E2A Tool Kit:

III. Written Products: Writing for Impact

Samia Amin, Carolyn Corea, Phomdaen Souvanna, and Siobhan Mills de la Rosa

June 2023

AIR®
Advancing Evidence.
Improving Lives.

E2A

Chief Evaluation Office
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR

III. Written Products: Writing for Impact

> "Omit needless words…[make] every word tell."
>
> Strunk and White, *The Elements of Style*

To capture the attention of your audience, it is important to give them a reason to begin or continue reading. However, researchers often write in a sequential manner, starting with the genesis of their study and moving through the design approach, methods, data collection, and findings. Unfortunately, this approach may not be an effective way to engage readers. After all, people spend very little time (7 seconds or less) before deciding whether to open content and whether to read it.

Learning to write in a way that grabs the audience's attention and keeps it is critical for evidence adoption. Written products remain the most traditional and commonly used tools for sharing evidence-based findings. Moreover, they often serve as a starting point for other evidence-related products, such as presentations and infographics. High-quality written products can help ensure your findings reach and are read by your target audience.

This chapter offers tips on planning written products, on writing and design, and on how to organize writing teams to produce well-written content that motivates readers to act.

Key Steps

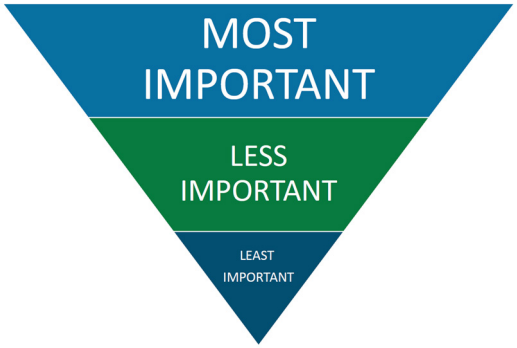
Step 1: Plan

1. **Define your audience and identify their needs.** While you may have diverse audiences, define your "ideal reader," what they may already know about the topic, and what more they need to know. Then write to that reader. See Chapter II. Planning for E2A Products for more details.

2. **Make simplicity your core goal.** As a researcher you have been trained to design and implement complex analyses. But when you write to motivate action, you must prize simplicity.
   - Simplicity helps readers prioritize their attention. When there are too many different takeaways, readers get overwhelmed and don't know how to act on the information. Multiple nuggets of information create uncertainty, leading to inaction.
   - Heath and Heath (2008) offer the following insights for simplicity:
     - Writing simply requires becoming a "master of exclusion" and finding the "core" elements of your story that can guide decisions.
     - Simple = Core + Compact. Both are critical, but neither one is sufficient. Brevity that conveys something unimportant (or worse, false) is not desirable – you must find the key idea that is worth sharing (the core). But lengthy text may be hard to understand and remember, even if it includes useful information.
     - Recognize "the curse of knowledge." When you know something, it is hard to know what the reading experience is like for those who do not have the same knowledge. This leads you to share information that is too nuanced and complex for your readers to absorb. These nuances risk drowning out your core message.
3. **Don't bury the lead.** Writers bury the lead when they let the most important finding (the core) slip too far down in the written product. Before writing, ask yourself:
   - What is the core of what you want to share?
   - What will feel revelatory in what you say? What is new and unexpected? Draw attention to the information your audience will find immediately helpful or surprising. You want to save the reader's time by avoiding the obvious and focusing on what is newsworthy.
   - Who will care and why? What decisions might it inform? Can you frame the finding in a way that makes it easier to interpret and apply?

- What is the minimum context most readers need to understand findings?
- Adopt the **inverted pyramid approach** to information sharing (See Exhibit III.1 and additional discussion of inverted pyramid in Chapter IV. Presentations.)
  - Allocate the most space to the most important content first. Winnow down to progressively less important information.
  - This works best if you focus each paragraph on a single topic and start the paragraph with a topic sentence.

Exhibit III.1. The Inverted Pyramid Approach



Source: Adapted by authors based on Scanlan (2003).

***Bonus tip:* Brainstorm with practitioners on how to prioritize and frame content.** *A brainstorming/review team that includes members who can represent policymaker or practitioner perspectives can be invaluable in helping to guide, prioritize, and review content.*

Step 2: Develop Compelling Content

1. Make the value clear early on.

- Develop a catchy, informative title that speaks to a broad audience. The opening sentence must include the key elements of the topic.
- Use the opening to capture attention. In the first page or so:

Don't:	Do:
X Lead with historical goals	✓ Motivate why your topic matters now
X Focus too much on the funding agency or the research team	✓ Highlight the decisions it can inform
X Use long sentences or paragraphs	✓ Provide a visual with key takeaways
	✓ Provide a roadmap

Source: Developed by authors.

- Help readers go to sections of interest easily. Hyperlink sections, so readers can jump ahead.

> "If it's possible to cut a word, always cut it out…Never use a long word when a short word will do."
>
> *George Orwell*

2. **Be concise.** Less is more in each unit of writing.
   - **Words:** Use short words (1 to 2 syllables) in place of long ones (e.g., "use" instead of "utilize"). Don't use multiple words when one will do - See Exhibit III.2 for tips on deleting needless words.
   - **Sentences:** Use short sentences. Break sentences longer than 12 words into two. Drop adverbs entirely. Use adjectives sparingly. Remove redundant words. Use "we" instead of "the research team" where possible, both for brevity and to forge a connection with the reader.
   - **Paragraphs:** Long paragraphs may confuse and deter the reader by signaling that the content is daunting. Treat the paragraph as a unit of thought, with one main idea in each paragraph. Within each paragraph, don't repeat similar ideas across multiple sentences. Assess whether the additional sentence is worth the thought it conveys. Can its "value added" element be added easily to an existing sentence?
   - **Chapters:** In each section and chapter, decide what is essential. Move non-essential background information to boxes or appendices.

     Bonus Tip: Cut by 10 percent. *Write your first draft freely. Then cut ruthlessly. Stephen King's book "On Writing" (2010) recommends cutting by at least 10 percent and offers useful examples.*

   - Use word limits and formats to force brevity (See Step 4: Organize Teams to Write Well).

Exhibit III.2. Removing excess words

Don't say:	*Say:*
a number of	several, a few, many
a sufficient number of	enough
at this point in time	now
is able to	can
on a monthly basis	monthly
on the ground that	because
an amount of X	X
be responsible for	must
in order to	to

Source: Federal Plain Language Guidelines (2011).

3. **When explaining technical content simply, you may sometimes need to write more.**

- First ask yourself whether the technical detail is essential for your audience to know in order to understand your material. Dynarski and Kisker (2014) offer a useful test: What does your reader need to know to understand your research and explain it to someone else? They offer useful examples to illustrate how to make decisions about this, which we include in the bullets below.
  - Only include the technical detail if necessary. For example, saying "an acceptable statistical technique" may be more helpful for lay audiences than saying "Ordinary Least Squares."

- If the technical detail is necessary, add enough for it to be useful. "The study used random assignment" is concise but may trip up lay readers. A more useful description might be: "We created groups by using an approach analogous to flipping a coin. This process yielded groups that were similar on average. Statistical analyses confirmed that groups were similar." This is lengthier but clear.
- But do not go far down the road by providing too much detail. Following the example above, it might also feel useful to say, "Because this approach was used, unobserved characteristics of groups will be similar"; however, it might not be essential to add this information because the reader will have to take your word for it. Adding a citation won't help either because the reader will wonder what the citation confirms.

4. Write for skimmers.

- Position main findings prominently in the introduction and each chapter.
- Devote each paragraph to a single main idea.
- Write useful headings that provide a concise summary of the main idea.
- Useful headings can either be question headings (e.g., Why invest in youth workforce programs?) or statement headings (e.g., Youth workforce programs help disconnected youth). Both are more informative than topic headings (e.g., youth workforce programs).
- Informative chapter and section headings effectively turn the table of contents into a report summary. For examples, See Exhibit III.3 Table of Contents from the Federal Plain Language Guidelines and Exhibit III.4 comparing a sample labor report TOC with non-descript section headings with one that has more precise headings.
- Avoid overusing acronyms and abbreviations. Spell out acronyms in the first instance if they must be used. After first use, avoid overusing the acronym. Write the bureau instead of ILAB (International Bureau of Labor Affairs).
- Exercise good judgment on when to make exceptions to the guidance to avoiding using acronyms. For example, WIOA might be so commonly known to your target audiences and have such specific connotations that using "the Act" might be confusing.

Exhibit III.3. Table of Contents from the Federal Plain Language Guidelines

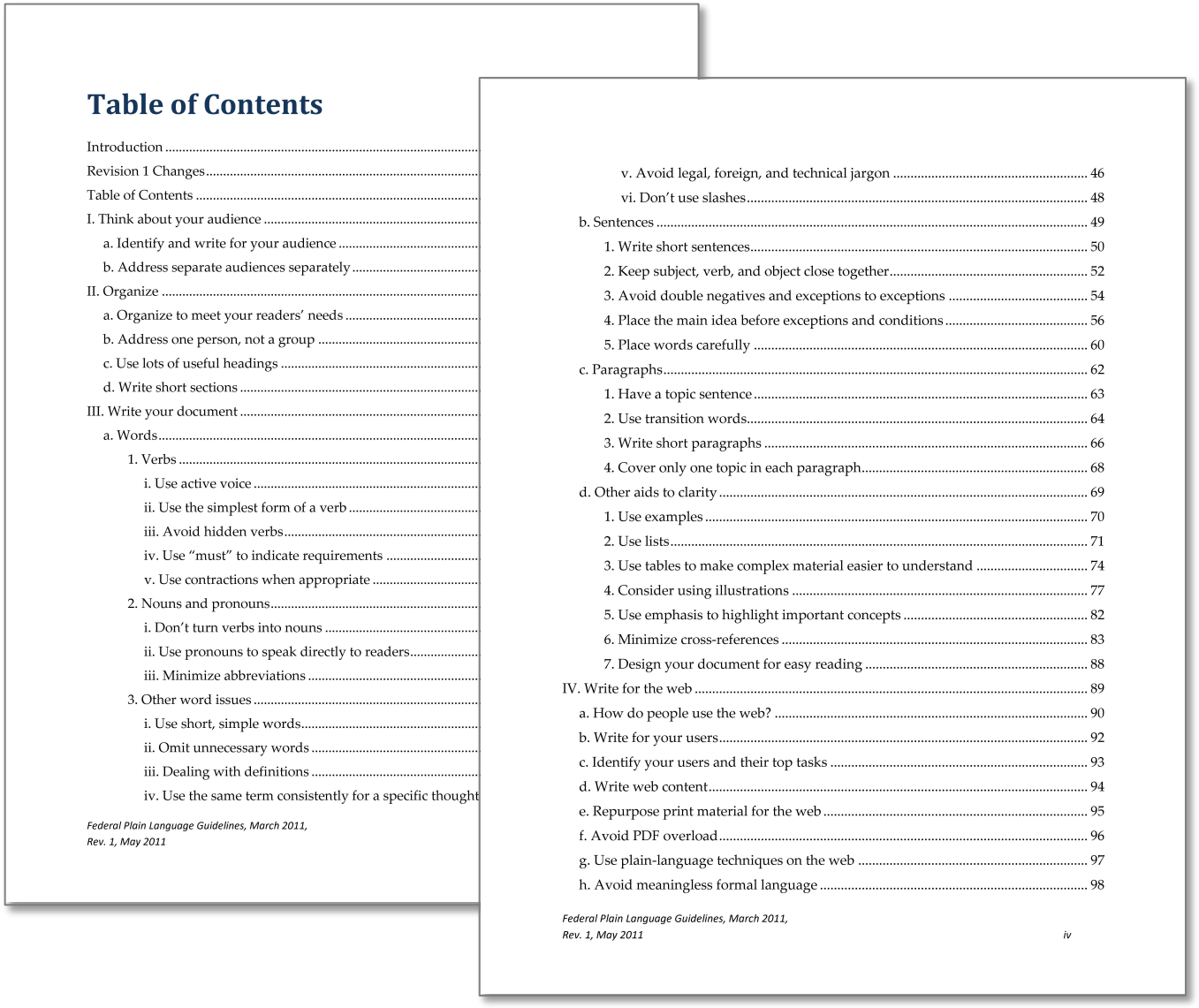
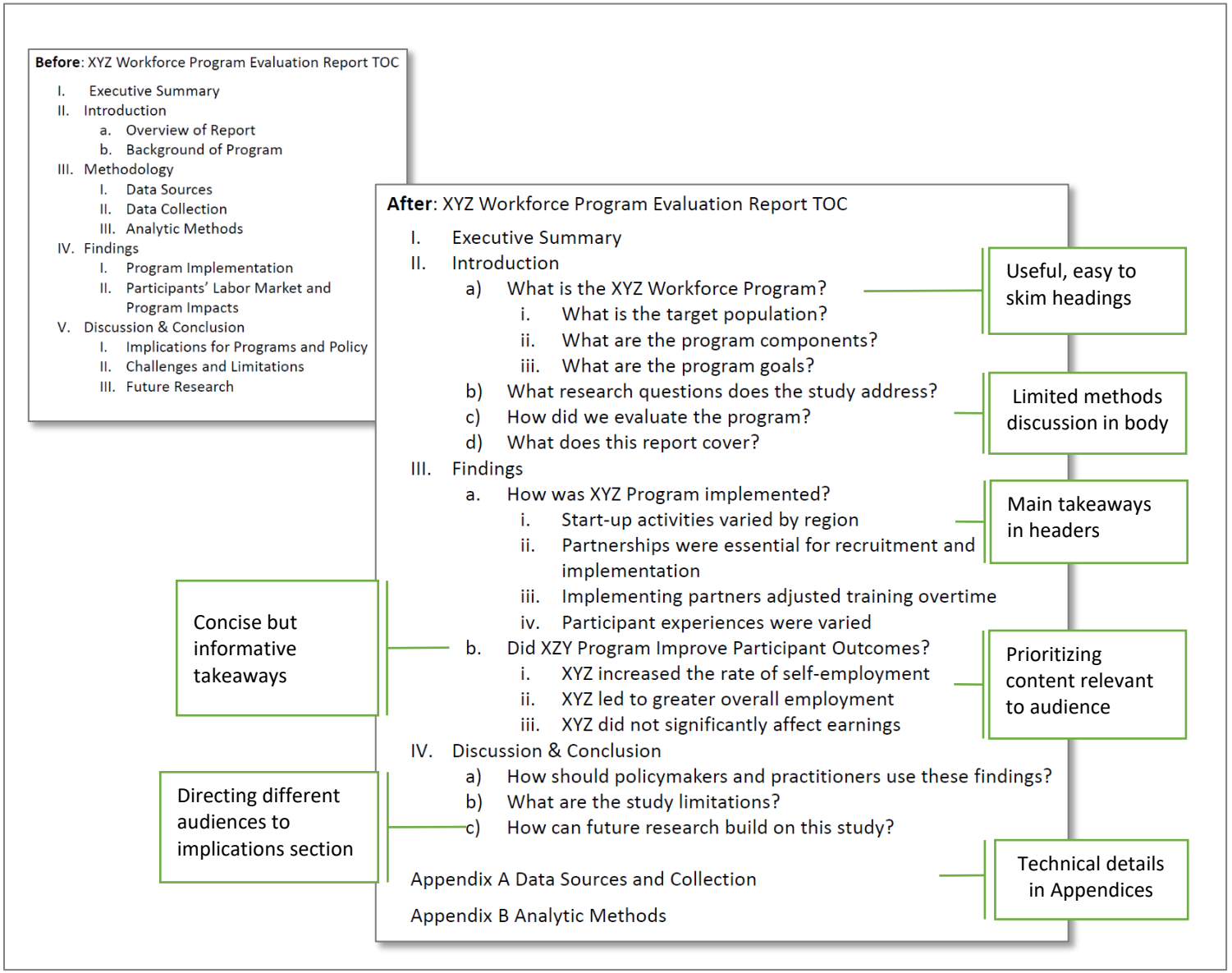


Table of Contents

Introduction
Revision 1 Changes
Table of Contents
I. Think about your audience
a. Identify and write for your audience
b. Address separate audiences separately
II. Organize
a. Organize to meet your readers' needs
b. Address one person, not a group
c. Use lots of useful headings
d. Write short sections
III. Write your document
a. Words
1. Verbs
i. Use active voice
ii. Use the simplest form of a verb
iii. Avoid hidden verbs
iv. Use "must" to indicate requirements
v. Use contractions when appropriate
2. Nouns and pronouns
i. Don't turn verbs into nouns
ii. Use pronouns to speak directly to readers
iii. Minimize abbreviations
3. Other word issues
i. Use short, simple words
ii. Omit unnecessary words
iii. Dealing with definitions
iv. Use the same term consistently for a specific thought
v. Avoid legal, foreign, and technical jargon 46
vi. Don't use slashes 48
b. Sentences 49
1. Write short sentences 50
2. Keep subject, verb, and object close together 52
3. Avoid double negatives and exceptions to exceptions 54
4. Place the main idea before exceptions and conditions 56
5. Place words carefully 60
c. Paragraphs 62
1. Have a topic sentence 63
2. Use transition words 64
3. Write short paragraphs 66
4. Cover only one topic in each paragraph 68
d. Other aids to clarity 69
1. Use examples 70
2. Use lists 71
3. Use tables to make complex material easier to understand 74
4. Consider using illustrations 77
5. Use emphasis to highlight important concepts 82
6. Minimize cross-references 83
7. Design your document for easy reading 88
IV. Write for the web 89
a. How do people use the web? 90
b. Write for your users 92
c. Identify your users and their top tasks 93
d. Write web content 94
e. Repurpose print material for the web 95
f. Avoid PDF overload 96
g. Use plain-language techniques on the web 97
h. Avoid meaningless formal language 98

Source: Federal Plain Language Guidelines, 2011.

Exhibit III.4. Table of Contents of Sample Workforce Report: Before and After



Source: Developed by authors.

5. **Write with vigor.** Draw in your audience.

   - Use the active voice. The active voice makes it clear who did what or who has to do what. Moving from passive to active usually increases brevity.
   - You may be tempted to use the passive voice to stress the objectivity of the research, but it just makes the writing harder to follow. Compare "We interviewed 15 participants in May 2022" with "Interviews were conducted with 15 participants over the course of two weeks in May 2022." Which is easier to digest?

> "The habitual use of the active voice, however, makes for forceful writing."
>
> *Strunk and White*

   - Do not use hidden verbs – these are verbs that have been turned into nouns and only make sense with the addition of another verb. "Making an application" is a hidden verb. It can be more simply written as "applying." Review your text for these and replace them.
   - Avoid clustering a lot of nouns together. When three or more nouns are strung together in succession, all the nouns before the last one serve as adjectives (e.g. worker rights protection procedures or mixed methods research integration or longitudinal data tracking and analysis). This type of sentence is hard to follow. Delete non-essential descriptors or
   - Use pronouns to make the language more compelling. Use "you" to pull the reader into your text and make it relevant to them. Use "we" to make the research team or sponsoring agency seem more accessible.
   - Use commonly used contractions (e.g., don't).

Exhibit III.5 offers illustrative examples of a few of these principles being applied to revise text.

Exhibit III.5. Applying Plain Language Strategies to Labor Research

Examples of:	Don't say	Say
Reducing passive voice and increasing specificity	Data collection occurred over three months and involved interviews conducted over video with program, managers, employers, and frontline staff.	We conducted 15 video interviews with program managers, employers, and frontline staff in May, June, and July 2022.
	The surveys were administered to employees in different sectors	We surveyed 45 employees across 5 sectors.
	The impact of the policy changes was assessed through statistical analysis.	We conducted statistical analyses to assess the impacts of the policy on employment and earning outcomes.
Replacing hidden verbs	The study team conducted an analysis of the impact of technology on job availability	The study team analyzed the impact of technology on job availability…
	The study focused on an examination of wage differentials among various occupational groups.	The study examined wage differentials among various occupational groups.
	There was a decrease in productivity	Productivity declined
	The implementation of new policies led to an improvement in worker satisfaction	Implementing new policies improved worker satisfaction.
Avoiding noun strings	Our interview protocol development procedures included…	To develop interview protocols, we…
	Our observational research data coding approach was	We coded data from our observations by…

Source: Developed by authors.

6. Be inclusive. See Chapter II. Planning for E2A Products for how to develop inclusive content.

Step 3: Design for Focus

1. **Create an inviting cover.** Make the title informative.
2. **Use white space to focus attention.** More space between lines and call-out boxes can make reading easier and text more memorable.
3. **Use bold text to focus attention.** It does, however, detract attention from the remaining text. Use bold text judiciously.
4. **Use icons and graphical elements** to create clues to content. (See Chapter V. Infographics and One-Pagers and Chapter VI. Data Visualization.)

Step 4: Organize Teams to Write Well

Research products often are written by teams of people with different skill sets. This section provides advice on how to guide teams to write well.

1. **Provide guidance and templates upfront.**
   - Share the goals and vision of the final product and the audiences you want to move.
   - Impose limits. Writers will exceed those limits but not by as much as when they write without direction. (See the recommended limits in Exhibit III.6.)
   - Lay out the report using placeholder text. Writing to a format can force writers to write concisely and think carefully about what detail belongs where.

Exhibit III.6. Recommended Limits

Report:	25 pages
Brief:	4-8 pages
Paragraphs:	Ideally, 100 words. Don't exceed 150 words.
Sentences:	Ideally, 12 words to a line. No more than 2 lines.
Bullets:	Aim for a single line of text (two at most).
Spacing:	Text that is spaced 1.5 lines apart is easier to skim.

Source: Developed by authors.

- Sequence report segments. Write technical appendices with greater detail first and draw from them to create user-friendly text. This strategy is especially effective when co-writing with technical writers who struggle to draft concise, simple text.

2. **Outline early.**
   - Before drafting, create a detailed outline. Outlines make the structure of the content and hierarchy of ideas clear. Outline how you will spread content across chapters and sections. Assign specific page numbers to sections and subsections and stress that your team must stick with them. Decide both on the overall length and on the combination of text, graphs, case studies, infographics, and call-out boxes.
   - Use topic sentences. Give sections and paragraphs useful headings with clear ideas (i.e., topic sentences) and nest supporting statements below.
   - In outlines, format section headings either as question headings (e.g., Why invest in youth workforce programs?) or statement headings (e.g., Youth workforce programs help disconnected youth) rather than as generic headings (e.g., youth workforce programs). See Exhibit III.4 Table of Contents: Before and After as an example.
   - Writing team members tend to default to generic headings, which makes it difficult to discern at the outline stage what content they plan to include. Set expectations early and reinforce them.
   - Balance rigor with readability by using appendices/boxes for technical details. The main body of the report should only have content that is important for your "ideal" reader.
   - Outlining before conducting data analysis is feasible and useful. It can help focus the analysis as it can highlight specific questions you want your analysis to answer.

3. **If feasible, finalize the text *after* presenting findings to policymaker/practitioner audiences.**
   - Developing slides for a timebound presentation forces you to focus on what matters.
   - Audience questions and feedback will help you clarify the policy or program relevance of findings. Put those insights in the report.

Written Products Checklist

- **Plan written products**
  - ☐ Define your ideal reader and identify their needs.
  - ☐ Make simplicity your main goal:
    - What is your core message? Have you said it as clearly and concisely as you can?
  - ☐ Train teams not to bury the lead.
- **Develop compelling content**
  - ☐ Make the value clear early on:
    - Use a catchy title and a cover page with a compelling photo or graphic.
    - Craft an opening sentence with key elements of the topic, a first page that provides context on why the topic matters, and a visual with key takeaways.
  - ☐ Be concise:
    - Ideal targets: short words, 12 words to a sentence, 100 words to a paragraph, 25 pages in a report, line spacing: 1.5.
    - Acceptable: 15 words to a sentence, 140 words to a paragraph, 35 pages in a report, line spacing: 1.2.
  - ☐ Be selective in what technical detail to include. If you do include it, explain it well.
  - ☐ Write for skimmers.
  - ☐ Write with vigor, draw in your audience: Use active voice and present tense.
  - ☐ Be inclusive: Lower the reading level
- **Design for Focus**
  - ☐ Create an inviting cover.
  - ☐ Use white space to focus attention and for easier reading.
  - ☐ Use bold text and color to focus attention.
  - ☐ Use icons and visuals to improve the understanding and recall of content.
- **Organize Teams to Write Well**
  - ☐ Provide guidance, templates, and limits upfront.
  - ☐ Outline early and require topic sentences.
  - ☐ If possible, finalize the text after the initial presentation of findings to target audiences.

Resources

Plain Language

- Federal Plain Language Guidelines: https://www.plainlanguage.gov/media/FederalPLGuidelines.pdf
- Plain Writing Checklist: https://www.archives.gov/open/plain-writing/checklist.html

Translating Research Concepts Into Non-Research Language

- *Going Public: Writing About Research in Everyday Language*: https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/REL2014051/pdf/REL_2014051.pdf

Writing for Busy People

- *The Science of Corresponding with Busy People with Todd Rogers* (Video): https://www.hks.harvard.edu/science-corresponding-busy-people-todd-rogers
- *How to Write So Busy People Will Read* (Slide deck): https://assets-global.website-files.com/60f998ee966fd623d55b7838/61156a515b7f134ed5cd3923_Leadership%2BEssentials%2BSlides%2BApril%2B22.pdf

Accessibility

- *Create and Verify PDF Accessibility: Acrobat Pro* (reviews all the potential accessibility issues that Adobe's accessibility checker might find and how to fix them): https://helpx.adobe.com/acrobat/using/create-verify-pdf-accessibility.html
- Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) for any products that are posted or shared online: https://www.w3.org/WAI/WCAG21/quickref/ and https://www.w3.org/WAI/test-evaluate/preliminary/

Additional Sources

- Brown, P.C., Roediger, H.L., III, and McDaniel, M.A. (2014). *Make It Stick: The Science of Successful Learning*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Dynarski, M., and Kisker, E. (2014). *Going Public: Writing About Research in Everyday Language* (REL 2014-051). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance.
- *The Economist Style Guide* (9th ed.) (2005). Profile Books.
- Heath, C., and Heath, D. (2008). *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Take Hold and Others Come Unstuck* (New and expanded ed.). Arrow Books.
- King, S. (2010). *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (10th anniversary ed.). New York: Scribner.
- Pinker, S. (2015). *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century.* Penguin Books.
- Scanlan, C. (2003). *Birth of the Inverted Pyramid: A Child of Technology, Commerce and History.* https://www.poynter.org/reporting-editing/2003/birth-of-the-inverted-pyramid-a-child-of-technology-commerce-and-history/
- Zinsser, W. (2006). *On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction* (30th anniversary ed.). HarperCollins.

About this Project

This toolkit was prepared by the American Institutes for Research for the U.S. Department of Labor, Chief Evaluation Office under the CEO Administrative Data Research and Analysis contract (DOL # 1605DC-18-A-0018), which is managed by Insight Policy Research. The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to DOL, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement of same by the U.S. Government.

Suggested Citation

Amin, S., Corea, C., Souvanna, P., and Mills De La Rosa, S. (2023*). E2A Tool Kit: Tips for Developing Great Evidence to Action (E2A) Products.* Toolkit submitted to the U.S. Department of Labor Chief Evaluation Office. Arlington, VA: American Institutes for Research.

Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful to Megan Lizik and Janet Javar at the Department of Labor for their championship of this effort, and their leadership and guidance on this project.

We would like to thank many people for their excellent inputs, review, and/or feedback, including staff from the Chief Evaluation Office and Chief Data Office at the U.S. Department of Labor; the Administrative Data Research and Analysis team at Insight Policy Research; the Capacity Assessment project team at AIR; the Reemployment Services and Eligibility Assessments Evaluation Technical Assistance Teams at Abt Associates and the Urban Institute; the Reentry Projects and America's Promise project teams at Mathematica; and the Evaluation Support team at AVAR Consulting.

Finally, we are grateful for the scores of experts from across disciplines who share their ideas with the world on how to communicate effectively and influence action. We are learning from you, applying your recommendations, and learning and adapting as we go. We hope this collation of the many ideas you've shared and additions to them do justice to your wisdom. All errors are our own.

Westat® insight

AIR®

Advancing Evidence.
Improving Lives.

E2A

Chief Evaluation Office
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR