

The opinions expressed are solely my own and are not necessarily shared by the Department of Physics, the College of Engineering, or the University of Illinois. But they should be.

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**One thing I've learned in physics,  
you have to satisfy both the theorists  
and the experimentalists...**



**...so this talk has two parts:**

- I. a theory of technical writing**
- II. the nuts and bolts of first putting  
together a scientific paper**

**First step, throw out most of what  
you've been taught about "writing"**

**Scientific writing ain't Shakespeare**

**Your purpose is to inform, educate,  
and persuade—not to entertain**

**Write with concrete, quantitative  
nouns and strong verbs, not  
adjectives and adverbs**

**Use the simplest word**

**Write short sentences and  
control your modifiers**

*No literary flourishes*



Scientific writing is fundamentally different from other kinds of writing—in tone, in style, in content, in organization. Good scientific writing is concise, direct, concrete, and unambiguous. The harder the concepts, the simpler and more transparent the writing should be.

## **Technical writing is a *craft*, not an art**

**Like any other craft,  
you have to learn  
the techniques**

**You have to get feed-  
back from experts**

**The same skills that  
make you a good scientist or engineer will  
make you a good technical writer**

- logic
- precision
- the ability to sort out what's important



Learning to write in the style described here will not only make you a better writer, it will also make you a better engineer. It will force you to see holes in your thinking, areas where you've made assumptions, places where you should add references, or data, or further analysis.

## **Successful science writing is**

**Logically constructed—think “linear”**

**Clearly and succinctly expressed**

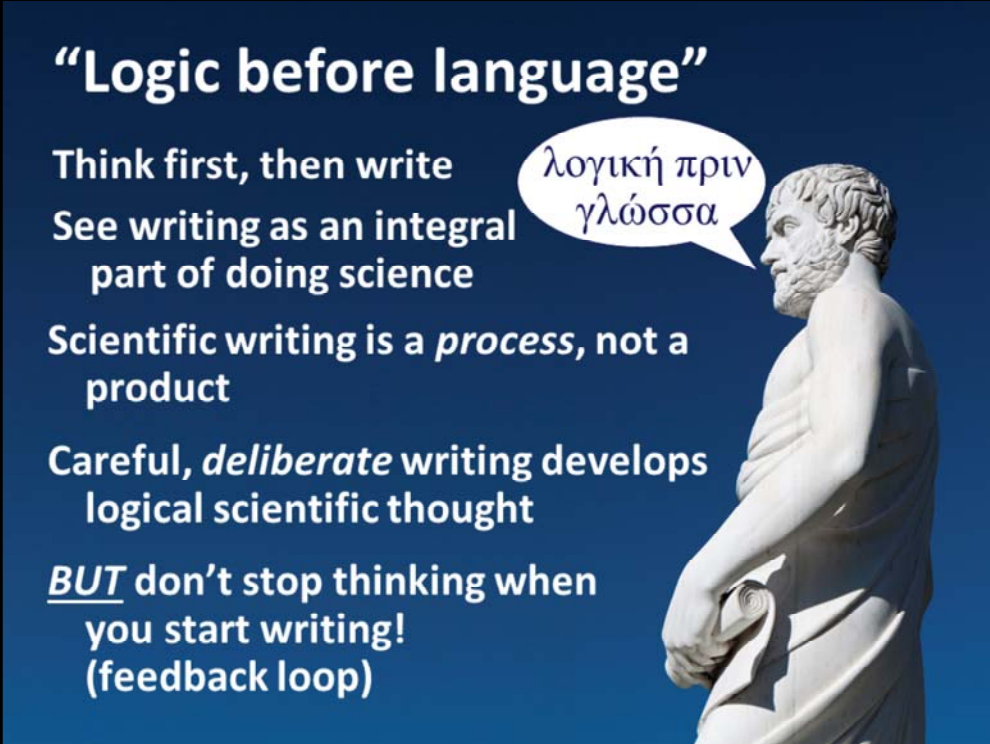
**Precisely and simply worded**

**Written to inform and persuade**

**Written with the *reader*  
in mind**



The first step in *any* writing project should be an analysis of the audience for whom the document is intended.



**“Logic before language”**

Think first, then write

See writing as an integral part of doing science

Scientific writing is a *process*, not a product

Careful, *deliberate* writing develops logical scientific thought

**BUT don't stop thinking when you start writing! (feedback loop)**

λογική πριν γλώσσα

logikí prin glóssa (loyeekee prin glōssuh)

Too often, scientists and engineers think of doing research and writing as discrete tasks that have little to do with one another. Today, I'd like you to think of them as a feedback loop, where progress in one informs and drives progress in the other.

From Peter Woodford: “Somehow the discipline of crystallizing a thought into a grammatical sentence with a beginning, a middle, and an end clarifies, sharpens, and delimits the thought.



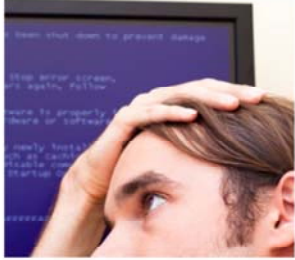
**As you first start thinking about your paper, answer four questions:**



- 1. What is my *purpose* in writing this document? What's my ultimate goal?**
- 2. Who is going to read it? What do they already know, and what am I going to have to explain? What do *they* want to get out of this paper?**
- 3. What *one thing* do I want the reader to remember? What's the "take-away" message?**
- 4. What are my space/time/page constraints?**

At this stage of your writing project, think about what you want to convey to your audience. What are the important points that you want them to understand and remember?

**Novice writers use the “core dump” method —inefficient and produces poor results**



**Always start from a plan—always!**

- 1. Promotes thinking**
- 2. Easiest way to get started if you don't like to write**
- 3. Gives you control over length and focus**
- 4. Increases the logical persuasiveness\* and coherence of your final paper (or talk)**

\*“Persuasion in Technical Communications,”  
<https://courses.physics.illinois.edu/PHYS496/sp2015/Lectures/Persuasion.pdf>

An outline is a tool that enables you to look systematically at how a paper or presentation is organized. Learning to write from an outline is one of the easiest ways to (1) get started and (2) improve the content and coherence of your scientific writing.

Today, we'll look at how to use outlines to get started on any writing project.



**Use the “reservoir” system\***

**Create separate reservoirs for**

- Background**
- Materials & Methods**
- Results**
- Discussion**
- Refs**

**Concentrate on facts, ideas,  
logical connections**

**Add to your reservoirs as you take  
and analyze data**

**Experiment with different reservoir methods  
to find what works best for you**

\*Scientific Writing for Graduate Students, ed. F. Peter Woodford (Rockefeller University Press, 1968).

The idea of creating separate holding pens for various parts of a technical document was first articulated, as far as I know, by F. Peter Woodford in *Scientific Writing for Graduate Students: A CBE Manual* (Rockefeller University Press, New York, 1968). Although targeted to graduate students in the life sciences and dated in language (not *all* scientists are men!), the fundamentals of Woodford’s approach remain sound.

## Now you're ready to start building a coherent narrative

In the next steps,  
we'll take the  
**content** of our  
reservoirs and  
make a **plan** to  
guide the building  
of our paper



**RULE #1: Never write *anything* without first writing a synopsis and an outline!**

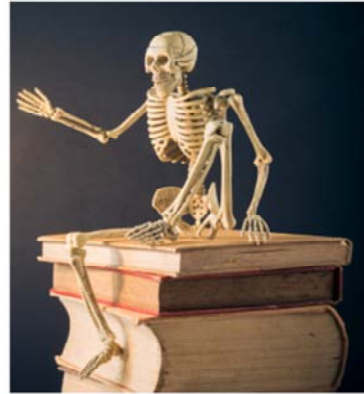
**“If you don’t know where you are going, you might wind up someplace else.”**

**—Yogi Berra**



## Start out with a five-sentence synopsis

1. What was the goal?
2. How does it fit into the context of prior work?
3. What method(s) did you use?
4. What were your results?
5. What do they mean?  
What did you learn?



**Answer each question in one coherent sentence**

**The synopsis is the “skeleton” for your paper**

Writing a synopsis is a good way to get started because it defines the content and scope of your paper.

Think of the synopsis as the skeleton—it gives the whole paper its shape and supports your evidence and arguments.

## Next, make an outline to avoid an amateur's mistakes



Using chronological instead of analytical order

Devoting the most ink to the parts that took the longest to do

Including superfluous or discursive information

Omitting mention of assumptions

Failing to provide logical transitions

**Each sentence in your synopsis becomes a section of your outline**

Some beginning authors think that if they spent 90 percent of their time on some aspect of the experiment, they should devote 90 percent of the paper to that topic., or they should present a chronological history of the experiment.

Readers don't want to know all the things that went wrong, all the components that failed, all the adjustments that had to be made to get the data. They want to know what worked, how it worked, what the results are, and what you think they mean.

Remember, a journal is an archive of your results and how you got them so others can reproduce them, not a cemetery where you bury all your mistakes.

## Your outline should accommodate the standard model of science papers

- I. Background and Introduction
- II. Methods/Procedure
- III. Results
- IV. Discussion
- V. Conclusions
- VI. Acknowledgments
- VII. References

**Make outlines for §I. through §V.**

Formal physics papers are *always* presented in this order, but they're not written in this order.

No experienced researcher that I know starts with the title and writes a paper sequentially. Nobody.

Most scientists and engineers usually write papers in the following order:

1. Methods
2. Results
3. Discussion
4. Conclusions
5. Background and Introduction
6. Acknowledgments
7. References
8. Abstract & Final Title

You *must* have an outline to keep a coherent narrative flow as you write the separate sections of a paper.



## **Writers use two kinds of outlines— “topic” and “sentence”**

### **Topic outlines use short phrases**

- **CO<sub>2</sub> underground storage—motivation**
- **Advantages of deep saline formations**
- **Convection could provide “stirring”**
- **Boycott effect**

**A topic outline is a good way to get started,  
but it may not be detailed enough for science  
writing**

An outline is a tool that enables you to look systematically at how a paper or presentation is organized. Learning to write from an outline is one of the easiest ways to (1) get started and (2) improve the content and coherence of your scientific writing.

Many of the ideas about full-sentence outlining are taken from a course given by Ohio Eminent Scholar and Professor of Physics at The Ohio State University, John W. Wilkins (who is also a Physics Illinois alumnus). His trenchant thinking and incisive writing on communicating in physics are gratefully acknowledged.

For more of Professor Wilkins’ excellent advice on technical writing, see his “Brief Guide to Writing and Speaking”:

[http://www.physics.ohio-state.edu/~wilkins/writing/Handouts/brief\\_writ\\_speak.html](http://www.physics.ohio-state.edu/~wilkins/writing/Handouts/brief_writ_speak.html).

A topic outline consists of short phrases. Here’s an example of a topic outline for a paper on carbon sequestration in deep saline formations.

A topic outline may be best for organizing a number of issues or ideas that could be presented in a several different ways, where the order of presentation is not important. Unfortunately, that is not typically the case for science papers.

While they might not be detailed enough, topic outlines are fast and easy to write. You might find it helpful to sketch out a topic outline first, and then expand it into a full-sentence outline.

## Writers use two kinds of outlines— “topic” and “sentence”

### Topic outlines use short phrases

- CO<sub>2</sub> underground storage—motivation
- Advantages of deep saline formations
- Convection could provide “stirring”
- Boycott effect



### Use “sentence” outlines for science writing

- Deep saline aquifers (DSAs) are underground salt-water reservoirs capped by impermeable rocks.
- DSAs offer large storage capacity for carbon capture and sequestration.
- Sequestered CO<sub>2</sub> would rise and form a separate layer that restricts dissolution.

Today we’ll look at the sentence outline, which is better suited for papers (and talks) that require complex information to be presented in strict logical order.

## **Tips for writing a sentence outline**

**Make your sentences as specific and quantitative as possible.**

**If you have two closely related sentences, combine, differentiate, or eliminate one.**

**Make a logic map of your sentences; can you show a linear progression of your ideas?**

**Devise a method that makes it easy to move sentences around and “see” the overall structure of the paper.**

**This slide is an example of a “sentence” outline**

Make your sentences as specific as possible. The purpose of the sentence outline is to help you spot missing or superfluous material. If your sentences are vague and generalized, you’ll lose the main advantage of sentence outlining.

If you have two sentences that say about the same thing, eliminate one of them, combine them, or differentiate them.

Ideally in science writing, the narrative should flow logically and incrementally from Point A to Point B to Point C to the conclusions. If your outline does not reveal a logical progression of ideas, move things around until it does.

If you’re not sure what a logic map is and want to read an astonishingly badly written explanation of the concept, see

<http://static1.squarespace.com/static/5665d05625981deffc6a3c88/t/568976be4bf118b4ed5cd5e1/1451849406364/creatinglogmap.pdf>.

A word processing document that displays only part of your outline at a time may not be the best way to get an overall look at your paper. Experiment with other methods—index cards dealt out on a big table, Post-It notes stuck on a wall—use your imagination.

Some physicists I know start out with a visual “outline”; they decide first on the figures they want to present and build from there.

**Today, we're going to write the  
introduction for a paper about the  
special mirrors built for NASA's  
Solar Dynamics Observatory**



*Courtesy NASA*

## **First, write down main points you want to make in the introduction section**

- **The atmospheric imaging assembly (AIA) is composed of highly reflective multi-layer mirrors.**
- **Mirrors image Sun at all seven euv wavelengths.**
- **The NASA Solar Dynamics Observatory (SDO) was launched in 2010 to study the solar corona.**
- **One component of SDO is the AIA, a suite of four telescopes.**
- **The Sun is the source of all space weather, but its physical processes are poorly understood.**

**\*Write a complete sentence for each point, in any order now—we'll arrange the points logically in the next step**

Start by writing down the main points you want to make in the paper. Don't worry about details—just concentrate on the main ideas now.

**Next, arrange the points so they  
provide a logical narrative arc\***



**\*Show a linear progression from  
premise to conclusions**

**\*No digressions or discursive material**

Next, arrange the points in a logical order so they provide a coherent storyline.

Think of this step as creating a map to guide your reader through your talk, paper, or proposal.

Each one of these points is going to be a signpost along the journey.



## A common paradigm in science writing is the “inverted pyramid”

Start broad  
and general

Add details that  
define and refine  
your message

Finish with the very specific

**main point**



## Next, arrange the points in a logical narrative



- **The atmospheric imaging assembly (AIA) is composed of highly reflective multi-layer mirrors.**
- **Mirrors image Sun at all seven euv wavelengths.**
- **The NASA Solar Dynamics Observatory (SDO) was launched in 2010 to study the solar corona and elucidate solar processes.**
- **One component of SDO is the AIA, a suite of four telescopes.**
- **The Sun is the source of all space weather, but its physical processes are poorly understood.**

Using the inverted-pyramid structure as a guide, we next arrange the points we want to make in a coherent, logical order.

## Next, arrange the points in a logical narrative



- The atmospheric imaging assembly (AIA) is composed of highly reflective multi-layer mirrors.
  - Mirrors image Sun at all seven euv wavelengths.
  - The NASA Solar Dynamics Observatory (SDO) was launched in 2010 to study the solar corona and elucidate solar processes.
  - One component of SDO is the AIA, a suite of four telescopes.
1. The Sun is the source of all space weather, but its physical processes are poorly understood.

Start with the “big picture” statement.

## Next, arrange the points in a logical narrative



- The atmospheric imaging assembly (AIA) is composed of highly reflective multi-layer mirrors.
- Mirrors image Sun at all seven euv wavelengths.
- 2. The NASA Solar Dynamics Observatory (SDO) was launched in 2010 to study the solar corona and elucidate solar processes.
- One component of SDO is the AIA, a suite of four telescopes.
- 1. The Sun is the source of all space weather, but its physical processes are poorly understood.

## Next, arrange the points in a logical narrative



- The atmospheric imaging assembly (AIA) is composed of highly reflective multi-layer mirrors.
- Mirrors image Sun at all seven euv wavelengths.
- 2. The NASA Solar Dynamics Observatory (SDO) was launched in 2010 to study the solar corona and elucidate solar processes.
- 3. One component of SDO is the AIA, a suite of four telescopes.
- 1. The Sun is the source of all space weather, but its physical processes are poorly understood.

## Next, arrange the points in a logical narrative



4. The atmospheric imaging assembly (AIA) is composed of highly reflective multi-layer mirrors.
  - Mirrors image Sun at all seven euv wavelengths.
2. The NASA Solar Dynamics Observatory (SDO) was launched in 2010 to study the solar corona and elucidate solar processes.
3. One component of SDO is the AIA, a suite of four telescopes.
1. The Sun is the source of all space weather, but its physical processes are poorly understood.



## Next, arrange the points in a logical narrative



4. The atmospheric imaging assembly (AIA) is composed of highly reflective multi-layer mirrors.
5. Mirrors image Sun at all seven euv wavelengths.
2. The NASA Solar Dynamics Observatory (SDO) was launched in 2010 to study the solar corona and elucidate solar processes.
3. One component of SDO is the AIA, a suite of four telescopes.
1. The Sun is the source of all space weather, but its physical processes are poorly understood.

## **Check to see if you've left anything out...**

- ✓ **The Sun is the source of all space weather, but its physical processes are poorly understood.**
- ✓ **The NASA Solar Dynamics Observatory (SDO) was launched in 2010 to study the solar corona and elucidate solar processes.**
- ✓ **One component of SDO is the Atmospheric Imaging Assembly (AIA), a suite of four telescopes.**
- ✓ **The AIA is composed of highly reflective multi-layer mirrors.**
- ✓ **Mirrors image Sun at all seven euv wavelengths.**

**...or included discursive material**

Check to see if you've left anything out, or if you have superfluous statements that lead the reader off the trail that you've laid out for him or her to follow.

Make adjustments (additions or deletions) now. It's much easier to write from a structure than to try to go back after you've already written something and try to impose a logical order on it.

It's also much less painful to cut things now than after you've struggled to get them written and are tempted to leave in superfluous information out of pride of authorship.



***NOW*** (and only now)  
**you're ready to start  
writing...**

**Each sentence in your outline  
becomes the “topic” sentence  
for a paragraph in your paper**

**The Sun is the source of all space weather, but  
its physical processes are poorly understood.**

**<We put a paragraph here>**



**The Solar Dynamics Observatory was launched  
by NASA in 2010 to study the solar corona and  
elucidate solar processes.**

Your main points—your topic sentences—provide a framework for your narrative.

The purpose of **every additional word** that you put in a paragraph should be to support and explain the topic statement and move the reader logically and incrementally to the next topic statement.

**Celia's foolproof, four-step SEES\*  
method to crank out science writing:**

- 1. Put the topic sentence first**
- 2. Explain it**
- 3. Give an example or present evidence**
- 4. Summarize it in a way that leads  
logically to the next topic sentence**

**\*State → Explain → Exemplify → Summarize**

**Tip: Use the same construction paradigm for  
paragraphs, subsections, and sections of your paper**

Use the formula to create logical, coherent paragraphs.

## **1. Topic sentence goes first (state)**

**The Sun is the source of all space weather, but its physical processes are poorly understood.**

**The Solar Dynamics Observatory was launched by NASA in 2010 to study the solar corona and elucidate solar processes.**

In science writing, the topic sentence is almost always the first sentence of the paragraph. While literary writing might put the topic sentence last, to build suspense, or in the middle, to redirect a reader's attention, put the topic sentence first in your paragraphs to emphasize your important points and reinforce the logical structure of your arguments.

Readers pay the most attention at the beginning of chunks of text. Exploit this natural human tendency by putting your topic sentences in the places where people are most likely to recognize and remember them—as the first sentence of each new paragraph.



## 2. Explain the topic sentence

The Sun is the source of all space weather, but its physical processes are poorly understood.

**Space weather refers to conditions on the Sun and in the solar wind, magnetosphere, ionosphere, and thermosphere of the Earth. Space weather affects the performance and reliability of space and terrestrial systems and can endanger life and health.**

**The Solar Dynamics Observatory was launched by NASA in 2010 to study the solar corona and elucidate solar processes.**

Next, provide additional explanatory details about the topic sentence. You can also expand on the idea(s) presented in the topic sentence or add evidence for it here.

### **3. Give examples or evidence**

The Sun is the source of all space weather, but its physical processes are poorly understood. Space weather refers to conditions on the Sun and in the solar wind, magnetosphere, ionosphere, and thermosphere of the Earth. Space weather affects the performance and reliability of space and terrestrial systems and can endanger life and health. **For example, a coronal mass ejection, the solar equivalent of a hurricane, can disrupt telecommunications systems on Earth.**

**The Solar Dynamics Observatory was launched by NASA in 2010 to study the solar corona and elucidate solar processes.**

Next, give examples to further explain or illustrate the concepts contained in the topic sentence.

## 4. Summarize and transition

The Sun is the source of all space weather, but its physical processes are poorly understood. Space weather refers to conditions on the Sun and in the solar wind, magnetosphere, ionosphere, and thermosphere of the Earth. Space weather affects the performance and reliability of space and terrestrial systems and can endanger life and health. For example, a coronal mass ejection, the solar equivalent of a hurricane, can disrupt telecommunications systems on Earth. **Solar research is needed to understand solar processes and predict space weather.**

**The Solar Dynamics Observatory was launched by NASA in 2010 to study the solar corona and elucidate solar processes.**

Finally, summarize the foregoing material and provide a transition to the topic sentence in the next paragraph.

In this example, the last sentence points back to the topic sentence (the Sun's physical processes are poorly understood) and anticipates the next topic sentence (the SDO was launched to elucidate solar processes). By repeating the idea that solar processes are poorly understood, the last sentence sets the stage for the next paragraph.

Thus, the two paragraphs are intellectually linked by this common idea.

## Commit to writing incrementally

Think “feedback loop”



Write in increments:

1. Construct a preliminary outline, based on your initial goals for the project
2. Write portions of the “results” and “discussion” sections while you’re taking and analyzing data
3. Add to your references as you go
4. Make your figures and tables early

Advantages:

- More complete, persuasive paper
- Finished result faster, giving you more time to edit and polish



Commit to writing incrementally; writing should be an integral part of your research work—remember “feedback loop.”

Advantages of the incremental method:

1. You may discover additional data that are needed while the equipment is still set up and the project ongoing.
2. You get a finished paper faster, with more time to revise and edit.

H.B. Michaelson, *How to Write and Publish Engineering Reports and Papers* (Oryx Press, Phoenix, 1990).

## **Plan for time to reflect and revise**

**You should allow as much time for revision as  
you do for writing your paper in the first place**

**Ideally, revising occurs in three steps:**

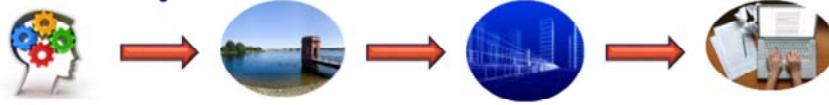
- 1. Checking and improving the content and logical structure**
- 2. Evaluating the use of language (emphasis, tone, vocabulary)**
- 3. Proofreading for mechanical errors**



Rewriting often takes more time than writing. As you are planning your timeline for completing your paper, build in sufficient time for getting feedback from others and revising.

The probability that a first-draft paper, ripped off the printer 30 ns before the deadline, will be acceptable work approaches 0.

## To recap...



1. Heed Aristotle—logic before language.
2. Start filling your reservoirs while the project is still underway. Write incrementally.
3. Write from an outline. Always! And use a full-sentence outline for best results.
4. Use the SEES paragraph method to create a tightly written, coherent logical narrative.



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NOTES: