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## Improving International Communication Through the Containment of Prose Paragraphs

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## Introduction: Beyond Clear Writing

English is one of the leading candidates for a global business/technical language. Increasingly, then, English-language technical and professional documents are read by an L2 audience, that is, an audience who uses English as a second language. This form of communication is even higher in risk than conventional communication; everything that burdens a reader or tends to cause ambiguity has an exaggerated effect on a reader with a limited vocabulary and a fragile grasp of English idiom and syntax.

While most treatises on internationalizing one's English emphasize conventional word/sentence editing, the objective of this paper is attack the broader problem of the prose paragraph, defined here as *any block of text with more than two or three rows of characters*. It is this author's position that the paragraph form may be the worst way to present technical content. And the purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how replacing prose with structured and graphical alternatives will reduce the burden and risk for L2 readers.

NOTE: This paper is not a polemic against the paragraph. On the contrary, the paragraph is the unit of mature discourse, and the inability of most undergraduates and business people to build an intelligent paragraph is what makes their writing so unreadable. Rather, the target of this essay is the *inappropriate paragraph*, that containing material better communicated in a different way.

## Theory: Editing as Risk Reduction

I often think of clear writing as *writing that cannot be misunderstood, no matter how hard the reader tries*. But this definition is, of course, hyperbole.

Understanding always entails interpretation and guesswork, even when the sender and receiver speak the same language. And unambiguous writing merely *narrows* the range of likely interpretation, reducing the chances for a misreading. Writers, then, work on the message, trying to free it from risky elements, that is, vocabulary and syntax with rich meaning and, therefore, rich possibilities for misinterpretation.

Beyond writing, though, are other factors that may contribute even more to misinterpretation: namely, those aspects of presentation and page design that increase the burden on the reader (or translator) and thereby encourage shallow or inattentive reading. Put simply, when a passage is difficult to process—taxes the reader's psychophysical limits—the reader will skim, scan, and otherwise reduce the processing burden. This skimming and scanning, which seem to me an unconscious biological adaptation to the stress in the reader's environment, probably account for

more of the misunderstanding, misinterpretation, and generally poor communication than any problem of diction or grammar in the individual sentences.

My reading of the document design literature, supported by my thirty years as an editor and teacher of writing, leads me to conclude that the principal culprit in raising the risk of misreading is a long paragraph. A block of text exceeding seven or eight lines will send the L1 reader skimming along its surface and will probably fill the L2 reader with a sense of weary reluctance. Indeed, I often recommend to my business and technical communication clients that they *arbitrarily break apart long paragraphs*, even if these paragraphs are thematically cohesive.

Shorter paragraphs are dramatically helpful, but they are not enough. When our messages are concerned primarily with facts, steps, and collections of items, the paragraph is the least effective form of communication. And when our messages contain complex rules and decision processes, then the paragraph becomes counterproductive.

The sections below will illustrate some “makeovers” from paragraph to structured and graphical alternatives, including

- **Lists**—bulleted and numbered representations of items, facts, and steps; one-column tables
- **Scripts/Maps**—playscripts and other classic procedural formats, usually using a linear, two-column table
- **Synoptic Tables**—If-then decision arrays, processed in no particular order
- **Decision Trees**—Branching and iterative decision arrays
- **N-S Charts/Logic Boxes**—Human procedures based on the constructs of structured programming, incorporating both sequential and iterative steps

## Prose into Lists

The most basic and commonplace improvement is to convert a paragraph—or paragraph-length sentence—into a list. (The use of paragraphs can only be justified by demands of space, but the diseconomy of the unreadable text easily overwhelms the diseconomy of the wasted space.)

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### Exhibit 1: Sentence→List

Before

Before using this monitor, please make sure that the following items are included in your package; Omniscan 6SJES/12SJES monitor (1), power cord (1), warranty card (1), “Windows95 Monitor Information Disk” (1), and this operating instruction manual (1).

After

#### Contents Checklist

- Omniscan 6SJES or 12SJES monitor
  - Power cord
  - Warranty card
  - Windows95 Monitor Information Disk
  - Operating instruction manual
-

## Prose into Scripts

The material least well suited to paragraphs is a procedure. The illustrations below show, first, a simple step-by-step procedure and then a classic *playscript*, that is, a procedure with more than one actor.

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### Exhibit 2: Paragraph → Procedure

Before:

At the end of the report processing, the report filenames should display on the screen. If printed directly to the printer list the printer number and report filename. If printed to disk, list the directory (LST) and report filename. The naming convention should be LST:DELR.lis.

After:

At the end of report processing,  
DISPLAY the report filenames on the screen.

If printed **directly to printer**,  
LIST the printer number.  
LIST the report filename.

If printed **to disk**,  
LIST the directory.  
LIST the report filename.

[Naming Convention: LST.DE LR.lis]

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### Exhibit 3: Paragraph → Playscript

Before:

To get access to the files of another user on the LAN, you must get the owner of the files to grant written permission, specifying your read/write privileges on Form MIS89-10. This form must be sent to the LAN Administrator who, after receiving the form, has 5 days to create the software links necessary, consistent with the read/write privileges. (For read-only links, the LAN Administrator must respond within 3 days.) Upon receipt of an e-mail bulletin from the Administrator, you may access the designated files.

After:

<u>Actor</u>	<u>Action</u>
Applicant Owner	1. Tells file owner of access request 2. Completes form MIS89-10 2a. If denied, advises applicant
LAN Administrator	3. Creates necessary software link 3a. If read/write, within 5 days 3b. If read-only, within 3 days
Applicant	4. Sends e-mail bulletin to applicant 5. Accesses the file, as needed

**Prose into Tables**

The most difficult paragraphs for most readers to understand are those describing options, alternatives, and multiple paths. They tend to exhaust the attention of an L1 reader and create numerous opportunities for error and misinterpretation for an L2 reader. The illustration below converts a paragraph from a product manual into a clearer table.

**Exhibit 4: Paragraph → Table**

Before:

This monitor complies with “VESA DDC”, the standards of Plug&Play. If your PC/graphic board complies with DDC, select “Plug&Play Monitor (VESA DDC)” or this monitor’s model name (CPD-6SJES/6SJEST or CPD-12SJES/12SJEST) as “Monitor Type” from “Control Panel” on Windows95. Some PC/graphic boards do not comply with DDC. Even if they comply with DDC, they may have some problems on connecting to this monitor. In this case, select this monitor’s model name (CPD-6SJES/6SJEST or CPD-12SJES/12SJEST) as “Monitor Type” on Windows95.

After:

<b>If your PC/Graphic Card is...</b>	<b>Then You Should...</b>
VESA DDC Compliant	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Open Control Panel</li> <li>2. Select the Settings Tab</li> <li>3. Click the Change Display Button</li> <li>4. Click the Change Button next to Monitor Type</li> <li>5. Select Plug&amp;Play Monitor</li> </ol>
<b>NOT VESA DDC Compliant</b>  OR  Does not connect through Plug&Play	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Open Control Panel</li> <li>2. Select the Settings Tab</li> <li>3. Click the Change Display Button</li> <li>4. Click the Change Button next to Monitor Type</li> <li>5. Select CPD-6SJES as Monitor Type</li> </ol>

## Prose into Decision Trees

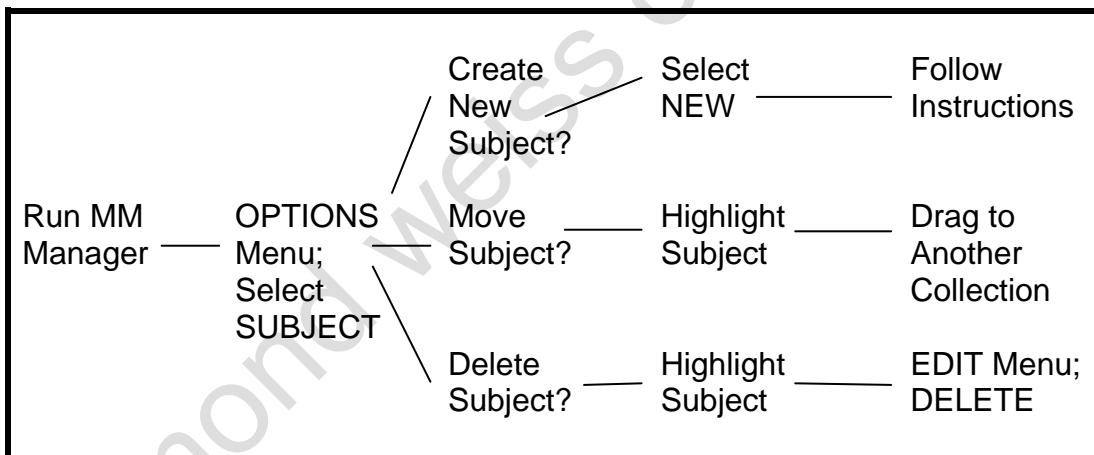
Often, to save space, technical communicators will compress a branching procedure into a single paragraph. The example below shows how much easier such a paragraph is to understand in the form of a tree diagram.

### Exhibit 5: Paragraph → Decision Tree

Before:

You can create new subjects just as you create new collections by clicking Subject on the Options menu, then accessing File menu. You can also move subjects from one collection to another by dragging them to the new collection, or you can delete subjects from MM Manager by highlighting the subject and clicking Delete on the Edit menu.

After:



## Prose into Logic Boxes and Nassi-Shneiderman Charts

When text includes procedures, decision rules, and even branching paths, there are many other diagramming options as well. The illustration below shows the conversion of paragraph into what is usually called a “logic box,” a graphical alternative to the decision tree, rendered more easily in a word processor.

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### Exhibit 5: Paragraph → “Logic Box”

Before:

If you receive the “Illegal Access Attempt” message, determine whether you have mistyped the name of the file. (If you have, retype and continue.) If the file name has been typed correctly, review your access privileges by pressing <PF18> (or Alt+F8 if you are using a PC as a terminal). If you are denied access, you must contact the DB administrator to get your privileges changed. If you are not denied access, call the Help Desk for consultation.

After:

Assure that the file name is typed correctly; then . . .

IF you are using...	THEN press...	And IF you receive the message	THEN you should...
A PC-terminal	ALT+F8	Denied	Call DB Administrator
		Not Denied	Call Help Desk
A Standard Terminal	PF18	Denied	Call DB Administrator
		Not Denied	Call Help Desk

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An especially useful diagramming technique, the Nassi-Shneiderman chart, was developed in the 1970s a flow-charting method for software engineers. It also works well to explain manual processes that involve decisions or iterations.

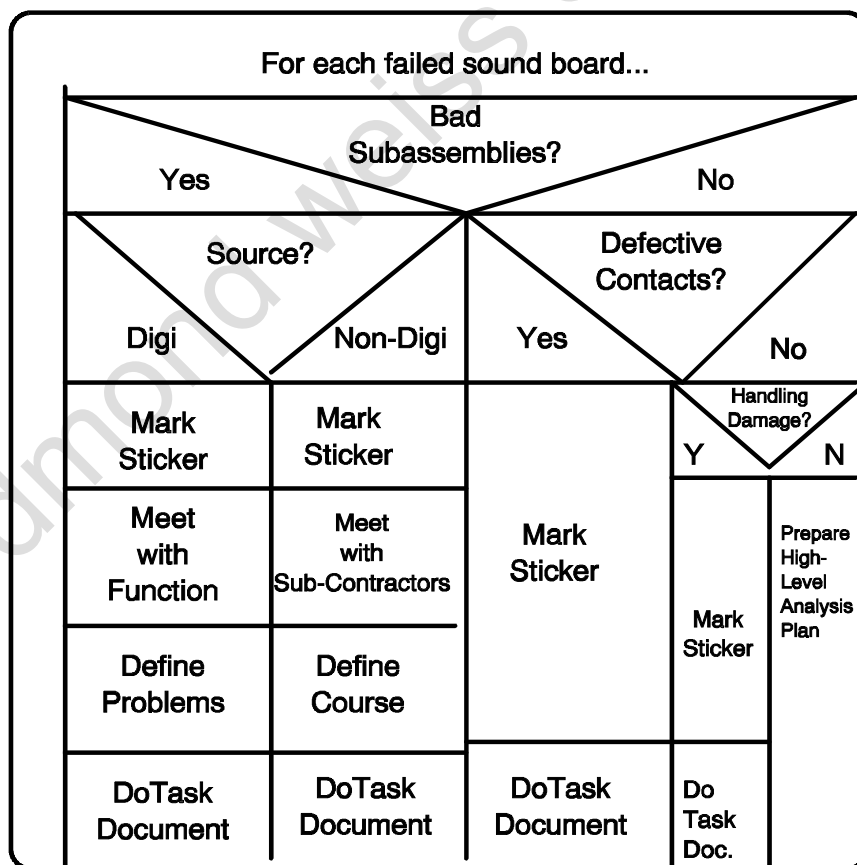
**Exhibit 6: Paragraph → Nassi-Shneiderman Chart**

Before:

**Defining the Category of Failure**

The Manager of the Failure Analysis Laboratory determines the class of the failure, marks the sticker, and prepares a task document. In the case of bad subassemblies, he/she meets with either the apposite DIGISOUND function or subcontractor. (No such meeting is required for defective contacts.) If the failure is from neither subassemblies, contacts, nor handling problems, the manager develops a High-Level Analysis Plan.

After:



## Conclusion: Are Graphics Culture-Free?

There are, of course, many other forms of structured text and graphical communication: traditional flowcharts, line drawings and photographs, captured screens ... The issue is less the particular style or format than the overall effect: Containing the size and number of paragraphs, decomposing long sentences, and generally reducing the processing burden on the L2 reader.

Of course, there is still a question of *localization*: whether the graphical forms described here communicate equally well in all language cultures. Obviously, technical communicators might want to “flip” a flowchart that moved left-to-right in a culture that reads right-to-left. And there might even be subtler problems with particular graphical shapes (or colors) that have unintended local significance.

It is not yet clear whether Tufte is overly confident when he asserts that "principles of information design are universal—like mathematics—and are not tied to unique features of a particular language or culture" (Tufte, E.R. *Envisioning Information*. Cheshire, CT: Graphics Press, 1990, p.10).

But even if these graphical patterns and relationships are not universal, or universally clear, they are at least far more readable, understandable, and translatable—to be sure—than prose paragraphs.

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