>drama</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Focus of Information</strong></td>
<td>active/lively style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>claims</td>
<td>personal point of view</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>data</td>
<td>detective/puzzle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>news hook</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Image**

Image is both a reflection of the organization’s attitude toward all it publishes and a characteristic that writers aim to accommodate. Image, though usually beyond the control of the authors, is known to writers before they decide to write for a particular publication, and they write to accommodate it. The image is seen in the placement of titles and abstracts, the use of headings, the types of visual markers, the illustrations, and the conventions for references. All of these conventions are meant to help documents function for their intended readers. In general, the more markers, white space, and relatively simple...
illustrations, the more open the document’s invitation to a variety of readers and a range of purposes.

**Structure**

Structure is the skeleton of ideas that underlie the text. Often an analysis of the first few paragraphs can reveal this skeleton. The introduction to a scientific argument, for example, forecasts the structure as it identifies the issues, names the prominent positions taken to date, points to a gap, and claims to fill that gap in this piece. The introduction to a popular article in a science magazine, on the other hand, proceeds more flexibly; it may employ a scientific style opening, or a narration, or illustrations.

**Information**

Information is the bulk added to the skeleton; it is the material that varies according to the purpose and the audience. Documents intended for other scientists can assume a common technical vocabulary and thus can pack in more information, providing ever more evidence to prove the scientific claim. Documents intended for the public must explain key terms and concepts necessary for the public to understand the phenomenon described.

**Style**

Style is the overt presentation of the message. In technical writing, for example, "proving" style would be defined as writing that is qualified, matter-of-fact, and concise because as much proof as possible has to be included. The "celebrating" style, by contrast, creates analogies and narratives as the writing attempts to involve readers in perhaps new discoveries.

The opening can identify the general style because writers normally construct the opening of a document with care. Density of terminology, definitions, examples, passive verbs, expletive openings, and use of upbeat statement are all clues to the style being used.

**Style, Audience, and the Arrangement of Information**

Principles of Page Design

Lay out information on the page to make it more accessible to your readers. When you design your resume you group information about yourself into related chunks: education, work experience, activities. You use reverse indenting (hanging indent) to establish levels of importance (i.e., what is indented farther to the right on the page is subordinate information). You use headings and boldface type to highlight points of emphasis. You use white space on the page in conjunction with the dark type, to signal to readers what is important and how they should process the information on the page. See the Designing Web Sites section of PWOnline for a discussion specific to web sites.

The same holds true for reports and memos. Order, arrange, and lay out your text so that the visual design of information immediately helps the reader understand what you are trying to convey.

**Direct vs. Indirect Arrangement of Information**

Compare Versions 1 and 2 of the same problem statement from a recommendation report.

**Version 1: Current Method of Scheduling at Kmart**
The current system involves a three-step process. Managers must sit down to calculate the payroll budget, slot employees into the schedule, and then calculate departmental sales per hour. All the while, managers must make sure to monitor which associates can work during certain times. For a company as large as Kmart, scheduling can become a tedious task. While slotting employees is not so tedious, doing the calculations can often double the scheduling time. It can take a store up to 40 hours every week to schedule its associates. This is valuable time that could be spent helping customers and training employees.

As a result of time-consuming calculations, difficulty in obtaining data, and human error, associate scheduling and sales are often not balanced. Having too many associates scheduled for slow periods and not enough for peak periods creates inefficiency and wastes payroll and sales dollars.

Version 2: Current Method of Scheduling at Kmart

Because of inefficiencies in Kmart’s method of scheduling employees, there are often too many sales associates scheduled for slow periods and not enough for peak periods. This scheduling problem creates inefficiency, wastes payroll, and potentially loses sales dollars.

The current system involves a three-step process. Managers must sit down to calculate the payroll budget, slot employees into the schedule, and then calculate departmental sales per hour. All the while, managers must make sure to monitor which associates can work during certain times. For a company as large as Kmart, scheduling can become a very tedious task. While slotting employees is not so tedious, doing the calculations can often double the time spent scheduling. It can take a store up to 40 hours every week to schedule their associates. This is valuable time that could be spent helping customers and training employees. As a result of time-consuming calculations, difficulty in obtaining data, and human error, associate scheduling and sales are often not balanced.

Version 1 uses an indirect method of identifying the problem. It begins by describing a process. As the description of the process unfolds, the writer gradually makes it clear what the problem is. Version 1 ends by identifying the problem. Version 2 flips the arrangement, stating the problem very directly first, and then providing corroborating detail.

Which version is better? The answer to that question might depend on your audience, and on your relationship with your audience. Version 2 certainly gets the main point across faster and sooner, and in many cases that can be an advantage. Version 2 follows this sequence:

1. main point (statement of problem)
2. supporting detail (description of process; evidence of problem)

The standard advice in professional writing is to follow this formula: make the main point first (perhaps also highlighted in the headings), followed by supporting description and detail. This arrangement suits the busy managerial reader who wants information delivery to be fast, direct, and blunt.

Version 1 builds more slowly to its statement of the problem. This kind of indirect style can frustrate busy readers hunting around for the main point. But in its indirectness, Version 1 seems more cautious. There might well be situations where Version 1 is better. If you are presenting this information to a skeptical reader, someone who doubts that there is a problem, Version 1 might be a better choice. If you were presenting this information to a reader who does not know you very well (and who does not know if your credentials allow you to make these claims), Version 1 might be a better choice because the order of information presents “the facts” first, and builds more slowly to its conclusion. Version 1 might be a better choice for international readers in high-context cultures, who might see the direct style in version 2 as ignorant in its bluntness.

But notice that even Version 1 does not keep the reader in suspense for long. Version 1 is indirect,
but it does stay on track, and it focuses very clearly and coherently on a single main problem.

**Style and Editing**

What are the stylistic characteristics of good professional prose? You want your writing style to be clear, direct, fluent, and readable. You want readers to be able to understand your points without puzzling over your syntax (sentence structure), wondering about your diction (word choice), and tripping over your grammar.

Edit your memos, letters, and reports carefully for each of the stylistic problems noted below. If you know that you are prone to a particular kind of problem, then make sure to edit your documents with an eye specifically toward fixing that problem.

**Use Lists for Information**

Notice how much cleaner a list can be, compared to a paragraph with the same information.

**Paragraph**

This program is only available to companies that have more than 100 but fewer than 500 employees and if no more than 20% of the employees are in nonexempt categories. In addition, they can have employees in up to 10 different locations as long as each location has at least 50 employees.

**List**

This program is available only to companies that meet these criteria:

- You have between 200 and 500 employees.
- No more than 20% of your employees are in nonexempt categories.
- You have no more than 10 different locations.
- Each location has at least 50 employees.

**Parallel Grammatical Structure**

Your writing is easier to follow when you use parallel structure.

**Faulty Parallelism**

My degree, my work experience, and learning to do complicated projects has given me the qualifications necessary to work for your firm.

**Parallel**

My degree, my work experience, and my ability to do complicated projects qualify me to work for your firm.

**Faulty Comparison**

The reason for this is that most small businesses have a lower budget for their managers than do government or industrial managers.

**Parallel Comparison**

The reason for this is that most small businesses have a lower budget for their managers than government or industry has for its managers.

**Subject-Verb Agreement**
Always check your grammar. Remember that singular subjects take singular verbs and plural subjects take plural verbs.

**Subject-Verb Agreement Error**
My hard work and my enthusiasm has made me successful.

**Plural Subject takes a Plural Verb**
My hard work and my enthusiasm have made me successful.

**Make Sure Prose Is Concise**
Wordy, jargon-filled prose is tiresome. Inflated language doesn’t make a writer seem more intelligent—it just gets in the reader’s way.

**Redundant/Verbose**
When a defective product is discovered, a minimal amount of time should occur between locating the defective product and recording the product as defective so that the product can be reordered.

**Concise**
When a defective product is discovered, a record should be made as quickly as possible so that the product can be reordered.

**Verbose Nominalization**
Our work team has at last come to the conclusion that this plan, which we have developed over time, is the best suited plan for our present purpose.

**Concise Prose**
We conclude that this plan is the best.

**Inflated Diction**
Short-term planning is foremost in the prioritization of the planning loop.

**Concise Version**
Short-term planning comes first.

**Inflated**
A characteristic that renders the system development life cycle unpopular with programmers is the fact that it forces heavy documentation at all stages.

**Concise and Direct Version**
Programmers dislike this cycle because it requires frequent documentation.

**Use Specific Headings and Labels**
Labels and headings provide important information for your readers. A specific heading is called a “talking head.”

**Generic Heading**
Re: Recommendation Report

**Specific Heading (talking head)**
Use Active Voice

In general, use the active voice in your writing. It is more direct.

Passive
Completion and return of the attached form will assure participation in the program.

Active
Fill out the attached form and send it in.

Passive
Issuance of a TOP command results in a line zero condition.

Active
If you want to see the beginning of your file, type TOP and press ENTER.

Passive and Inflated
An affirmative decision has been reached by Congress in regard to termination of the program.

Active
Congress decided to terminate the program.

Use Accurate Language

Your readers will be more likely to understand your meaning if you take care to use accurate language.

Inaccurate/Ambiguous
The problem which was initially presented to us is the changing market. (A “changing market” is not a problem.)

Accurate
The problem which was initially presented to us is the company’s inability to remain competitive in a changing market.

Question:

1. Write a one page review on the internet marketing article, addressing multiple issues.
   A. Whether it uses a direct or indirect style of presentation? Justify your answer.
   B. How did the reader use the ISIS Model here? If not used, explain how it can be done?

2. What was your personal approach while reading this article? Design lecture # 4 into a one page guideline for shaping text.