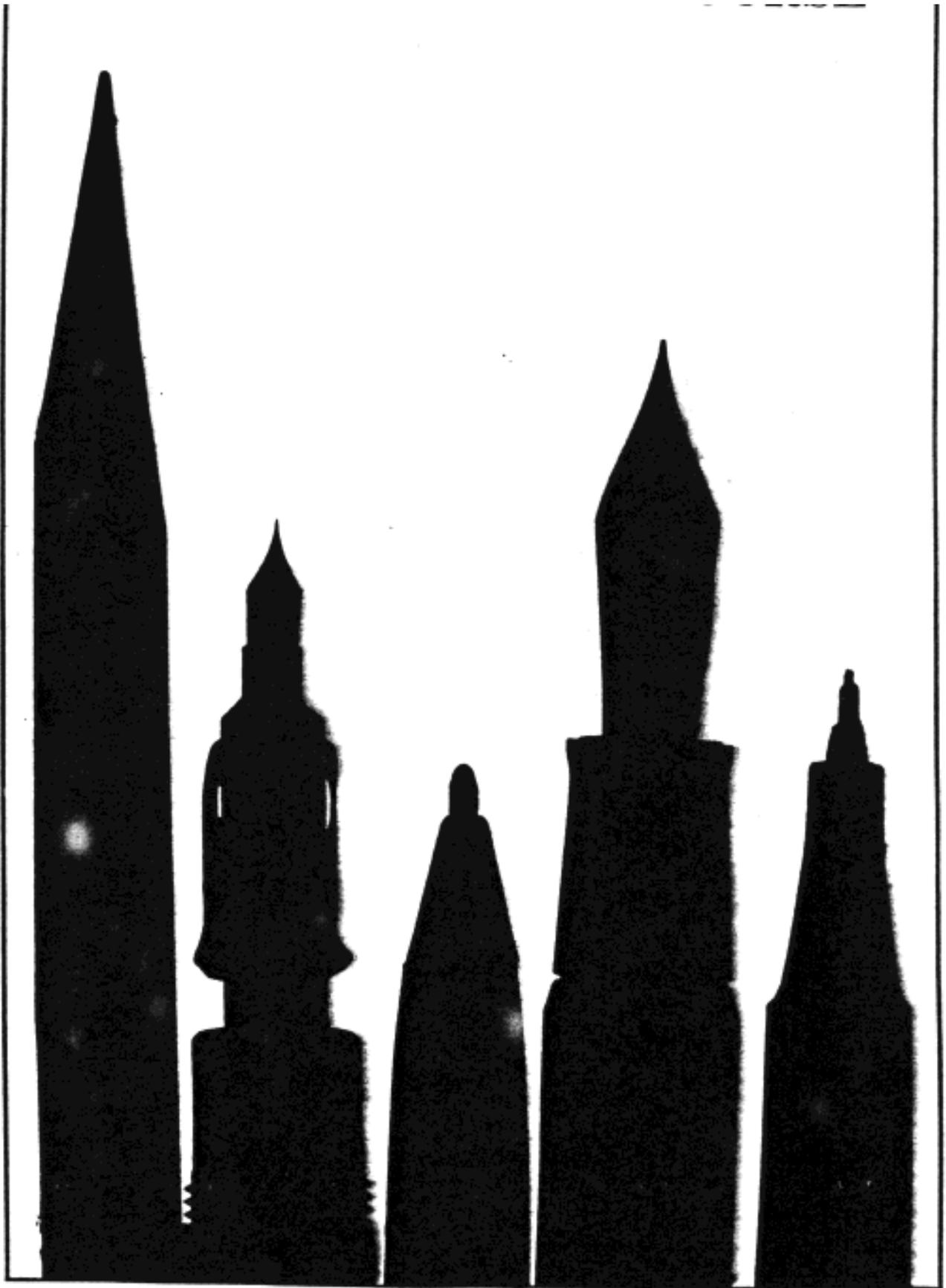


UNITED STATES AIR FORCE ACADEMY  
EXECUTIVE WRITING COURSE



# **ORGANIZED WRITING**

Too many writers start throwing ink before they know what to aim at. When you write, start with a clear sense of your purpose and audience, and arrange your ideas so you get to the point fast. Then write effective paragraphs and sentences.

## **Establish Your Purpose and Audience**

You'll save time and rewrite less if you plan before you pick up a pen or start to dictate. In the planning stage, analyze your audience in light of your purpose by answering these questions:

What is my purpose?

Who are my readers?

What are their interests?

How much do they know already?

What will make it easy for them to understand or act?

You'll discover ideas as you write, but you'll wander less by keeping the answers to these questions in mind.

## **Start Fast, Explain as Necessary, Then Stop**

Timid writing creeps up on the most important information. This kind of writing starts with background, then discussion, and finally the so-what. With luck, the main point follows a sign such as *therefore*, *consequently* or *due to the above*. This slow buildup isn't chaotic; it enacts the way writers inform themselves. But the pattern isn't efficient, either. From the perspective of readers, it's the clue-by-clue pattern of mystery stories.

Your writing should follow the newspaper pattern. Open with the most important information and taper off to the least important. Avoid mere chronology. (Make your bottom line your top line.)

To find what to put first, think about the one sentence you'd keep if you could keep only one. Many letters and memos are simple enough to have such a key sentence, which should appear by the end of the first paragraph. The strongest letter highlights the main point in a one-sentence paragraph at the very beginning. Put requests before justifications, answers before explanations, conclusions before discussions, and summaries before details.

Sometimes, as in a complex proposal or a reply to various questions, you may have many key points. They would overload the first paragraph if you tried to put them all there. In these cases, start with a general statement of purpose.

Here are some good beginnings:

We inspected the Directorate of Administration on 24 January 1994. Its overall performance was satisfactory. Special-interest areas were also satisfactory

We request authorization to hire a full-time clerk typist or reassign one from the word-processing center.

This memorandum summarizes how we are planning the first step toward your goal of reorganizing the Air Force Reserve.

Sgt Frank Martin did a superb job during our recent engine change.

Delay your main point to soften bad news or to introduce a controversial proposal. But don't delay routinely. Readers, like listeners, are put off by people who take forever to get to the point. In most cases, plunge right in.

To end most letters, just stop. When writing to persuade rather than just to inform, end strongly with a forecast, appeal, or implication that activates the reader to do something. When feelings are involved, exit gracefully—with an expression of good will. When in doubt, offer your help or the name of a contact.

### **Use More Headings**

Any document longer than three pages probably needs headings, so that readers can follow at a glance. Even a one-page letter can benefit from headings when topics vary widely. Be informative; avoid relying on headings that use one or two vague words.

For: Procedures

Try: How to Complete DOD Form 76

For: Use of Contractors

Try: How Much Contractors May Charge

If you want the scoop, then group, otherwise it's poop (Poorly Organized Offers Perplexity)

## Write Effective Paragraphs

Keep paragraphs short. Cover one topic completely before starting another, and let a topic run for several paragraphs if necessary. But keep each paragraph down to roughly four or five sentences. Divide long paragraphs where your thinking takes a turn.

Now and then use a one-sentence paragraph to highlight an important idea, such as the main point of a letter.

Use more lists. Look for opportunities to divide paragraphs into lists. This technique is especially important for staff papers and directives. As you can see, lists

- Add white space for easy reading,

- Show levels of importance,

- Simplify--

  - Initial review,

  - Later revision,

Just remember to avoid dividing a paragraph into more than the three levels shown here. If you use too many lists within lists, readers will lose sight of the overall structure.

Take advantage of topic sentences. A paragraph may need a topic sentence—a generalization explained by the rest of the paragraph. Then again, it may not. The decision to use a topic sentence is among a writer's many judgment calls. A short paragraph announcing the time, place, and agenda of a meeting might begin with, "Here are details about the meeting." Yet such a topic sentence is probably unnecessary, for readers can follow the writer's thinking without it.

But suppose you're writing a report on ways to protect a particular military facility from attack. Your ideas are complex and the evidence needed to make them clear and convincing is considerable. So your paragraphs are likely to run longer and use more topic sentences than is the case in letters. Here's a model:

Because so much of the complex borders the river, its waterfront is especially vulnerable to attack. The naval station and the shipyard next to it have 1.5 miles of waterfront on the river's north bank. Together they have 13 dry docks and piers. Two piers are used to load fuel. Most of the piers extend to within 100 yards of the center of the river's main ship channel, and the river itself is only 900 yards at its widest.

The first sentence of the sample gives the paragraph a bull's eye. Because we know early where the facts are headed, the paragraph inspires confidence. A lesser writer might have left out the topic sentence or put it elsewhere in the paragraph or claimed more than the facts support. Be

alert to the advantages of topic sentences, for they help shape masses of information. Without them, some paragraphs make readers shrug and say, "So?"

## Write Disciplined Sentences

So far we've talked about organizing letters and paragraphs so they call attention to important ideas. Now here are some important ways to avoid sentences that mumble: subordinate minor ideas, use more parallelism, place ideas deliberately, and try some mini-sentences.

Subordinate minor ideas. Besides clarifying the relationship between ideas, subordination prevents overusing and, the weakest of all, conjunctions.

Use more parallelism. Look for opportunities to arrange two or more equally important ideas so they look equal. Parallelism saves words, clarifies ideas, and provides balance. The first words of the series should use the same part of speech (verbs in the previous sentence).

For: The symposium is a forum for the dissemination of information and is not intended to establish standards.

Try: The symposium is a forum for sharing information, not for setting standards.

For: Effective 1 October, addressees will be required to utilize the cost accounts contained in the attachment. Addressees will cease reporting against cost accounts 1060, 2137, and 2340.

Try: On 1 October, start using the cost accounts in the attachment and stop using cost accounts 1060, 2137, and 2340.

Place ideas deliberately. Start and finish a sentence any way you like, but keep in mind that ideas gain emphasis when they appear at either end. To mute an idea, put it in the middle.

Maintenance time may have to increase if more structural problems develop. (mutes increased time)

If more structural problems develop, maintenance time may have to increase. (stresses increased time)

For: I would like to congratulate you on your selection as our Employee of the Month for June.

Try: Congratulations on your selection as our June Employee of the Month.

Try some mini-sentences. An occasional sentence of six words or less slows down readers and emphasizes ideas. The principle is illustrated in this next example from a general's memo to his staff.

I can get more information from the staff if each of you gives me less. Here's why. In a week, about 110 staff actions show up in my in-box. I could handle these in a week if all I did was work the in-box. Yet about 70% of my time in the headquarters goes not to the in-box but to briefings. I could handle that dilemma, too—by listening to briefings and thinking about staff papers at the same time. I don't.

Look for opportunities in your own writing to use mini-sentences. They'll give it variety.

For: I apologize for not answering your letter sooner, but an extended TDY kept me away from my desk for three weeks.

Try: I should have answered your letter sooner. I apologize. An extended TDY kept me away from my desk for three weeks.