

# Module 1: How Readers Actually Read

*In these modules, you'll be learning about the science of informative writing: how can you write so that readers can understand you easily and your ideas can make a bigger impact on the world?*

There are different kinds of writing.

Creative writing is used to create novels, poetry, and plays.

Informative writing is used to share scientific and academic knowledge.

Creative writing is a form of self-expression.

Informative writing is a service to the reader.

When you write for yourself, you focus on what *you* want to say. When you write for your reader, you focus on what *your reader* needs to understand. What you focus on will determine how well people understand you and sometimes even whether anyone actually finishes reading what you write.

In informative writing in English, the burden of clarity falls on the writer, not the reader. In other words, English has a “writer-responsible culture”: we don’t expect readers to put in a lot of work when reading. They should not have to decode the text. Writers must do the work. They must try to express complex information in a way that is most accessible and easy to understand.

When readers encounter too much resistance, they will lose focus or even abandon the text. Have you ever given up on a text that you found hard to read? Or spent far too much time trying to figure out what it was trying to say? If you haven’t had this experience yet, you most likely will in the future: much academic writing is harder to read than it needs to be, which is why the principles given in these modules matter.

## How Reading Actually Works

When we read, we don’t actually read. That is, readers are not just reading one word after another. Something more complex is happening: their brains are constantly predicting what will come next based on what they have read just before. When their predictions match the next words their eyes see, readers experience flow, which makes reading feel effortless. When their predictions don’t match, readers either have to stop and re-read to try to figure out what went wrong, or they give up entirely.

These predictions happen subconsciously. Readers don’t consciously choose what to predict; their brains do it automatically.



Let's see whether this works with you.

How would you end the following phrases:

The first man who walked on the \_\_\_\_\_.

Blood, sweat, and \_\_\_\_\_.

Did your predictions match your classmates' predictions?

What a reader predicts tells us what a reader expects to see. So instead of talking about their predictions, we can talk about their **expectations**.

Your job as a writer is to give your reader what they expect at the moment they expect it. Writing an informative text clearly is an act of service.

Readers have many subconscious expectations. Below you will find five of the most common. When you meet these expectations, readers experience ease and comfort and can focus entirely on your content. But when you violate these expectations, readers feel confused and disoriented, and they have to stop reading to figure out what broke their flow.

## Reader Expectations

### 1. Parallelism: repeating the same structure

Sentences are easier to read if they have the same structure. This technique, called parallelism, is required with lists and comparisons. It is optional with other structures, but it is an ideal that we strive for because of its natural elegance.

When parallelism is applied correctly, the structure becomes invisible to the reader so that they can focus on the content.

#### Problem:

The experiment requires heating the sample, measurement of its mass, and that you record the temperature.

*Why this fails:* Three actions each have a different grammatical form. "Heating" is a gerund, "measurement" is a noun, and "that you record" is a clause. Readers must work to see that each action is a next step in the process.

#### Solution:

The experiment requires three steps: heat the sample, measure its mass, and record the temperature.

*Why this works:* All three actions use the same form (verbs): heat, measure, record. The pattern is identical. Readers don't have to focus on the structure.



## 2. Familiar information first

The beginning of a sentence (the topic position) is where readers expect to find something they already know. Start with information that is already in their minds. This technique gives readers a context before they have to process new information.

When you start with unfamiliar information, readers are forced to hold that new information in their minds as they work to figure out the context for it. That disconnect adds to their mental load.

### Problem:

The manuscript had been missing from the Vatican archive for five centuries. A rare fungus native to the limestone caves of central Italy had destroyed a third of its pages.

*Why it fails:* The reader is picturing a lost manuscript — mysterious, precious, finally found. Then a rare fungus native to limestone caves tears the reader's attention away from this manuscript and forces it onto something that appears to be unrelated and has not been mentioned before.

### Solution:

The manuscript had been missing from the Vatican archive for five centuries. Its pages, it turned out, had been slowly consumed by a rare fungus.

*Why it works:* "Its pages" refers to the manuscript that was already in the reader's mind.

## 3. New information last

The end of a sentence (the stress position) is where readers expect to see new, important, or surprising information. This position is where you place information you want to emphasize. Don't waste this position on weak or obvious information.

### Problem:

Sixty percent was the amount that the treatment reduced symptoms in the study.

*Why this fails:* The sentence ends with "in the study", which adds nothing. The most important, specific information (60 percent reduction) is actually in the topic position, where familiar information belongs.

### Solution:

The new treatment reduces symptoms by 60 percent.

*Why this works:* The sentence starts with information from the context ("new treatment") and ends with the dramatic finding ("reduces by 60 percent"). Readers remember the finding because it is in the stress position, where they expect to see new or surprising information.



#### 4. Verbs show the action

Readers expect to see the main action of the sentence expressed as a verb, not a noun. When you bury actions in nouns (a process called nominalization), you force readers to work harder to understand who did what.

##### **Problem:**

The committee made a decision to conduct an investigation of the allegations.

*Why this fails:* Two actions are buried in nouns: "decision" (hiding "decided") and "investigation" (hiding "investigate"). The actual verbs - "made" and "conduct" - do not express the actions that are happening.

##### **Solution:**

The committee decided to investigate the allegations.

*Why this works:* The actions are expressed as verbs: decided, investigate. Readers can see exactly what happened.

#### 5. Subject and verb should be close together

Readers subconsciously expect the verb to follow the subject without delay. When you insert a long clause between the subject and verb, readers must hold the subject in their minds as they try to process the interruption. Most readers cannot do this reliably.

##### **Problem:**

The students, after completing three years of preliminary coursework and passing a rigorous entrance examination, begin their specialized training.

*Why this fails:* The subject is "students" and the verb is "begin" - but 15 words separate them. By the time readers reach "begin," they will find it harder to remember *who* begins.

##### **Solution:**

The students begin their specialized training after completing three years of preliminary coursework and passing a rigorous entrance examination.

*Why this works:* The verb "begin" follows the subject "students" immediately. Readers never lose track of who does what. The new and heavier information comes after the main action.

### Why These Expectations Matter

Clear writing does not mean “dumbing down” the content. It means making the structure conform to readers’ expectations so that they can *focus* on the content, which tends to be more complex in informative writing. A clear sentence can have a simple structure and can still be sophisticated and precise. What makes it clear is that readers never have to stop to decode the structure. They focus all their mental energy on the ideas that you are trying to share.



Compare these two sentences:

**Unclear:** "The utilization of excessive nomenclature constitutes an impediment to comprehension."

**Clear:** "Using too many long words makes your writing hard to understand."

Both sentences say the same thing. The second is clearer because the verbs (using, makes) express the actions, the subject and verb are close together, and the vocabulary is accessible.

## A note on other languages

These modules are about academic and professional writing in English — the standard expected at universities and in international professional environments. The principles in these modules matter when you are doing informative writing in English: an essay, a research paper, or a professional report.

Other languages and writing traditions may follow different conventions because languages are set up differently. For example, German and Dutch speakers won't necessarily see it as a problem when the main verb is at the end of the sentence. Both Germanic- and Latin-language speakers tend to use more nouns than verbs in their texts. These structures would be considered overly wordy and often incomprehensible in English.

You will encounter published texts in English that do not conform to these expectations. Sometimes it will be because the text belongs to a different style of writing (creative writing) and sometimes it will be because the writer was not aware of the principles in these modules. These modules prepare you to be successful in an environment that expects you to be able to communicate your ideas clearly.

### Remember the fundamental principle:

When writing, you are acting in service to the reader. Readers should not have to work hard.