



**National Legislative Program Evaluation Society
Evaluator 101 Training Series
Session 4: Clearly Communicating Findings
Thursday, April 15, 2021**

Good Grammar

Readability

Active vs. Passive Voice

Try to use active voice as much as possible; think about who is doing the acting in the sentence.

EXAMPLE: “The General Assembly passed legislation” rather than “Legislation was passed.”

Sometimes it is necessary to use the passive voice, such as when the doer of the action is unknown or unimportant or when you want to emphasize the action rather than the doer.

EXAMPLE: Systematic budget data were kept on projects.

Parallel Structure

Use parallel structure for bulleted lists. E.g., if one bullet begins with a verb in the present tense, all bullets in that list should begin with a verb in the present tense.

EXAMPLE: The General Assembly should

- transfer two attorneys and four administrative staff from DES to the Board of Review;
- modify statute to direct the Board to develop policies, procedures, and standards; and
- direct DES to work with the Board to track and collect necessary data.

Acronyms

Use acronyms sparingly! A good rule of thumb is to only use acronyms that are commonly known to your audience, which is legislators (e.g., state departments). Write out the words the first time the acronym appears in a section, followed by the acronym in parentheses. After the first time, you can use the acronym throughout the section. Don't include the acronym if you are not actually using it later in the text.

CORRECT: The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) is the single state agency responsible for the Medicaid program and must operate within federal guidelines. DHHS has broad flexibility to manage the Medicaid program.

The and That

Often, when “that” is used in a sentence, the sentence can be re-worded to make it more concise.

INCORRECT: “...indicating that more progress needs to be made.”

CORRECT: “...indicating more progress needs to be made.”

Limit the use of “the” when possible.

INCORRECT: The Division asked the representatives from DHHS about the issue of coordination.

CORRECT: The Division asked representatives from DHHS about the issue of coordination.

Mechanics

Subject-Verb Agreement

The subject and verb in a sentence must agree in number, whether singular or plural. The rule is simple: singular subject, singular verb; plural subject, plural verb. Most problems involve words that fall between the subject and the verb, thus separating the subject and verb and allowing for confusion.

CORRECT: The common goal of the two programs within the agency, which was funded at Fiscal Year 1996–97 levels, was reached within six months.

INCORRECT: The common goal of the two programs within the agency, which was funded at Fiscal Year 1996–97 levels, were reached within six months.

Subordinate Conjunctions

Use “since” when referring to time; use “because” when giving a reason.

CORRECT: The unified court system in North Carolina has been in place since the late 1960s.

INCORRECT: Furthermore, nursing facilities may not be appropriate for non-elderly Medicaid recipients since they cater to the elderly.

Use “while” when referring to time; use “whereas” when making a comparison.

CORRECT: Four of the six entities do not restrict which communities may apply for funds, whereas the remaining two focus on economically distressed areas.

CORRECT: MHDDSAS scrambled to come to grips with and resolve the situation, while members of the General Assembly asked for greater accountability.

Split Infinitives

Avoid using split infinitives, which occur when a word or phrase, usually an adverb, comes between “to” and a verb.

CORRECT: DMV also needs to ensure results by setting program goals.

INCORRECT: DMV needs to also ensure results by setting program goals.

Who vs. That vs. Which

“Who” refers to people. “That” and “Which” refer to things and groups of people. Use “that” in a defining clause of a sentence; use “which” in a non-defining clause, and set off the clause with a comma.

EXAMPLES: Most occupational licensing boards have five members who are county residents. Occupational licensing agencies are state agencies that regulate the licensure of persons within a particular profession or occupation. Occupational licensing agencies, which also are referred to as OLAs, perform a variety of duties regarding oversight of licensing boards.

Punctuation

Commas

Use a comma before conjunctions that link two or more independent clauses, each of which can stand as a complete sentence.

EXAMPLE: The bill was passed on March 14, but the vote was close.

Do not use a comma when a coordinating conjunction links two words or dependent clauses. Do not set off any clause following a coordinating conjunction if it cannot stand on its own as a sentence.

INCORRECT: The parameters of the study were not well defined, and remained vague.

When using a phrase that cannot stand alone, use a comma to set it off when it introduces an independent clause.

EXAMPLE: Beginning in October, the agency will monitor the program.

When three or more elements (words, phrases, or clauses) are alike in form and importance, set them off with commas.

EXAMPLE: Legislators, aides, and lobbyists congregated in the rotunda for the ceremony.

Colons

Do use a colon with the terms “the following” or “as follows” if followed immediately by the items.

Do NOT use a colon with the words “such as” and “including” when they precede a number of items. This is true whether you are writing a short sentence in one block of type or presenting a sentence with a list of bulleted items.

INCORRECT: Profitable boards used a variety of techniques such as: printing revenue distribution information on bags, distributing, and displaying revenue distribution information.

CORRECT: Theft inspectors have the following duties: conducting criminal, civil, and administrative investigations; investigating odometer fraud; and conducting other special investigations.

Hyphens, En Dashes, and Em Dashes

Hyphen – Connects two or more words when they come before a noun they modify and act as a single idea.

EXAMPLES: “an off-campus apartment” or “state-of-the-art design”

En Dash – Connects values that are in a range or are related. Used when expressing a “to” relationship.

EXAMPLE: National efforts to develop health improvement plans for states for the period 2020–2030 are expected to begin in 2018.

Em Dash – A stand-in for a comma or parentheses that allows an additional thought or explanation to be added within a sentence.

EXAMPLE: Allotment transfers—a system feature intended to promote LEA flexibility—hinder accountability.

Correct Terms

“Percent” vs. “Percentage”

“Percentage” is used either for generalizations or for reporting trends in specific amounts. A “percent” is always a specific number, amount, or quantity, such as 5 percent or 100%.

EXAMPLE: The 2019 Appropriations Act reduced the percentage of taxes collected on gross property insurance.

Fewer vs. Less

Use “fewer” when referring to items that can be counted.

EXAMPLE: The allotment for children with disabilities fails to observe student population differences and directs disproportionately fewer resources to local education agencies.

Use “less” when referring to nouns that are not counted like “time” or “money.”

EXAMPLE: The heavy licensure workload required licensure staff to spend less time on the regulatory review of license applications.

Commonly Misused Words

- “then” describes time; “than” makes a comparison
- “affect” is a verb; “effect” is a noun
- “impact” is a noun (not a verb)
- “indicated” suggests the condition or situation is not definitive; if someone or a report said it, use “stated” or “found”
- “ensure” is something you do to guarantee a condition; “assure” is something you do to remove doubt; “insure” is reserved for limiting financial liability