

Making it clear

Tom Freeman, March 2015
stroppyeditor.wordpress.com @SnoozeInBrief

This is a case study of editing a passage of text for readability. I've taken an extract from a document on the website of an organisation that funds scientific research (not the one I work for). The document sets out the organisation's policy on the maternity, paternity, adoptive and extended sick leave that its funded fellows are entitled to.

The readers are intelligent and well-educated; the topic calls for formal, precise writing.

I aim to show how certain changes to the language can make this text much more concise, direct and accessible, even for this readership, while keeping the factual content as precise as necessary and without compromising the professionalism of the tone.

While I've chosen a document that I thought I could improve (most of the writing I saw on this website was better), it's certainly not uniquely bad by the standards of the industry.

I've made tiny initial edits to fix a couple of trivial typos and grammatical slips, and I've changed the name of the research-funding organisation to RFO. Otherwise, this is the extract:

The original

The terms of your fellowship make provision to provide you with support in the event that you need to take maternity, paternity, adoptive or extended sick leave. Your contract of employment with your host organisation and the associated human resources policies and procedures normally define the standard organisational policy on maternity, paternity, adoptive and extended sick leave. Under the terms of your fellowship you are entitled to take the full period of maternity, paternity, adoptive or extended sick leave as outlined in your employing institution's standard policies and procedures.

The policy for paid maternity, paternity, adoptive or extended sick leave varies between organisations. In the event that you need to take a period of maternity, paternity, adoptive or extended sick leave the RFO will increase the value of your grant in line with your host organisation's policy on paid maternity, paternity, adoptive or extended sick leave to meet the additional costs associated with this period of leave. Any request to increase the value of the grant to meet the additional costs associated with such paid leave must:

- be made by the host organisation and approved by the RFO in advance of the leave period commencing
- outline the standard policy of the host organisation
- indicate the total increase in the value of the award resulting from the period of paid maternity, paternity, adoptive and extended sick leave less any statutory maternity, paternity, adoptive or extended sick leave that can be recovered by the organisation from HMRC.

If you can't bear the suspense, skip to the end to see the final rewrite. If you want the blow-by-blow account, read on...

Let's look at the three sentences of the first paragraph:

The terms of your fellowship make provision to provide you with support in the event that you need to take maternity, paternity, adoptive or extended sick leave.
Your contract of employment with your host organisation and the associated human resources policies and procedures normally define the standard organisational policy on maternity, paternity, adoptive and extended sick leave.
Under the terms of your fellowship you are entitled to take the full period of maternity, paternity, adoptive or extended sick leave as outlined in your employing institution's standard policies and procedures.

The first two are wordy and repetitive, but rather than reduce them let's cut them entirely. They contain almost no information that doesn't appear later.

The first sentence is a general statement of principle, and I understand the desire to open in that way, but we can get to the substance so quickly that there's really no need for this. It's just vague throat-clearing.

The second is another general statement, about the background to the situation. This is more useful, but it's almost entirely implicit in the third sentence, which is where the information really starts to appear.

But the third doesn't mention the fellow's contract, as the second does. So let's build that in:

Under the terms of your fellowship you are entitled to take the full period of maternity, paternity, adoptive or extended sick leave as outlined in your contract with your employing institution and in its standard policies and procedures.

The phrase "employing institution" doesn't appear anywhere else in the passage; all the other references are to the "host organisation". This appears to be synonym-hopping for its own sake, so for consistency let's use what appears to be the more standard term. Also, we can tighten the sentence up by changing "entitled" to an active verb and cutting a few needless words:

The terms of your fellowship entitle you to the full period of maternity, paternity, adoptive or extended sick leave outlined in your contract with your host organisation and in its standard policies and procedures.

This is still quite long for an opening sentence. On reflection, maybe adding the bit about the contract was a mistake. Maybe we should lose the contract/policy/procedure detail – after all, the readers will know their own employment situations better than we do:

The terms of your fellowship entitle you to the full period of maternity, paternity, adoptive or extended sick leave agreed between you and your host organisation.

That's better.

Now let's look at the first two sentences of the next paragraph:

The policy for paid maternity, paternity, adoptive or extended sick leave varies between organisations.

In the event that you need to take a period of maternity, paternity, adoptive or extended sick leave the RFO will increase the value of your grant in line with your host organisation's policy on paid maternity, paternity, adoptive or extended sick leave to meet the additional costs associated with this period of leave.

Again, the first sentence can go. Saying that different organisations have different policies is a truism.

The second sentence we can make much shorter by assuming that the reader will remember what kind of leave we're talking about. But we need to keep the fact that this is "paid" leave, which hadn't previously been mentioned:

In the event that you need to take such a period of paid leave the RFO will increase the value of your grant in line with your host organisation's policy to meet the additional costs associated with this period of leave.

There are still some wordy phrases here: "in the event that" and "period of...leave" (twice). Trimming those, and switching into the first person, we get:

If you need to take such paid leave we will increase the value of your grant in line with your host organisation's policy to meet the associated additional costs.

But this sentence isn't in a helpful order. It breaks down like this:

Situation: If you need to take such paid leave

Action: we will increase the value of your grant

Clarification: in line with your host organisation's policy

Aim: to meet the associated additional costs.

At least, I think it does. It could come across like this:

Situation: If you need to take such paid leave

Action: we will increase the value of your grant

Clarification: in line with your host organisation's policy to meet the associated additional costs.

This is something we should query, but here let's assume the first breakdown is the right one. To remove the possible ambiguity, we can rearrange it as situation, aim, action, clarification:

If you need to take such paid leave, we will meet the associated additional costs by increasing the value of your grant in line with your host organisation's policy.

This also brings the mention of the costs much nearer the mention of the leave, which makes it clearer that it's these two that are "associated".

(If it turned out that the second breakdown of the sentence was the right one, we could clarify that as: "If you need to take such paid leave, then in line with your host organisation's policy to meet the associated additional costs we will increase the value of your grant." But I doubt it.)

Now the final sentence and its bullet-points:

Any request to increase the value of the grant to meet the additional costs associated with such paid leave must:

- be made by the host organisation and approved by the RFO in advance of the leave period commencing
- outline the standard policy of the host organisation
- indicate the total increase in the value of the award resulting from the period of paid maternity, paternity, adoptive and extended sick leave less any statutory maternity, paternity, adoptive or extended sick leave that can be recovered by the organisation from HMRC.

This is the first mention of a request, and it's right at the start without a link to the previous sentence. This makes it feel, at first, like an unexplained change of subject. Also, the intro line repeats much of the wording from the previous sentence, which we should be able to cut.

That sentence was a promise of action, so let's start by referring back to that:

To do this, we must receive a request...

Before we go any further, let's look at the bullets.

The first states where the request comes from, what the RFO needs to do after receiving it, and what the deadline and result are. The second states something the request must include; so does the third.

The contents of bullet-points ought to be equivalent, but these are different kinds of fact. Also, the sequence of events is wrong. It should be chronological: where the request comes from; what it includes; what the RFO does next; deadline; result.

Let's put the source in the intro line, the inclusions in the bullets, and the rest afterwards:

To do this, we must receive a request from the organisation, stating:

- its standard policy
- the total increase in the value of the award resulting from the period of paid maternity, paternity, adoptive and extended sick leave less any statutory maternity, paternity, adoptive or extended sick leave that can be recovered by the organisation from HMRC.

This request must be approved by us in advance of the leave period commencing.

The structure is better but the wording is not great.

In the intro line, "must" makes it sound like something the RFO has to do. "Need to" would be better.

The first bullet is so short that it's fine.

The second isn't. It repeats that long list of the types of leave, twice, and it makes a small factual slip (the organisation will recover pay, not leave, from HMRC). Dealing with those, we get:

- the total resulting increase in the value of the award, less any statutory pay that can be recovered by the organisation from HMRC.

Let's assume that readers will know what HMRC is. But let's add a little energy by changing "recovered" from passive to active voice:

- the total resulting increase in the value of the award, less any statutory pay that the organisation can recover from HMRC.

Then the final line is very awkward. As in the intro to the bullets, "This request must be approved by us" puts the compulsion in the wrong place. And "in advance of" and "the leave period commencing" are long-winded and indirect. So we get:

We need to approve this request before the leave starts.

In total, the extract now looks like this:

The rewrite

The terms of your fellowship entitle you to the full period of maternity, paternity, adoptive or extended sick leave agreed between you and your host organisation. If you need to take such paid leave, we will meet the associated additional costs by increasing the value of your grant in line with your host organisation's policy.

To do this, we need to receive a request from the organisation, stating:

- its standard policy
- the total resulting increase in the value of the award, less any statutory pay that the organisation can recover from HMRC.

We need to approve this request before the leave starts.

It could still be improved, but let's stop here.

The original was 245 words long, with sentence lengths 27, 30, 32, 14, 54, 20 (+18+8+42 for the bullets).

The rewrite is 102 words long, with sentence lengths 26, 29, 13 (+3+21 for the bullets), 10.

But it isn't just shorter: the words are simpler, the sentences are sharper, the structure is more logical, and the meaning is clearer. The tone is more personal and direct but still perfectly formal and businesslike (compare it with the more casual tone I've taken in narrating the edits). It isn't vague and it isn't weighed down by repetition.

Of course, the scientists reading the original will be able to understand it. But they'd be able to understand the rewrite in half the time and with less need to concentrate. This makes it a far more courteous, efficient and professional piece of communication.

No reader is too intelligent to appreciate clarity. And no writer should shy away from giving it.