

Effective Tips and Writing Techniques for Policy Briefs

Learning Objectives

At the end of this module, you will be able to:

- **Write for your audience or stakeholders**
- **Avoid common errors of grammar and syntax in scientific writing**
- **Use techniques presented to craft clear, concise sentences and paragraphs**



Module Requirements

For this module, you will need to have the following ready:

- **The Participant Guide**

**You can find this in the “Slack Channel
#d2p_module_resources”**



Know Your Purpose

Why Do People Write and For Whom?

- People write to
 - Reflect
 - Entertain
 - **Inform**
 - **Persuade**
- People write for
 - Themselves
 - **Others**



What Format Does the Policy Brief Follow?

- **Combination of informative and persuasive styles**
- **Start as informative arguments**
 - Provide background (e.g., current policy, evidence)
 - Provide options (e.g., alternatives, costs/benefits)
- **End with persuasive arguments**
 - Provide recommendations
 - End with your conclusion (e.g., "We recommend...")
- **Example of informative policy brief:**

"Fines for police enforcement will have the highest public health impact per dollar invested. **A supported implementation plan and agreed upon budget will be essential for success.**"

PAUSE

Go to your participant guide and answer the question in your guide.

Review Question: Policy Brief Style

- A policy brief is written to be:

- ☐ Persuasive
- ☐ Informative
- ☐ Persuasive
- ☐ Neither persuasive nor informative

PAUSE

Go to your participant guide and answer the question in your guide.

Know Your Audience

Define Your Target Audience

- **Definition:** Group that you hope will both **understand** and **use** your information and benefit from it
- Your goal: Respond to/serve needs of audience
 - Understand them (generally)
 - Understand their specific needs
 - Connect with them at their level



Questions to Ask to Know Your Audience

- **Who are they, what are they like?**
 - What is their background?
 - What is their level of education?
 - What worries them?
 - What are their objectives?
- **What do they know about topic?**
 - What do they need to know?
- **What do I want them to do?**
 - How might they resist?
 - How can I best reach them?



Attributes of Good Writing

Attributes of Effective Policy Brief Writing

- **Document is written for the reader, not the author!**
- **Document is written clearly and concisely**
 - Free of jargon, grammatical errors, spelling errors
 - Purpose/goal/objective is clear
 - Meaning cannot be misunderstood or misinterpreted
 - Content is simple (preferably), never complicated
- **Document is organized logically**
 - Has clear sections
 - Components flow smoothly

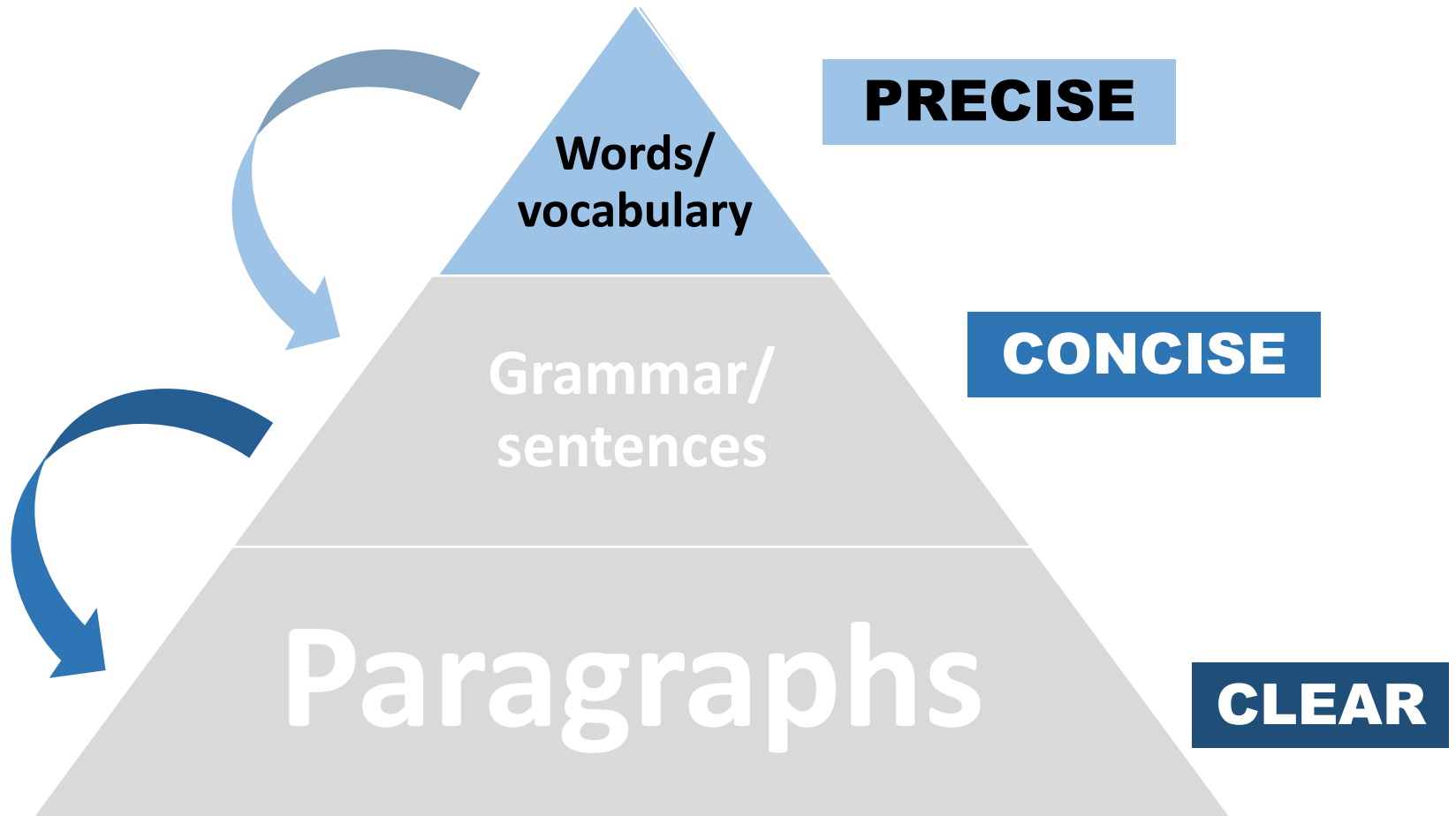
From this . . .

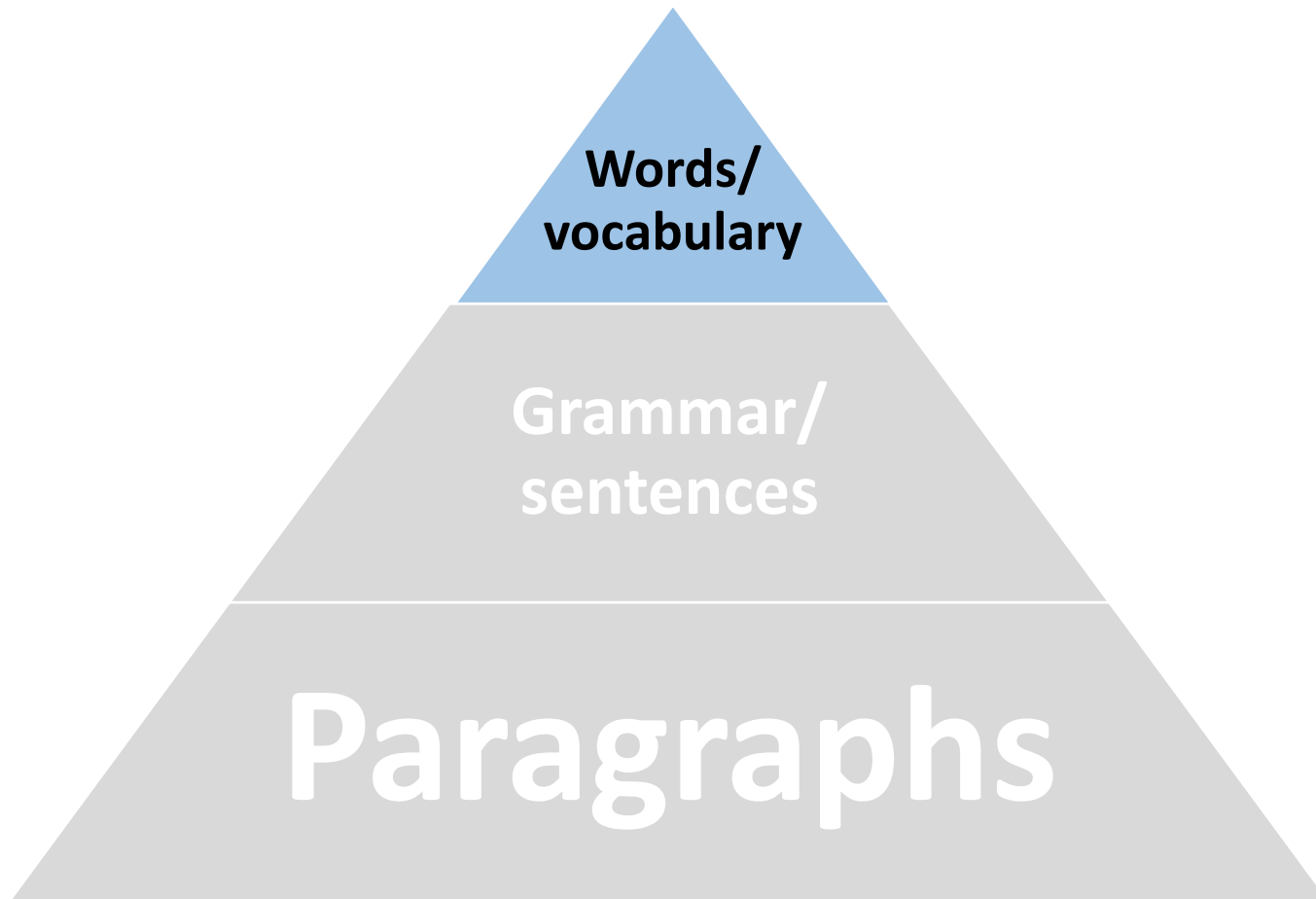


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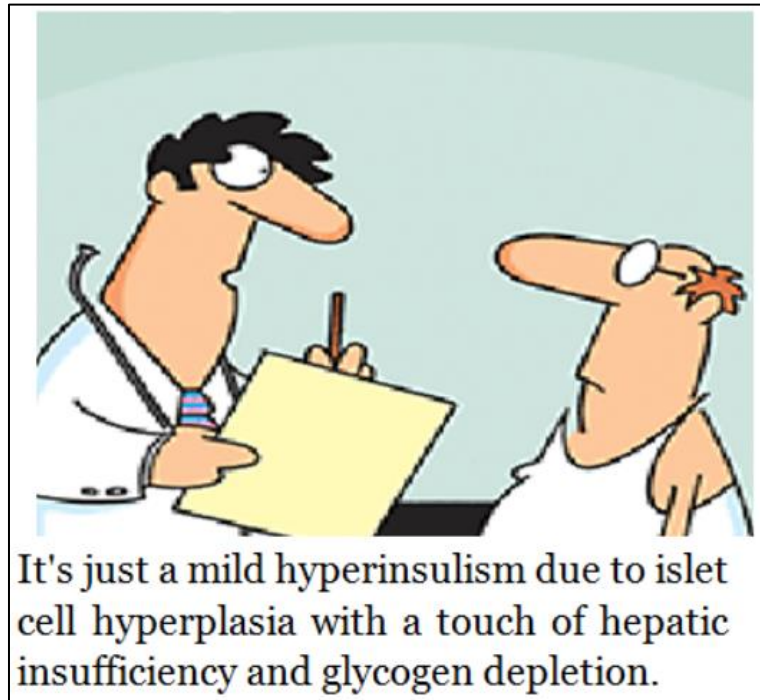
Elements of a Well-Written Document





Be Careful With Jargon (Language Specific to a Field of Practice)

- Avoid scientific terms when audience is non-scientists
- Avoid location- or organization-specific acronyms, especially if you haven't defined them first (RMO, DSS, etc.)



Use Consistent

PAUSE

- Use the same v **Go to your participant guide and answer the e document question in your guide.**

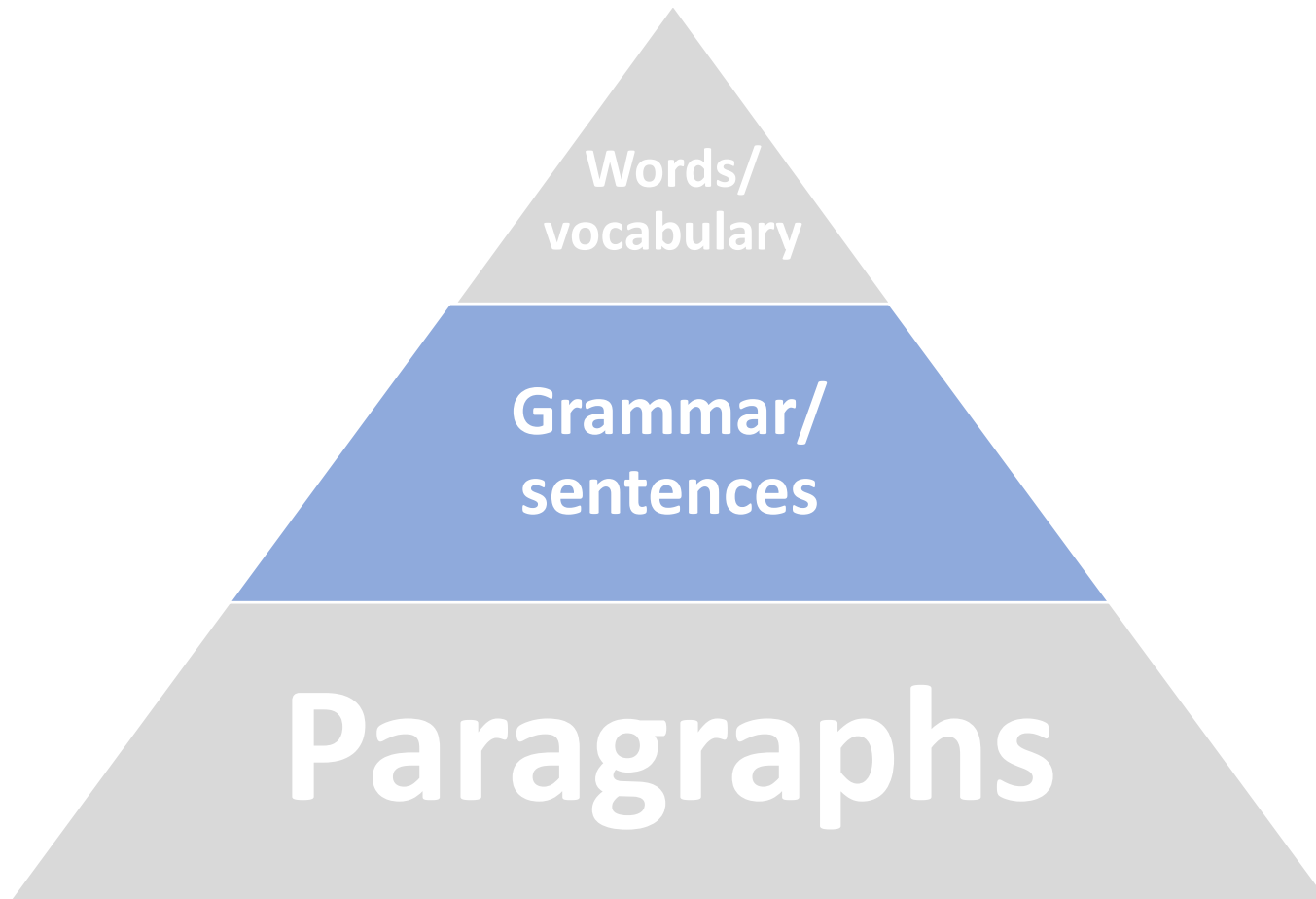
Where is the inconsistency?

Driving a motor vehicle without wearing seat belts is illegal. When getting into a car, always fasten your safety belt.

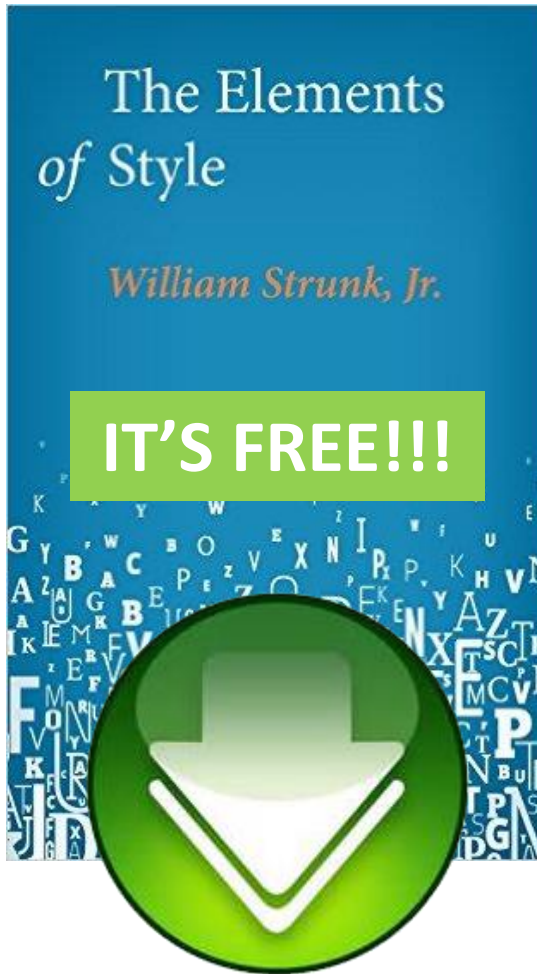
Consistent:

Use Inclusive Words

- Avoid negative/pejorative terms
 - fat → overweight
 - old → elderly
 - prostitute → sex worker
 - gay/homosexual → men who have sex with men
- Use gender-, race-, economic-appropriate terms
 - chairman → chairperson
 - developing/developed country → low/middle/high-income country
- Describe person first, then name of disease or disability
 - AIDS sufferer/victims → person/people with AIDS
 - diabetic → person with diabetes
 - alcoholic → person with alcohol dependence
 - drug user → person with chemical dependency



The Elements of Style, by W. Strunk



Vigorous writing is **concise**. A sentence should contain **no unnecessary words**, a paragraph **no unnecessary sentences**, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts.

Be Succinct: Examples

Verbose

A considerable number of people who work are utilizing public transportation at the present time.

Succinct

Verbose

Those who reside in the villages are not able to access water that is safe to drink.

Succinct

Verbose

Due to the fact that helmets cost a lot of money, a lot of people who ride motorcycles do not possess one.

Succinct

Use Shorter Sentences Preferentially

- Very long sentences are difficult to follow
- Shorter sentences are easier to read
- It is best to split a long sentence into several shorter ones
- Aim for one main idea per sentence
- Aim for a mixture of sentence lengths (average: 15–22 words)



Mainly Use Active Voice

- Prefer this word order: subject-verb-object (active voice)
 - Active voice is more direct and easier to read
- Avoid this order:
 - Passive voice is more complicated than active voice
- Use mainly active voice:
 - **NO:** The outbreak was caused by the contaminated water.
 - **YES:** Reservoirs are contaminated by the water.

PAUSE

Go to your participant guide and answer the question in your guide.

TIP

The investigation was conducted **BY** the epidemiologist
The presentation was given **BY** the director

Passive and Active Voice Examples

NO You are loved by me.

YES

NO The policy was developed by the Ministry of Health.

YES

NO Helme

YES

NO The dangers of paper helmets are not understood by the public.

YES

PAUSE

Go to your participant guide and answer the question in your guide.

Note: Subject in green, verb in red, object in purple

Use Parallel Structure When Using Bullets

Non parallel	Parallel
Feasible options <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Implement random points• Fining violators• Enforcements	

PAUSE

Go to your participant guide and answer the question in your guide.



Bullets are parallel if they can be read as a complete sentence

Always Use The Serial Comma

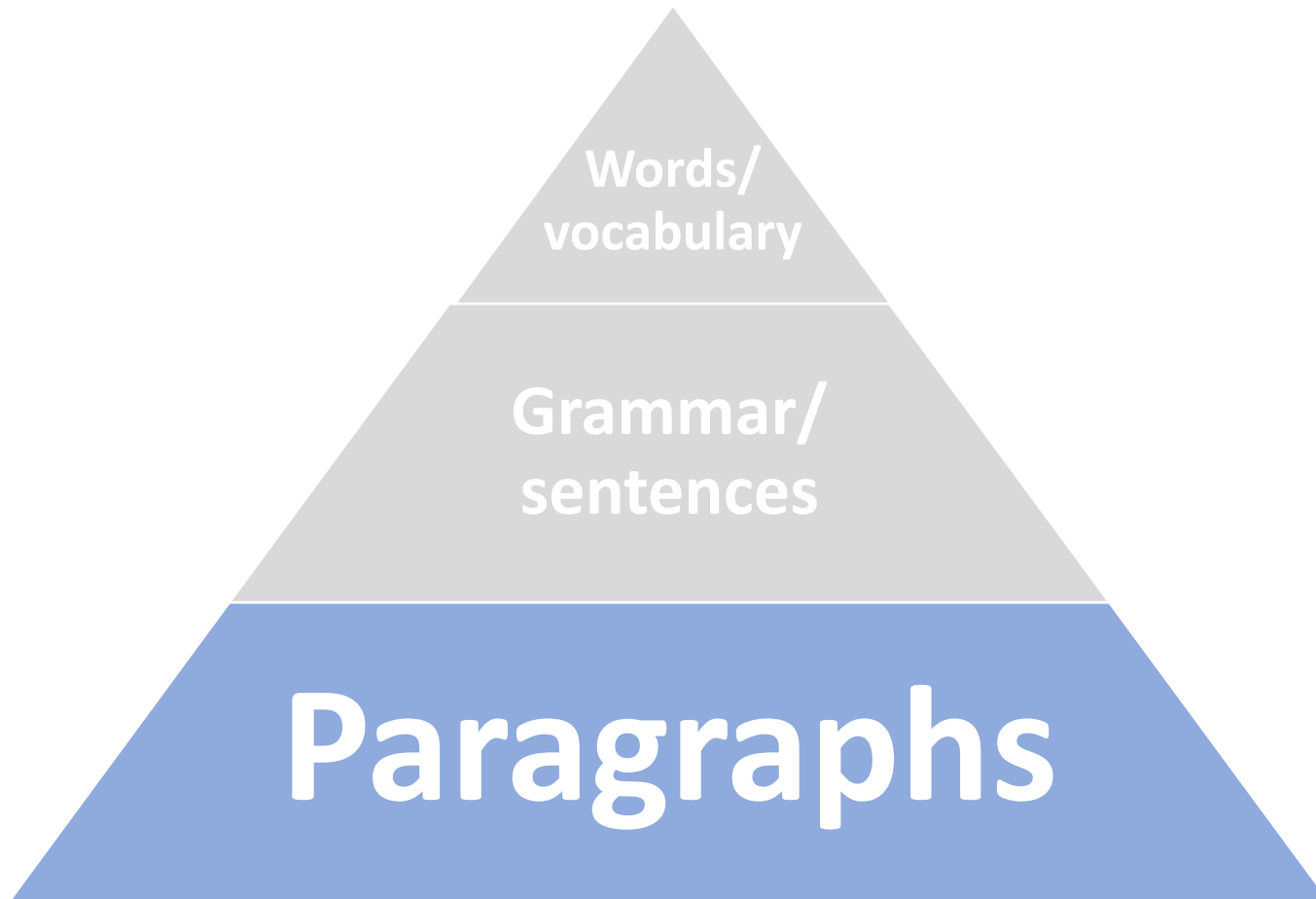
- **Definition:** A comma that is inserted after the last item in a list of three or more items
- Also called the Oxford comma

- What are the three items in the list?

PAUSE

Go to your participant guide and answer the question in your guide.

- During our tour of South Africa, we saw Nelson Mandela, a 280-lb lion and a father of seven.
- During our tour of South Africa, we saw Nelson Mandela, a 280-lb lion, and a father of seven.



Paragraph Organization

- **First (topic) sentence**

- Indicates and summarizes topic of paragraph

- **Middle of paragraph**

- Develops theme of paragraph
- Organized with a pattern (most to least important; problem & solution)



◀ The top bun is your topic sentence.

The sentences that come next are your supporting detail. They are like the lettuce, tomato and hamburger patty in the middle.

◀ Holding everything together is the bottom bun of the hamburger. It is a concluding sentence.

- **Last sentence**

- Summarize, draw conclusion, or highlight important point

Paragraph Structure Examples

Structure	Example
Most to least important	The largest decrease occurred in district 5 and the smallest in district 2.

PAUSE

Go to your participant guide and answer the question in your guide.

Paragraph Coherence: Consistent Order

- When listing items in one sentence, keep the same order in the next sentences
- Do not introduce new items in subsequent sentences

**Inconsistent
order**

We st
found
users

sex workers. We
e time and drug

**Consistent
order**

PAUSE

Go to your participant guide and answer the
question in your guide.

In Summary

- Know your purpose and your audience
- Write for the reader, not for yourself
- Write a clear, concise, and organized document
- Be careful with jargon and prefer everyday words
- Examine every segment of your document for clarity and accuracy
 - From the smallest component: the word
 - To the largest: the paragraph

Good writing resource:
Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL)
<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>

END
