

Script – Good Writing Matters

Slide 1 - Welcome to this presentation, Good Writing Matters. I'm Audrey Shifflett with the Grants Program at the South Carolina Department of Education. This presentation is designed to help you as you respond to a funding opportunity...

Slide 2 - ... either a grant or subgrant opportunity ...

Slide 3 - ...offered by our agency as presented on our Grants Opportunities website. This presentation is designed to provide guidance as you revise your application narrative.

Slide 4 - I will discuss the characteristic of good writing to illustrate why good writing matters, especially when you're competing for grant funding. By the end of this presentation, you will understand some writing tips and how to use a few simple strategies to help you proofread your writing so that you can make improvements for clearer communication. To begin, let's look at some characteristics of good writing.

Slide 5 - Almost all writers will agree that good writing is organized so that it flows from one idea to the next, it is focused on communicating a message, it is clear and concise, it uses energetic and vivid language, and it is correct. Let's look at each of these elements of good writing.

Slide 6 – When you're writing a grant application, organization is very important. One way to organize your application narrative is to follow the structure provided in the request for proposals or the application instructions. This means using the titles and subtitles in the instructions as the headings and subheadings for your narrative and using them in the order in which they are presented in the instructions. Under each of these headings, try to begin that section with a one-sentence response or answer to the instructions or directions for that section. Keep your paragraphs short and focus them on one point and begin each paragraph with a topic sentence.

Slide 7 - Recall from your high school writing or college composition class that a topic sentence is a sentence that expresses the main idea of the paragraph in which it occurs. Essentially, a topic sentence tells the reader what the rest of the paragraph is about, so it is a useful tool for organizing paragraphs in your response to grant application instructions. A good practice is to draft a topic sentence about what you want to present in the paragraph. Then, as you're revising your narrative, go back and revise the topic sentence to make sure that it accurately reflects the full paragraph.

Slide 8 - To help you focus your writing, be sure that you're addressing the items presented in the RFP or application instructions in the order in which they're presented. Write all of the information that you need to address the item or answer the question fully before you begin to revise and edit. Focus your paragraphs on communicating one point and try to keep your paragraphs short. And always try to get right to the point; this may mean, in some instances, that you're revising a paragraph multiple times. And that's OK; your goal is clear communication. And regarding clear communication...

Slide 9 - ...good writing is clear and concise. So, if you've written everything down in response to an instruction as I just recommended, then your task when you revise is to focus on clarity. Clear writing is very important. This slide presents strategies for revising both for clarity and for conciseness. For example, be mindful of the words you choose. Use familiar words that are understandable instead of jargon or words that only someone in your specialized field will understand. Also, be specific and precise with your word choices. And when you look at the words you're using, you'll want to revise and remove words that don't really say anything but are just taking up space. We'll look at examples of those in a minute, but first let's look at...

Slide 10 - ...energetic and vivid language, which is what results when you use active verbs and write in active, rather than passive voice. Again, when you're revising your narrative and looking at the words you're using, be sure to examine sentences with "is" and "was" to see if you can revise them with more active verbs. And because you're competing for funding, you want to write about what you will do with the grant award, not what you might do or could do. Let's look at some examples of revising weak verb phrases into strong, active verbs...

Slide 11 - For example, compare the weak verbs to the left with the stronger verbs to the right. Notice that the active verbs are shorter, clearer, and more interesting; in this way, they're a better choice than the wordier verb phrases. This is part of the revising and editing process – to edit out wordiness and revise for clarity. Also, keep in mind that repeating the same verb again and again makes the writing boring and unimaginative. You will not want to bore your grant reader.

Slide 12 - Another key to vivid, more energetic writing is to use active voice instead of passive voice. Active voice in a sentence means that the subject performs the action that the verb indicates. It's easier to explain through examples of revisions like the one on this slide. In the first sentence, the subject "training opportunities" is not taking any action; instead, the partners will be doing the action, but they're not mentioned until the end of the sentence. This sentence is in passive voice. The subject "training opportunities" is being acted upon by the verb "will be provided." Notice that in reading this sentence, you have to backtrack as a reader to get what the partners will do. The revised example moves the partners into the subject position in the sentence, and the verb is revised to be more active: "In years two through five, the partners will provide additional training opportunities." Notice that there is no need to re-read or backtrack through this sentence to understand it.

Slide 13 - Here are a few more examples of revising sentences that are in passive voice to make them active. These come from revisions to actual grant application narratives. [Pause] Notice that the revised active voice sentences are shorter than their passive voice counterparts. This can be important if you have a character limit or page limit for your narrative.

Slide 14 - Above all, good writing is correct. While "little" errors, like a typo, a subject-verb disagreement, an apostrophe in the wrong place, may not wreck clarity, they certainly undermine your credibility as a writer. They also undermine the importance of the message being conveyed. In the case of a grant application, errors can give the wrong impression to a reviewer and make them think that you don't care enough to get things right or ensure that things are correct. Take the time to proofread carefully and look for errors.

Slide 15 - There are a few common errors you can look out for. With dates, when the month, day, and year are all present, put a comma after the day. And if the full date is within a sentence, but not at the end of the sentence, put a comma after the year.

The abbreviation e.g. is short for the Latin phrase *exempli gratia* and means “for the sake of example” or simply, “for example.” This term is used to introduce examples of something that has already been stated; for example, “I like citrus fruits, e.g., oranges, lemons, and limes. This is different from the abbreviation i.e., which is short for the Latin phrase *id est*, which means “that is,” or “in other words.” I.e., is used to introduce a rephrasing or elaboration on something that has already been stated; for example, “I like citrus fruits, i.e., the juicy, edible fruits with leathery, aromatic rinds.”

Slide 16 - Other common errors involve periods and apostrophes. When you reference the time of day, be sure to use periods to separate the a and m in a.m., or the p and m in p.m. The apostrophe is used to indicate contractions, like it’s for it is, can’t for can not, and also to indicate a possessive when something belongs to someone. Take time to ensure that you are using the apostrophe correctly.

Slide 17 - Overall, good writing is rewriting – starting with a draft and rewriting it and revising it to create clear communication. As you revise, you’ll want to remove instances where you’ve restated information or been redundant. As I mentioned earlier, you’ll want to edit out words that do not really say anything. And you’ll want to be sure that you’re using words such as titles or terms consistently – and likewise, if you’re using an acronym, you’ll want to use it consistently throughout your narrative. Also, when you’re revising, be sure that important information comes at the beginning of a paragraph and not at the end. If you find instances where you have important information at the end of a paragraph, revise that paragraph so that the important information comes first or start another paragraph with the important information at the beginning. Sometimes grant reviewers skim and you don’t want them to miss something because it came at the end of a paragraph rather than at the beginning.

Slide 18 - Here are examples of revisions for clarity, where words that say nothing or are not needed have been removed. Also, we use thousands of redundant expressions in everyday speech, but unlike a speaker, a writer has time to be precise. For example, a speaker may say *completely destroyed*, but a writer should just write “destroyed” to avoid being redundant.

Slide 19 - Here are additional examples of revisions for clarity. The first example points out the need to be consistent. Once you have defined an acronym in a document, be sure to use it. And be sure you’re using the acronym consistently and correctly. Sometimes when you’re drafting and typing quickly, you may transpose the letters of an acronym accidentally, so you’ll want to look out for such errors when you proofread your application narrative.

Slide 20 – And now is a good time to remind you: do not rely on spell check alone. *Always* proofread your writing carefully. Here’s why, explained vividly in this excerpt from the federal government’s recommended resource, Plain Language: A Handbook for Writers in the U.S. Federal Government.

And if you’ve read the first sentence on this slide more than once to find the error, then take special precautions with your own writing. Ask a colleague to help you proofread your

narrative, but do not rely solely on someone else to proofread for you. You should take authority as the writer to proofread and if necessary, correct your writing.

Also, keep in mind that proofreading takes time, concentration, and attention. Do not wait until the last minute to proofread your application, because you *will miss* something.

Slide 21 - Here are two strategies used by professional proofreaders. The first is to enlarge the type or font size. Often you will see mistakes if they are larger. Of course, when you finish proofreading, remember to return the font to the correct size for the narrative. The second strategy is to read your writing out loud. Often you will hear mistakes you didn't see. Another strategy is to mindfully read, paying attention to names, dates, numbers, titles, and addresses as these are things that can cause problems if they are not correct.

Slide 22 - Before you submit your grant application, be sure to review both the format and content of your narrative and your application carefully to be sure that you're including everything that is required and that your narrative communicates everything you intended. Always do a spell check and a grammar check. But as you've seen from the previous slides, do not rely solely on them.

Slide 23 - We encourage you to take these action items to heart: develop your own writing skills because they will enhance your professional acumen. If there is someone in your office or your organization who is a good writer or a good proofreader, enlist their help—but also support them to help you. This may mean taking on a task to help them and free up their time for helping you with writing or proofreading. Use the resources that are available to help you improve your skills such as tools available through Google, YouTube, and Microsoft Word. And pay attention to details, which means slow down. When you go fast, you miss things; it's inevitable.

Slide 24 - Resources on good writing abound so I'm presenting just a selection here. The internet puts a wealth of resources at your fingertips so explore these and others. [Pause]

Slide 25 - I hope this information helps you as you revise your grant application narrative. I'm Audrey Shifflett, and this presentation is a production of the Grants Program at the South Carolina Department of Education. Visit our website for more information.