Published Edit

This is a graded discussion: 100 points possible due Jan 19 at 2pm

Discussion of article by Gopen & Swan

Jan 14 at 6:43pm

2 23

Brian Junker

Please read the article by Gopen and Swan attached to these instructions.

Then do both of the following:

- Post something intelligent related to the article. It can be a question or question(s), your view of some aspect of the article, a connection with some example of writing, or with some other advice on writing, etc. Doesn't matter. Just be intelligent. If you are asserting something, it is always good to provide or cite evidence for your assertion.
- Reply intelligently to someone else's post on the article. If you are the first reply, you have lots of scope to reply. If someone else has replied, your reply must take a new direction, or it can be a "reply to the reply", etc. N.b., "I agree", "Nice job!", or some other verbal handshake does not count as an intelligent reply in this case!

Remember that it is possible, and in this class necessary, to be gracious and maintain your own dignity and the dignity of those you are replying to / commenting on. Do not interpret this to suppress critical comments. It is always possible to be critical and gracious/dignified at the same time. Of course, positive comments must also be gracious and dignified.

gopen-swan-1990.pdf

Reply

(https://cmu.instructure.com/courses/8/users/491)

Pospisil, Taylor

(https://cmu.instructure.com/courses/8/users/491)

Friday

Literate coding!

Ok, bear me out. When reading the article I starting thinking about their approach by making an analogy to something (I think) I do well: writing code. Basically the folk wisdom for making code more understandable is somewhat the same as their arguments for prose. Let's walk through some examples

+ Subject-Verb Separation :: "Readers expect a subject to be followed immediately by a verb"

This is typically a problem for many languages (R, julia, lisps in general) where you have verb(subject) and people have a hard time understanding it, especially when there's multiple nested

function calls. Instead people like languages (python, ruby) where you have subject.verb() method calls.

+ Positioning :: "The beginning of a sentence is where people expect perspective and context" and "The end of the sentence is where people expect the primary emphasis"

The first thing people see is the function signature which helps you know the context. You end the function with what you're returning which shows what's important. People will read the signature and return statement and use your function so it would be great if that didn't cause problems for them.

+ One thing :: "You should only focus conveying one function for each unit of discourse"

Everyone has seen a function that tries to do everything at once. Breaking things up into logically separated subroutines is common practice. Separation of concerns leads to easier to understand designs.

+ Perceiving Logical Gaps :: Don't make readers construct logical linkage by themselves

There's idea of emphasizing locality in variables; don't initialize something on line 3 that you end up using on line 302. You also have the reader as a parser which will fail if it happens upon an unitialized variable (new concept).

More generally, there's also the concept of "code smell": certain patterns which while not exactly "wrong" are usually indicative of a larger problem. You can get a long way just by doing simple pattern matching on common bad "code smells" and performing standard transformations. Do you think this approach of finding a moderate sized list of common failure patterns could work for prose too?

Also, to push the idea of prose as code a little further. I find using tools like git and emacs or approaches like modular design greatly enhance my writing experience. Are there other ways to leverage tools/approaches for writing code?

Reply

Gallagher, Shannon
(https://cmu.instructure.com/courses/8/users/486)

(https://cmu.instructure.com/courses/8/users/486)

Yesterday

I agree with Taylor's point and the analogies he provides are thought provoking. To extend the analogy further, we can use some of the guidelines from Gopen and Swan.

"4. Place appropriate 'old' information' (material already stated in the discourse) in the topic position for linkage backward and contextualization forward."

Often functions rely on another function, but they seem to be linked together by going back and forth. For example we could have a funciton

function f(thing1){

thing2 <- g(thing1)

return(thing2)

}

A function like this is looking back at old information "thing1", contextualizing it with respect to function g, and becoming new information "thing2."

In general, writing and coding may be related because we seem to be emulating how we think or process ideas.

Reply

(https://cmu.instructure.com/courses/8/users/488)

Luby, Amanda

(https://cmu.instructure.com/courses/8/users/488)

Yesterday

This is really interesting! I agree with all of the connections between writing code and writing prose, but would argue that the conventions for understandable code grew directly from the conventions for writing good prose. Thinking of 'editing' as 'debugging' could also be a good way to go about it. We wouldn't add a chunk of code to a larger program and assume it works without extensive testing and debugging, but I find it very easy to add a new section in a paper, or paragraph in a section, without editing and analyzing it extensively.

I also think there's danger in writing prose TOO systematically. I find pieces of writing with the same sentence structure throughout very boring to read, while this kind of consistency in code makes it easy to understand. It may be a good starting point or troubleshooting technique, but as the writers of the article say, strict adherence to these 'rules' won't necessarily result in good writing - while strict adherence to code-writing conventions (provided the code runs) is kind of the definition of good code.

Reply

(https://cmu.instructure.com/courses/8/users/492)

Richardson, Lee

(https://cmu.instructure.com/courses/8/users/492)

Yesterday

To continue with the analogies, the general idea here of studying writing from the readers perspective is similar to David Donoho's recent paper on Data Science. In this paper, he introduced the goal of data-science research as to assist the every-day data analyst. The analogy I'm making here is comparing writing's emphasis on "The Reader", and the Data science emphasis on "The analyst".

The asssumption underlying both of these papers is that there are better and worse ways to write/analyze data, and taking a certain perspective helps us understand how to do better. Both of these are scientific approaches; By studying what we're doing, we can come up with ways to improve. Specifically, we can come up with principles/abstractions common to all writing/data analysis, and understanding these can help us become better writers/data analysts.

For example, in this paper the idea of the stress position is introduced. I've never heard of this, but now that I'm aware of it, it can certainly help me to become a

better writer. Similarly, we can think about the abtraction of the "Tidy Data" for data analysis. Tidy data is simply a framework: Every observation is a row, every column is a variable, every type of observational unit is a a table. However, by noticing that lots (80%?) of time is spent cleaning data, this definition can help the analyst understand when his data is ready, which makes him a more competent analyst.

Both of these abstractions, as a result of studying writing/data analysis scientifically, help us to become better at what we are doing.

Reply

Rospigil, Taylor

(https://cmu.instructure.com/courses/8/users/491)

Yesterday

I like the idea of finding common abstractions.

The thing with tidy data is that everyone was using it before Hadley wrote his paper, but there wasn't really a name to discuss it. Once he came and gave it a name people could talk about how much easier things were and notice when their data sets might be easier to work with when tidied.

Wouldn't it be nice if there were some common "pieces" of academic writing where you can see why a particular "piece" is working and mold your text appropriately. As per Amanda, you probably want to avoid turning this into an exercise in academic MadLibs, but at some level emulating what works seems like a great strategy.

Reply

McVeigh, Brendan

(https://cmu.instructure.com/courses/8/users/490)

12:07am

One other thing that Taylor touches on in his original post but I think could be expanded upon more is drawing a mapping from functions in a program to concepts and terms in writing. It is a very common rule to make variable and function names as descriptive and transparent as possible and the same should be true for terminology used in the paper although area specific jargon can and does get in the way of this. But I think we can expand this link in terms of how consistently terms in papers should be used. As we talked about in class it is important to pick terminology and stick with it but I think that the same can be said for coding and it is perhaps more apparent in a coding environment. We certainly wouldn't want to write multiple different functions that perform nearly identically tasks as this would make for confusing code. Similarly, once we have explained a concept or procedure in our writing we want to be able to refer back to it and not re-explain the procedure each time it is mentioned as if it is something new the reader needs to pay attention to.

Reply

(https://cmu.instructure.com/courses/8/users/486)

Gallagher, Shannon

(https://cmu.instructure.com/courses/8/users/486)

Yesterday

As we have discussed in class, there is a relationship between the author and the reader in any form of writing. Perhaps in less scientifically oriented writing, this relationship is very much a two-way street where both parties are allowed to bring their own ideas and values to the table and take away different conclusions from the text. On the other hand, for scientific writing to work, it seems that the author wishes to control the reader as much as possible.

In scientific writing, we do not want our results to be subject to different opinions nor our experiments be subjective. The burden thus falls on the author to control or influence the reader as much as possible. The guidelines posited by Gopen and Swan all give ideas and instructions on how to control the reader's thought process and ease the cognitive load of the reader.

As to controlling the reader's thought process, points 2, 4, 6, 7 from Gopen and Swan's article (P. 16) all emphasize placing text and information in certain areas that are most effective for the reader. By maintaining a focused and tight narrative, the author narrows the reader's thought process to only consider the text and ideas posited by the author. In this way, the author is indicating what to the reader should think about, when to do so, and how much weight that idea should receive. Similarly, reducing the cognitive load not only makes an article easier to read but again reduces the opportunity for external ideas to influence the reader's thoughts.

All in all, Gopen and Swan indicate that the author should influence the writer's thinking as much as possible through the text. In this way, the author-reader relationship becomes dominated by the author in hopes that every reader may draw the same conclusions from the text.

Reply

(https://cmu.instructure.com/courses/8/users/483)

Cuellar Correa, Maria

(https://cmu.instructure.com/courses/8/users/483)

9:29am

I agree with Shannon's point, that Gopen and Swan suggest that the author should attempt to control the reader's thinking as much as possible through the technical text. This also relates to Taylor's analogy to code-writing: If you write in code to a computer, the computer does exactly what you would expect it to, and the writing is not up for interpretation.

However, assuming that the readers are like computers I think is misguided. Humans are influenced by their training, historical background, language skills (I'm pointing here to Francesca's argument about thinking first in one language and then translating to another, which I have definitely faced), tastes, and current state of mind. The answers to these questions might depend on the reader and even something as variable as the time of day: Did they have their pot of coffee? Did they just wake up and rush to read their assignment quickly before class? Did they try to read this their first year of their undergraduate program before they had some of the tools necessary to understand the arguments?

In my opinion, there is no objective "reader" (and by objective here I mean, one that will interpret the writing as if it were code – a specific line of code will always mean the same command). There are many readers with lots of different priors (to draw a parallel with the Bayesian-frequentist contrast), which lead to different expectations. All the author can do is be explicit about his or her* priors, which is not to say that one should, say, "Write as sloppily as you want because the reader should be the one interpreting my quirky ways." But instead, one should, "Keep in mind that everyone has a different perspective and all you can do as a writer is give what you think is a clear explanation." For example, if someone is not from the United States, saying an idiom such as, "The ball is in your court," might be very confusing, and even the ordering of words in a sentence might be considered complex (despite Gopen and Swan's best intentions), if the reader has different expectations.

In a way, I think everyone's writing could be improved with at least the awareness of the seven pieces of advice that Gopen and Swan summarize so succinctly at the end of the article. But saying the "reader" has "expectations" and not addressing the issue of subjectivity (on both the reader and writer's part) seems lacking in this article.

* I also agree with Amanda's point about the authors' use of female pronouns. I appreciated it!

Edited by Cuellar Correa, Maria on Jan 19 at 9:33am

Reply

(https://cmu.instructure.com/courses/8/users/1321)

Dabbs, Bead

(https://cmu.instructure.com/courses/8/users/1321)

Yesterday

The article seemed to primarily consider how taking the reader's experience into account can help us better control the flow of information to the reader. However, most of their examples flowed much better after being reworded, but also pointed out logical gaps that were not obvious in the original version. This process of unveiling missing logical gaps made me think of the biggest problem I have when writing, which is determining how much explanation is necessary for the reader to understand my main points.

1. yes

2. writing vs revising (also dealt with by others in the discussion)

I think by rewriting things in the way Gopen and Swan suggest, it should also be clearer to me, as an editor, what logical gaps are missing. Adapting writing to reader's expectations consists largely of making the reading process more linear and emphasizing important concepts that should be taken away. By having the writing flow more easily, and calling attention to the important points, it should also become easier to see what is missing, without having to untangle the writing style first.

If I write in an easier to digest way initially, it can also make it easier for me to see what is not clear from my initial attempts to explain my ideas, and add in logical connectors to make them more clear. Similarly, it should be easier to see statements that are obvious, and remove those from the text. Overall, being able to more clearly see each step in the logical chain might allow me to spend less time trying to understand what information I am providing to the reader and more time deciding if the information provided is enough to understand my main point.

Reply

(https://cmu.instructure.com/courses/8/users/482)

Chakravarti, Purvasha

(https://cmu.instructure.com/courses/8/users/482)

Yesterday

I have the same problem while writing; that of deciding how much explanation is necessary for the reader to understand. I agree with you that rewriting things might solve the problem. But I think it is also important to think about your target audience while writing to decide how much explanation is necessary.

One important thing I noticed while reading the article is that most of the examples considered in the paper were very specific to their field. That is I think it was written for a very specific crowd. Though there are some obvious logical gaps, we should not expect to understand it completely as we do not know about the subject too much. So I guess knowing your audience and trying to see from their point of view might help in better understanding of how much explanation is necessary.

Reply

Orellana Arreaga, Josue
(https://cmu.instructure.com/courses/8/users/1462)
9:59am

I agree with Purvasha, we need to keep our audience in mind when deciding how much explanation is necessary to convey our ideas. This is actually a very important aspect of writing. Many times we also need to keep in mind how much room we have in the text. For instance, many journals have policies about how many pages they expect to see. Then we need to make a budget of content. So that we allocate just enough information for our audience to understand the context that our ideas are based on.

But even if we had an unlimited number of words, a longer explanation does not guarantee clarity of interpretation. Like Beau pointed out, a cohesive structure without missing gaps should help us in deciding how much background to include. Gopen and Swan mention how important it is to save the reader's energy for the substance of our ideas, rather than the prose. It should be our goal to present our ideas in an efficient way.

Reply

Adhikari, Samrachana
(https://cmu.instructure.com/courses/8/users/1322)
11:58am

controlling the working memory load of the reader

I like the idea of considering length constraints while writing. As Josue pointed out, lengthy writing does not necessarily guarantee clarity of interpretation. In fact, the main idea of the paper might get lost in the heaps of information, if not presented in a coherent and logical manner. In that regard, it is tricky on how and when we need to provide additional background to the readers, and how much. Having a length constraint should make this consideration at least more convenient for the writer. And as Purvasha pointed out, considering a reader of a particular field is another constraint that should help us in deciding what information is important for that readership and hence needs to be

included in the paper.

Reply

(https://cmu.instructure.com/courses/8/users/482)

Chakravarti, Purvasha

(https://cmu.instructure.com/courses/8/users/482)

Yesterday

Gopen and Swan in their paper provide structured principles that can be followed to control the readers' interpretability of scientific text. They show that following a few simple rules could lead to a much clearer understanding of the writer's intent. I would like of comment specifically on a few of them.

- Subject-Verb Separation: *Readers expect a grammatical subject to be followed immediately by the verb. Anything of length that intervenes between subject and verb is read as an interruption, and therefore as something of lesser importance.*

I found this very helpful as I realized I tend to separate the subject and the verb with a description of the subject. After reading this I realized that it actually makes a difference. For example note the difference between “Mumble, a white cat with black spots, barks like a dog!” versus “Mumble is a white cat with black spots, but he barks like a dog!” Notice that while reading the first sentence the significance of the fact that Mumble is actually a cat who barks like a dog is lost.

- The Stress Position: *We tend to take something like a "mental breath" as we begin to read each new sentence, thereby summoning the tension with which we pay attention to the unfolding of the syntax. As we recognize that the sentence is drawing toward its conclusion, we begin to exhale that mental breath. The exhalation produces a sense of emphasis. Moreover, we delight in being rewarded at the end of a labor with something that makes the ongoing effort worthwhile.*

When I read this, I wondered if this was probably more true for a paragraph. This could probably be true while reading a large sentence. But for smaller sentences I don't think it makes much of a difference.

- *A sentence is too long when it has more viable candidates for stress positions than there are stress positions available.*

This is a very clever definition of a long sentence! As the authors stress on the importance of introducing new information or mentioning the idea that has to be emphasized in the position of stress, it is important to have lesser number of them to guarantee that each of them get enough attention.

The authors in general convince us that readers have expectations to find different things of different emphasis in specific parts of the sentences. So in order to convey the emphasis of anything we need to make sure that the readers find it in the right position.

Reply

(https://cmu.instructure.com/courses/8/users/488)

Luby, Amanda

(https://cmu.instructure.com/courses/8/users/488)

Yesterday

I found the strategy for revision detailed on pages 9 and 10 very interesting. I think most of us have struggled through revision, especially when all of the information is already included but it doesn't seem 'right' when reading it. I tend to get very overwhelmed when trying to rewrite a paragraph or section when I'm not trying to add more information or remove extraneous details. I've never really thought of the difference between 'new' and 'old' information in a sentence, but distilling each paragraph into a list of the 'new' and 'old' information, and then filling in the sentences so they make sense seems like a really neat way to rewrite a paragraph in a systematic way.

!

I also think this general strategy could work on a larger scale too. Instead of putting sentences together to form paragraphs, we also can use a similar strategy to organize paragraphs into sections, and sections into a paper. By trying to emphasize the 'new' information in the context of 'old' information, the paragraph/section/paper becomes much more readable and has a natural flow that's easy to understand. I think this links to what Beau mentioned about filling in logical gaps and making sure that each piece of 'new' information - whether it be a part of a sentence, a paragraph, or a section - has some sort of context for the reader that's rooted in 'old' information.

two different points, both important

This is a bit of a side note, but I also wanted to point out this article's use of feminine pronouns and how much I appreciated it. This is something that I'm very conscious of, and notice that it rarely happens in scientific writing. Obviously, this is partly due to the notion that scientific writing should be in a passive voice and often doesn't include humans at all, but I think it's something that we, as a community, could be more aware of.

Reply

users/484)

e.com/courses/8/users/484)

I find it interesting that you have more trouble with revision. In my experience, the revision stage tends to be like putting together a small puzzle, where once all the ideas are out there and you know what the picture is meant to be, things tend to fall into place. The hard part is more getting all of the ideas out of the box and not losing any pieces under the couch.

I also like how you describe the process as trying to get the writing to "seem 'right'". I think I usually tend to rely more on how I *feel* when judging my writing rather than having some concrete rules to check. Having a more systematic method would probably be helpful for me.

Reply

(https://cmu.instructure.com/courses/8/users/484)

Elliott, Peter

(https://cmu.instructure.com/courses/8/users/484)

Yesterday

I found the discussion of the "stress position" somewhat vague and confusing. While the term "stress position" is given a definition, the definition didn't seem concrete enough that I could reliably pick out how much of the end of the sentence would count. I would've liked to see more examples where the stress position actually did take on the varying forms the

authors mentioned. As it is, it's not clear to me whether a misused stress position is likely to be a subtle error or something obvious.

On the other hand, I thought the idea of structuring sentences by old information to new information was very helpful and compelling. This idea makes it a lot easier for me to consider how easily a reader will be able to follow my train of thought. I also was surprised to see the way poor structure could open up paths to possible misinterpretation. The examples in the article did a good job showing how structure could affect both the readability and the interpretability of a piece of text.

Reply

(https://cmu.instructure.com/courses/8/users/489)

Matano, Francesca

(https://cmu.instructure.com/courses/8/users/489)

12:20am

The connection between writing code and writing prose is very interesting. To some extent, I agree with Amanda when she says that being very systematic might lead to very different results. No doubt that in code-writing following the rules is the way of success. In prose-writing, though, no such conclusion can be drawn; in fact as the author said: "There can be no fixed algorithm for good writing."
However, I do think that technical writing is a little different. In my opinion, the writer freedom is limited by the necessity of clearly communicating the scientific achievements. For doing this, I think that having "strict" principles helps the writer in at least two ways. First, the author writes the paper in such a way the reader interpretation converges to whatever the writer wants that to be. Second, it fills the language gap. By language gap I mean the tendency of non native English speaker of using structures coming from their native language. For example, it happens often to me in English to construct sentences in the same way I would construct them in Italian, but, as in many other Latin languages, the composition pattern is considerably different from English, and, by doing this, it is very easy to mislead the reader.
In conclusion, at least from my prospective, having these principles seems helpful to be able to put things where they should be to be remembered, no matter how complicated the concept that we are explaining is and despite of any language inclination.
Edited by Matano, Francesca on Jan 19 at 12:23am

Reply

(https://cmu.instructure.com/courses/8/users/1463)

Qin, Jiming

(https://cmu.instructure.com/courses/8/users/1463)

12:49am

The biggest shock this article gave me is the fact that structure is so powerful in meeting readers' expectation. When I wrote up my work, I had the awareness of arranging proper structure on a larger scale (laying out sections, subsections, etc.) but I didn't pay so much attention to the smaller structure in terms of sentences and paragraphs. Presenting the old information linking back in the beginning and the new information linking forward in the end makes the flow of writing natural and lowers readers' mental consumption in reading. When I go over my writing to check the principles listed in the article, however, I found it a little hard to follow them literally, at least in some parts. I wonder whether it is OK to violate them (even not for good style, but just for stating some things according to the

convention).

I love Taylor's analogy to writing code and this article brings to attention the unavoidable role of readers' interpretation of the writing. According to the authors, the interpretation would almost always vary from reader to reader; clear writing only makes sure most of the readers interpret the writing in the way intended by the writer. This is interestingly compatible with the criterion for judging code "Good codes are obviously without bugs; bad codes are without obvious bugs." Substitute bugs with confusion and we get it parallel in writing.

I also share Beau's problem with deciding the necessary level of details in my writing. I was planning to read some articles from my intended journal to see the general style of presentation. After reading this article my takeaway is more or less to fill in all logical gaps in briefest fashion possible and then fill in necessary details with either explanation or references if possible. I hope that would be a good way to guarantee comprehensiveness of the logic in my writing.

Reply

(https://cmu.instructure.com/courses/8/users/1462)

Orellana Arreaga, Josue

(https://cmu.instructure.com/courses/8/users/1462)

8:50am

This article has very good suggestions on how to maintain clarity of expression in scientific writing. Here I summarize what I learned from it.
Writing according to reader expectations improves the interpret ability of scientific information. We want to maximize the clarity of interpretation by using structural clues. Structure refers to the scope and order in which information is presented.
We should present individual points using separate units of discourse. The beginning of a unit of discourse is called the topic position; it should point to the subject of the story and set the context. To preserve clarity of context, the verb should immediately follow the subject. The last section of a unit of discourse is called the stress position; and it should be reserved for new information that needs to be emphasized.
Writing according to the reader expectations increases the likelihood of successful communication between the author and his/her audience. Communication is the fundamental purpose of scientific discourse.

Reply

(https://cmu.instructure.com/courses/8/users/483)

Cuellar Correa, Maria

(https://cmu.instructure.com/courses/8/users/483)

9:11am

I liked the section in the article on perceiving logical gaps. It seems useful to hand-hold the reader through the logical argument so nothing is left out, which could lead the reader to misinterpret as well as not understand the argument.

What I thought was missing, however, was a discussion about the consideration about what is a logical gap. I would assume the determination depends on the audience. Something that is missing for one reader might be trivial for another. This is related to the

audience for which your technical writing is intended.

For example, in advanced mathematics courses, some of the proofs might not show an induction argument explicitly, but they might simply say something is true "by induction". The word "trivial" is also often used to express this logical gap. But for some readers it might not be a gap at all. It might be such a commonly used argument in their sub-field, that writing the argument would seem condescending to the reader.

So, where does one draw the line between what is a logical gap and what is trivial? I have always found it difficult to answer this question, regardless of my audience.

Reply

(https://cmu.instructure.com/courses/8/users/1321)

Dabbs, Beau

(https://cmu.instructure.com/courses/8/users/1321)

10:18am

I agree that the determination of what is and isn't a logical gap is probably going to depend in large part on the audience that you are targeting. I guess that can be counted as another reason that it's important to have a specific readership in mind as you're writing.

You mentioned the experience that we've all had with mathematics texts where they state that something quite complicated is "trivial" in some sense. While this is some form of logical gap to a reader that does not understand why the notion is trivial, at least the writer is letting the reader know that there is a gap, even if they are refusing to address it. The acknowledgement at least gives you the hint that, if it's not trivial, you should think about the gap to see what is going on.

What I tend to find more frustrating is when there is a gap, and the writer does not acknowledge it. This type of logical gap can be more disorienting, and harder to figure out. For a casual reader, or perhaps an editor of a journal, I could see these unannounced gaps leading to the decision that the article simply isn't worth the time to break down and interpret fully.

Overall I feel like the bigger problem is gaps that the writer doesn't even seem to be aware of. So as we're writing as long as we are aware of the gaps we are leaving, and acknowledge any big leaps we are taking, maybe it can guarantee the reading process go more smoothly, even if the reader doesn't understand all of the fine details.

Reply

(https://cmu.instructure.com/courses/8/users/1322)

Adhikari, Samrachana

(https://cmu.instructure.com/courses/8/users/1322)

10:25am

Gopen and Swan talks about re-organizing scientific writings for a wider audience who might not be as familiar with our work as we are. I consider this reorganization phase as a second phase of writing; the first phase being writing for the scientist herself. I usually start

my initial phase of writing as a journal keeping. I write down ideas that I think are important and not necessarily those that are already familiar to me and seem unnecessary then. This practice leads to logical gaps almost everywhere, but it is less of a problem when I use it for my own reference compared to when revising it for other readers. In my experience, revising such draft for a wider audience or even my future self takes considerable amount of effort and judgment. While Gopen and Swan's paper gives suggestions on how to revise and re-organize a draft that is already written, for a specific group of readers, it does not really talk about how to start writing in the first place. Having a set of guidelines to consider while writing a very first draft of my work (without specific readers in mind) would be almost as helpful, especially for undisciplined writers like myself.

Reply

(https://cmu.instructure.com/courses/8/users/490)

McVeigh, Brendan

(https://cmu.instructure.com/courses/8/users/490)

10:32am

I like the way Gopen and Swan present the information transfer from writer to reader that takes place as only approximate or probabilistic. They make the point very clearly on page 7:

"*We cannot succeed in making even a single sentence mean one and only one thing; we can only increase the odds that a large majority of readers will tend to interpret our discourse according to our intentions.*"

Viewed in this light we can think of the methods presented for clearer writing as ways to increase the probability that the reader will interpret the writing the way the writer intended. However, it seems to be that even employing these techniques there will always be some trade-off between clarity and length. It is certainly possible to include too much detail as a writer, on page 5 the authors provide an example of where this may be appropriate.

This an area where knowing your audience is crucial but I would also appreciate more of a discussion of how to weight factors other than just reader background. For example, as a reader I can imagine being deterred from finishing as article not because it was at the wrong level but because it tried to cover too much or reading seemed like it would take too long.

Reply