



Publish & Flourish

Become a Prolific Scholar

Tara Gray

Director, Teaching Academy
Associate Professor of Criminal Justice
New Mexico State University

575-646-1013
tgray@nmsu.edu
taragrays.com

The Ten Steps

Writing

1. Write daily for at least 15-30 minutes.
2. Record your minutes spent writing—share records daily.
3. Write informally from the first day of your research project.
4. Outline your manuscript based on an exemplar.

Writing Log

Week Beginning on _____ Name _____

	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun	Total
Writing Time* (e.g., 8:15-8:45a)								
Minutes of writing (e.g., 30)								

Note: "Writing time" includes any time working to communicate your research with words, such as freewriting, dictating, outlining, concept mapping, revising, editing, writing paragraphs that will someday appear in the final manuscript, and writing paragraphs so rough that they could never appear in the manuscript.

Applying the Steps

The first two steps below are in bold because they should be done every day unlike the other steps.

This week I... [check all that apply.]

- wrote _____ days and _____ minutes.**
- recorded my minutes spent writing daily and shared them with my coach.**
- wrote informally even if I wasn't ready to write formally.
- outlined my manuscript based on an exemplar.
- wrote a key sentence for my manuscript and for each section and paragraph.
- made a list of key sentences as an after-the-fact outline.
- sought informal feedback before peer review.
- responded effectively to feedback.
- read my prose out loud.
- kicked my manuscript out the door to a co-author, an informal reader, or its final outlet.

Key Sentences

Key sentences are to paragraphs like street signs are to cities: they orient readers and help them navigate. They have much in common with topic sentences except they announce a point, rather than just a topic. They need not be the first sentence in each paragraph, but should be located in the first three sentences.

Key sentences should:

- Announce the point of the paragraph
 - simply with little detail (the most general statement)
 - without trying to prove the point (the rest of the paragraph serves that function)
- Be short and memorable
- Be broad enough to “cover” everything in the paragraph, but no broader
- Use key words as subjects (for example, if the topic of the paragraph is “Napoleon” then, ideally, the word “Napoleon” appears in the key sentence rather than the word “he.”)
- Ensure everything after the key sentence is about the point in the key sentence.
- Unlock the meaning of the paragraph and bring it into focus.

Directions: Practice finding key sentences in the following paragraphs. Once you find the best available key sentence for each paragraph, write the number of the sentence in the margin. For example, if the key sentence is the first sentence; write the numeral “1.” If there is no key sentence whatsoever, write “0” in the margin and then write a key sentence and insert it into the paragraph. As you read, know that the best available option for a key sentence will not meet every characteristic of the ideal. Also know that there is more than one good answer for some of the paragraphs depending on how you analyze the paragraph. Assume for simplicity that the authors of these samples wanted each paragraph to remain one paragraph so do not recommend two paragraphs as a solution.

Example 1. Cancer is what happens when normal cells start growing and dividing out of control. If we want to prevent cancer, we need to know what causes that switch—why do “good cells go bad?” My research targets that question—I study how genes interact with each other to keep cells working and growing at the “right rate,” and how those interactions break down, turning normal cells into cancer cells. I work on zebrafish because their genes behave similarly to those of people—and you can’t grow people in an aquarium. If we learn what causes growth regulation to break down, we may be able to prevent or reverse it. So, yes, I hope that my work will ultimately contribute to curing cancer (Schimel, 2012, p. 200).

Example 2. By definition the true value for each of the unknown variance parameters must be positive. However, it is not uncommon to obtain some estimates of these parameters that are negative. There are many ways to handle this. In this study, negative estimates were handled using the Brennan approach (1983). Brennan’s approach involves replacing the negative estimate with zero, but retaining the original negative estimate in the formula for estimating other variance components. This approach has the advantage of producing unbiased estimates of the other variance components.

Example 3. “The United States is at present the world’s largest exporter of agricultural products. Its agricultural net balance of payments in recent years has exceeded \$10 billion a year. As rising costs of imported petroleum and other goods have increased the U.S. trade deficit, this agricultural surplus has taken on great financial importance in both the domestic and international markets. First, agricultural exports maintain profitable market prices for the American farmer and bolster the national economy by providing over one million jobs. The income from farm exports alone is used to purchase about \$9 billion worth of domestic farm machinery and equipment annually. Exports of U.S. agricultural products also reduce price-depressing surpluses. Without exports the government would be subsidizing American farmers by more than \$10 billion a year over the current rate. Finally, agricultural exports provide an entry to foreign markets than can be exploited by other industries” (Williams, Joseph. (1990). *Style: Toward clarity and grace*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, p. 100).

Example 4. “Seven out of eight reigns of the Romanov line after Peter the Great were plagued by some sort of palace revolt or popular revolution. In 1722, Peter the Great passed a law of succession that terminated the principle of heredity. He proclaimed that the sovereign could appoint a successor in order to accompany his idea of achievement by merit. This resulted in many tsars not appointing a successor before dying. Even Peter the Great failed to choose someone before he died. Ivan VI was appointed by Czarina Anna, but was only two months old at his coronation in 1740. Elizabeth, daughter of Peter the Great, defeated Anna, and she ascended to the throne in 1741. Succession not dependent upon authority resulted in boyars’ regularly disputing who was to become sovereign. It was not until 1797 that Paul I codified the law of succession: male primogeniture. But Paul I was strangled by conspirators, one of whom was probably his son, Alexander I” (Williams, Joseph. (1990). *Style: Toward clarity and grace*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, p. 88).

Make a List of Key Sentences

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Create a new document, perhaps named “[paper title]-Keys.” At the top, write the paper’s title and key sentence for paper (one-sentence summary of hypotheses).
2. Read your section paragraph-by-paragraph *backwards*, identifying a key sentence as you read each paragraph.
 - a. Reading *backwards* keeps the focus on the distinct unit of the paragraph, rather than the paper as a whole.
 - b. Identifying key sentences this way encourages you to ask:
 - i. Does every paragraph have a single sentence point?
 - ii. Is that point well summarized in a single sentence?
 - iii. Is that point well supported with evidence?
3. Put each key sentence you identify in your new document’s list of key sentences.
4. Read your list of key sentences backwards, asking if each key contributes to the stated purpose of the manuscript.
5. Delete key sentences that don’t contribute to the purpose of the manuscript.
6. Read the list of key sentences “forwards,” asking if each key is organized (e.g. logical and coherent).
7. Re-order your keys as necessary to make them better organized.
8. Now, turn your attention to the paragraphs that are based on the keys.
 - a. Delete any paragraph that is based on a key that was deleted.
 - b. Re-order any paragraph that is based on a key that was re-ordered.
9. Re-read your section forwards checking your work.

Seek Informal Feedback

Share **early drafts with non-experts**, asking them to find two places each where the manuscript could be:

- Clearer
- More persuasive
- Better organized

Share **middle drafts with little-e experts**, asking them for help as non-experts or as Capital-E Experts depending on how well you know them, how far along the manuscript is and how close their field is to yours.

Share **near-final drafts with Capital-E Experts**

- Include the title and abstract of your manuscript in the body of the email and attach the full manuscript as well.
- Tailor an email to each Expert individually, explaining how their work informed yours.
- Ask specific questions aimed at the intersection of your work and theirs.
- Ask for feedback by asking for a “quick read” of only 20 minutes— sometime in the next two-three weeks.
 - Consider saying, “I’m not asking for a detailed read with copious comments; just run your eyes over it and tell me the biggest problems you see.”
- Ask “To what outlet would you send this manuscript?”
- Volunteer to read and respond to a paper for them now or in the future if they would ever deem it useful.

Hints for Successful Writing Groups

Before You Meet:

- Look for the key sentences in your own paragraphs and revise accordingly.
- Make copies of a three-page rough draft for everyone in your group, including you.

When You Arrive:

- Be on time.
- Pass your writing log around to others and look at theirs; discuss as others arrive.
- If you forgot your writing log, create one on the spot.

Instructions for Writing Groups

Ground Rules:

- Appoint a time keeper to set alarms so that the time is divided evenly.
- *Readers:* Create a community of scholars by putting your relationships with each other above any need to improve the manuscripts. In all that you say, remember that the main purpose of writing groups is to motivate the writer to want to write another day. Accomplish this by asking questions instead of making criticisms (e.g. I wonder whether this would be clearer to the reader if...?)
- Avoid commenting on style problems at the sentence level (wording, grammar, punctuation, and so on). Instead, write down style suggestions and pass your copy of the paper to the writer when the group discussion is finished. Style suggestions require no discussion.
- *Writers:* You moderate the discussion of your manuscript. As you do, focus your attention on listening, asking questions, and taking notes. Take notes even when the comments seem unhelpful because they may turn out to be helpful once you revisit the ideas and are less defensive.
- Moderating should empower you as a writer and help to reduce the sting of having your work criticized. Instructions for how to moderate are below, but the most important thing is this: Avoid talking too much and explaining what you were trying to say. Instead, just look at the words on the paper and try to see your words through the reader's eyes. If you do find yourself explaining, be sure to write down your explanation; it's usually clearer than what is in the manuscript.

First five minutes: Readers and writers read the same paper and search for keys

- *Readers:* Identify a key sentence by number for each paragraph (e.g. sentence #2) Prepare to tell which sentence seems to be key and why you think so.
- *Writers:* Pretend you are just another reader and identify a key sentence by number for each of your own paragraphs. You will have new insights by reading your work as others read it because this is like watching yourself speak on a video recording.

Next nine minutes: Discuss keys

- The writer asks, "In paragraph #1, which sentence is the key (#1, #2, #3, etc.)?"
- If readers disagree, discussion ensues. If readers agree, skip to the next question.
- The writer asks, "How could the paragraph communicate a single point more clearly and with better support?"
- Repeat for each paragraph.

Last minutes: The positive round

- The writer asks, "What works in this manuscript?" "What aspects should I keep?"