Cyberseminar Transcript

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Session: Grant Writing, Session 1: How and what to cut: A primer on editing your own work

Presenter: Christine Hartmann, PhD

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Rob: I’d like to introduce our presenter today. Tina Hartmann who is a Research Health Scientist at the VA Center for Healthcare Organization and Implementation Research, acronym CHOIR at the Bedford VA. Tina is also an author of four books and a successfully funded Principal Investigator for the VA. Tina, can I turn things over to you?

Dr. Christine Hartmann: Yes, please.

Rob: Here you go.

Dr. Christine Hartmann: Thank you Rob. I really appreciate the introduction and I also would like to acknowledge all of you who are out there listening. We’re going to try to do this a little bit differently and I’ll explain how in just a second. But I thought I’d start with a little bit of a waker-upper slide. This is actually the case I think for a lot of us, it’s difficult to see your own writing from the perspective of the person who is reading your writing.

But the good news in this is that you have an option to edit your own writing. Your first brain dump doesn’t have to be what people see.

People have the opportunity to edit and that’s what we are going to be talking about today. You can use certain skills and hone your own self-editing technique so that your own writing becomes clearer for your intended audience.

So that, as I said is the topic that we’ll be going through today. We’re going to be doing that in a slightly different way than is normal for a Cyberseminar and so I’m looking forward to the participation of all of you in what we are going to strive to have be some interactive learning.

Now those of you familiar with this platform realize that this platform doesn’t support that much interaction in terms of interaction with the audience. One thing it does do well is polls. So we’re going to be using these polls but we’re going to be using them not to find out about you but rather to have you write in the correct answers for what you can think of as stress-free pop quizzes. So we’re going to have a little quiz up on the screen and you are, we’re going to ask you to type, you know choose your correct answer or answers and just for those of you who aren’t familiar with this, this is completely anonymous we have no idea who you are so please do participate in the polls. Please make this fun and we can see they, they happen really quickly on screen and Rob will help us with that. And then we’re also going to subvert the question box and turn it into an answer box. So if I were doing this in a roomful of people I would have everyone, you know work on their own exercises and then we’d talk about those exercises. That’s not possible here with this, first of all it’s a large group of people, and second of all we have this rather clunky interaction format. So what we’re going to do is have some examples on the screen, as Rob talked about those examples are in that word document that he pointed out earlier. And we’re going to use those examples. They will also be right here up on my screen. You can look at those and type your revisions as you practice this tip, the skill that you just learned, revise the example and type that into the question box. And then Valerie Clark is with me here behind the scenes and she’s going to pull some examples into a Word document and we’ll talk about some of those correct answers. So please embrace the interactive nature of this. This is really going to be your chance to practice right here live and none of this is going to reflect badly on you. Please make it fun. We’re really hoping this works well and we look forward to trying and use this technique in the rest of this particular writing series.

So when I did a little homework on, before putting this presentation together I found this article online which has this really intriguing title here by Robert Porter. And I took a look through it and I don’t completely agree with him I have to say. Because one of the things he said for example is that traditional academic writing rewards verbosity whereas grant writing rewards levity. And I do agree that being clear and as brief as possible is important, I don’t think that verbosity should for verbosity’s sake ever really be rewarded. What I think is the most important thing is keeping your audience in mind. And that’s where editing comes into play and why editing is difficult because it, you already understand what you were trying to say so it’s difficult to take that step back and edit your own writing from the perspective of who your audience is. And keeping in mind also that particular expectations for the format in which you’re writing, that has to do with organization and length. So a tweet is different from an email, is different from a document that you write, is different from a journal article, is different from a grant proposal.

But I argue that good writing is consistent across all those mediums and the reason why is because good writing achieves the goal, the holy grail of cognitive ease for the reader. Cognitive ease is a term from this excellent book by Daniel Kahneman that I highly recommend if you haven’t read it before it’s called Thinking Fast and Slow. It’s rather a tome, so it requires a time commitment. It’s well worth the time but cognitive ease is one of the concepts that he introduces here and he has a lot more information about it. But you can think of cognitive ease as when your reader is experiencing cognitive ease that reader does not realize that they are reading. They are in the flow of your words. They are not tripping on anything.

And you can imagine that the opposite of cognitive ease is cognitive strain. And you see that here on the screen. When your reader is tripping over your words, your content, is not understanding, is having to backtrack that promotes vigilance on their part, suspicion, and they are more prone to making errors. So when you read those three words, three things there; vigilance, suspicion, and error-prone and you think about what you want for example if you’re writing a grant proposal and your reviewer is reading it those are things you do not want your reviewer to be feeling. So obviously what you want to promote is cognitive ease. Cognitive ease puts the reader in a good mood and they are prone to like what they see. This is the kind of reviewer’s experience that you would like to promote if you were writing a grant proposal. But it’s also the experience you’d like to promote if you were doing any other type of communication. So this is where I argue that if you keep cognitive ease in mind the things that we’re going to go through actually apply to all aspects of your life, not just grant writing. And the more you practice the better you will get.

So the first rule and I put this first for a reason because I actually think this is the most important thing that you can do in terms of your own editing. It’s the thing, when I edit people’s grants it’s, and other writing it’s the thing I write the most in the margins and the thing that I keep in mind the most when I am writing myself it’s this two-three-one rule. So that can also be changed to the one-three-two rule but it’s pretty easy to understand. It’s all here on the screen. It just means that the most important stuff either comes first or last. And the less important stuff goes in the middle. Now think about when you’re trying to explain something to a child. You are not ever, when you’re trying to explain something to a child, going to put the most important thing that you want them to understand in the middle of your explanation, right? Because the human brain doesn’t work that way. The human brain will pick out the first and last pieces and it will remember those pieces. It is very likely to forget what happens in the middle. That’s why this applies from the sentence level on up. All the way through paragraphs, sections, the whole entire grant proposal or whatever else you’re writing. And please in emails, my goodness that’s where I practice this potentially the most, is I want to see that first sentence in the email give me the information that’s important for the rest of the email. But there’s so many times when that doesn’t happen. Even when I write them I’m often having to do my own self-editing. So a big clue for this is you have a strong desire to bold or underline or italicize, I was just reviewing a grant recently where they said on page two in the middle of a paragraph and the overarching premise for this grant is, and they had that sentence underlined in the middle of a paragraph on page two. So I think by now you understand that that was probably not the right thing for them to do and if they had the editing cap on they would’ve seen that they had done that and they would’ve reorganized things according to the two-three-one or you know one-three-two rule.

So we’re going to look at this at the sentence level because we just don’t have time to look at anything else. And I picked this sentence that you see here on the screen for a reason. And the reason is that it highlights the arbitrary nature, and the arbitrary means that you are choosing what you think is the most important piece of information and the second most important piece of information right? So you could look at this sentence and say well I don’t really think that’s second most important I think that’s first most important. I think we’d probably all agree that the middle stuff should belong in the middle. But the point that I make is that what you, how you organize will affect how your reader understands it. So yes, this is your choice about what you put first and last and that is actually terrific because it, you are choosing what the reader will remember. Because you have put them first and last.

So I’m going to hand this over to Rob now for a quick poll. And this is our first interaction so please have some fun with this. Rob I’ll hand it over to you.

Rob: Thanks Tina. That poll is up. Tina would like to know, would like to, for you to choose the best beginning using the one-three-two rule for the first sentence of an email requesting someone to complete a survey. I’m writing to ask if you would take the time to, I hope you’re doing well and know how busy you are but, as part of a VA HSR&D grant our team was funded to, or you are an expert whose response to this survey below, blah, blah, blah. And Tina we have quite a few people having made their choices already. It’s up over 50%. Almost at 70 at this point, usually levels off around 75 or 80% so we’ll give people just a few more moments to make their decisions. I can tell here that it’s starting to slow down. And yeah it slowed down and it looks like it’s leveled off so I’m going to close the poll, share out the results. And 17% chose the first option I’m writing to ask if you would take the time, nobody chose the second one I hope you’re doing well and know you’re busy, 28% chose as part of a VA HSR&D grant our team was funded to, and 56% chose you are an export with, I’m sorry you are an expert whose response to the survey below. So now I’m closing the poll and we’re back on your slides.

Dr. Christine Hartmann: Great! Thank you so much Rob. So this is really interesting. So I, I thought this would diversify the answers. I’m really happy to hear that nobody chose number two. And if I were choosing I will tell you right up front that I would’ve choose number four and I’ll tell you why but I also will before that, say that I understand why some people chose numbers one and three. The reason I chose, I would have chosen number four is because the actual email request is that someone would complete a survey. And so if you think about the take-home message for when they open that email is please complete the survey. You don’t want to start your email like that but what you do want to clue them into is that there’s a survey coming and that they have been chosen to complete this for a reason. And so for number four if you follow this rule it’s actually that they are the expert and that there’s a survey below that is in my mind the most important piece of information. Now as I said you may feel differently and that is okay. What you think is the most important piece however should lead that email and that is the message.

Now we’re going to try the second interaction here and we’re going to do a revision. So I’m going to ask all of you and you see this here on your screen and it’s also in the Word document that Rob talked about, and I will say here this is a good place to say it when the first example comes up, that these are taken from my own writing. So I went back in history ten years ago or whatever and picked out sentences from my own writing that need some corrections. So let’s follow the two-three-one rule. Please write a revised version of this sentence and type it into the question box. Valerie is monitoring the question box and she’s going to pull some examples from that or an example, representative example for example, into a Word document and we’ll look at that briefly together with Valerie. Right now I’m going to give you a minute. I don’t want a lot of dead air but I’m going to give you a minute here to revise this sentence and type your answers or cut and paste. You can do it somewhere else and cut and paste it into the question box. All right, so I’m starting the timer and we’ll just give some silence on-air here while you all work on this.

Rob: Tina I think for next month we’ll have to have a recording of the Jeopardy song.

Dr. Christine Hartmann: That is an excellent idea, I love that!

Rob: We are getting a lot of responses.

Dr. Christine Hartmann: Terrific.

Rob: Real, a real lot.

Dr. Christine Hartmann: Thank you so much everybody for really participating in the interaction and I really think this will help you remember this too. So Valerie, we have reached a one-minute point and so I’m going to ask you to, actually Rob can you facilitate Valerie’s sharing the screen? Valerie if you’ve, have you been able to pull something into a Word doc?

Valerie Clark: I have! So\_

Dr. Christine Hartmann: Oh excellent.

Valerie Clark: Yeah we received a number of responses so this is, this is a pretty representative version.

Dr. Christine Hartmann: Okay, terrific. So I’m just going to talk us through that for a second. So you all took the example and made it into whatever you thought was the most important and second most important pieces coming first and last. And I’m really excited to hear that there were so many responses. I don’t have the question box up in front of me right now but thank you so much for participating in this and you will, I think, probably most of you agree that this part about the fast-paced environment and example of which industries it was, was not as important as the fact that it is possible to function in a hazardous environment and that you can achieve nearly failure-free results. So no matter which position you put those two things in I think we both, or both, we all agree that those are the more critical pieces of information and that it is probably better for cognitive ease to lead and end with those pieces rather than all that stuff in the middle. So Valerie thank you very much. Thanks everybody for participating and we’ll continue then with my slides, if Rob we can do that. Great, thank you. You should be able to see my screen again?

Rob: Sure can.

Dr. Christine Hartmann: Great. So the next tip sounds super simple. It’s one idea in one sentence. It is simple-sounding but don’t let that deceive you. It is a, if you want to call it an error then you can call it an error that we all make and if you don’t want to call it an error but just call it a writing style then it’s a writing style that we all learned in high school. And it is that complex sentences, longer sentences where this verbosity that Dr. Porter talked about was value to a certain extent. Because we were all learning how to write. However when we are writing and particularly when we’re writing something about something complex, such as in a research grant proposal, we actually would benefit by shortening sentences and by enabling the reader to pause between ideas. So it is easier to remember one idea than it is to remember two ideas. I think we all agree on that. And if you only have one idea per sentence a period acts as a pause mechanism and you therefore are able to enter that one idea into your brain and then move onto the next idea. So this, again in our holy grail is promoting cognitive ease, promotes cognitive ease.

We’re going to now go to a quick poll and Rob I’ll ask you to do this again with the audience. And here’s your second pop quiz. Please choose all that apply for this pop quiz.

Rob: And that question is which of the following may indicate you have more than one idea in your sentence. And you, as Tina said choose all that apply. I’m sorry. Compound sentence meaning multiple independent clauses, long dependent introductory clause, and difficulty reading sentence aloud in one breath. A lot of people have made their choices Tina, we have over 70% and so we’ll give people just a few more moments to make their decisions. I will say that since this a choose all that apply for some reason it comes up as over 100%. So the percentages won’t be exact but they’ll give us an indication of what people are thinking. So we have over 80% having made their choices so I’m going to close the people, share the results. And 96% and I’m making finger quotes say a compound sentence, 78% long dependent introductory clause, and 82% difficulty reading sentence aloud in one breath. And back on your slides Tina.

Dr. Christine Hartmann: Wonderful. Wow thank you everybody. That’s, I think you all are thinking right along the same lines that I am thinking. One of the easiest things to find is a compound sentence. And a compound sentence is something you know, two independent clauses connected by a conjunction, you know with a comma, right. We all were taught to write that way. I suggest that whenever you find yourself writing a comma, and, or a comma but and then continue with another clause you just cut it right there and put a period. It is easier for the reader to assimilate that first idea and then move onto the next sentence. Even though you may want to link those sentences and this gets to another point that isn’t talked about here today but it is okay to start the sentence with a conjunction. So it is okay to start the next sentence with but despite again what potentially your high school English teacher taught you. So dealing with compound sentences and finding them, long dependent introductory clauses are often difficult in terms of cognitive ease. So those of you that picked that answer I think are also correct because it depends on the length and it depends on the complexity of the sentence overall. But it is often a clue that you might want to break that content that’s in that long clause into a separate sentence. When you have such long clauses starting off a sentence they could also be ending a sentence and it follows in the same rule. And then one way to figure out whether the sentence might be easy or difficult for your audience is to read that sentence aloud and if you are struggling to read that sentence aloud in one breath or you are stumbling over that sentence then it might be a clue that the audience would stumble over it as well.

So now we’re going to do another revision. So this is a chance for you to practice this one sentence, one idea. And again mea culpa, I wrote this sentence so please help me by correcting this sentence for me. And you’re going to need to put it into two sentences. This one shouldn’t be that difficult. Please have at it creatively and Valerie will monitor the question box and I have started the timer. And think of the Jeopardy song in your head. I apologize for not having it this time but we’ll try to get it going next time.

So we have about fifteen seconds left. Valerie are you able to pull some things in, I hope.

Valerie Clark: Yeah, I’m working on it. I’m almost there. The answers, people are still answering, so.

Rob: Let me know when you’re ready.

Dr. Christine Hartmann: Yeah, we’re at a minute. So Valerie if you can pull one or a couple into a doc and then we can open that up.

Valerie Clark: Okay. I’ve\_

Rob: Here you go Valerie.

Valerie Clark: All right. Let’s see how you like these.

Dr. Christine Hartmann: Excellent. Thank you. So that’s terrific. So you all probably did this and Valerie were there a lot of similarities across the answers?

Valerie Clark: Pretty much.

Dr. Christine Hartmann: Yeah. So that’s what I expected it. So that you could break this example sentence into two sentences in different ways. And so some of you broke it at the beginning. Our conceptual framework relates to multiple levels, boing that’s one idea. And then it comprises six domains blah, blah. That’s the second idea that it, that it comprises and then those domains are all related. Now it’s possible also to break this into three sentences. So some of you may have done that. But then the second example that I see here is that it is, has multiple levels and six domains. Which you can encompass as the descriptor for the conceptual framework so that’s all one idea. And then the second sentence is the second bunch of ideas. Okay, great. Thank you all so much. I hope it’s helpful to do a little practice here, just as you’re going through these tips. So Rob tell me when I have the screen back. Okay great. I think I do.

So we’ll go onto the next tip here. And this also sounds pretty primitive right? Starting with the subject and verb. I will say that this is something that sounds primitive but is extremely important for promoting cognitive ease. And the example that I’ll always give when I talk about this is that imagine the subject and verb are the clothes hanger. And the rest of the sentence, all the words in the rest of the sentence are the clothes. So imagine that you are giving the person the clothes hanger and then giving them the rest of the clothes by which they can organize what you give them, right? If you don’t give them the clothes hanger first, if you don’t put the subject and verbs first then you’re piling all these clothes into their arms without any means for them to organize it. So you can see which one would promote cognitive ease because obviously cognitive ease is the more organized way for the brain to work through your writing. So if you give the brain a lot of information without giving them any organizing principle and in English the organizing principle is the subject and the verb, then it promotes cognitive strain. You know you can think of it visually, it’s holding all those clothes without a clothes hanger. It’s a strain and you want to avoid that. So as simplistic as it sounds potentially and it again goes against this idea that we as academics or good writers want to be [unintelligible 25:25] it is important to think about how you have constructed your sentence from the perspective of your audience. Not from your perspective you understand what you were trying to write but rather from the perspective of the audience. So I have written entire grant proposals, so however many pages that was depending on each, you know successfully funded, first-round funded even grant proposals as, with the entire grant proposal written subject-verb-object sentences. And so it is possible. It doesn’t have to sound boring. You can vary things and one thing to keep in mind here is this exception when you need to set the context again for your audience. When the reader needs to know something before it can understand or [unintelligible 26:11] they can understand the rest of your sentence then you need to give them that piece of information before they get to the rest of the sentence.

So it, we’re not going to do a poll for this one. I couldn’t think of an exciting poll to do that wouldn’t be so super obvious. So instead we’re going to jump right into the revision here. So please revise the sentence that you see here on your screen so that the subject and verb come first. And you may need, depending on how you do this, to make multiple sentences out of this. So I’m going to start the clock here. And allow you a chance to work on this. Rob I just realized just for the purpose of the recording, should I read the sentence out loud? I missed it on the first two examples but maybe I should read this?

Rob: It probably wouldn’t hurt.

Dr. Christine Hartmann: Yeah. Okay. So based on extensive preliminary analyses our power analysis and practical considerations regarding study scope, we propose selecting a stratified random sample of 64 sites.

Rob: Let me take the opportunity to let people know that no you are not able to copy from the broadcast of the GoToWebinar software but the handout that I mentioned in the, in my opening comments in the handout section of the GoToWebinar dashboard will allow you to do so. You can click on that and I believe it opens up a word document where you can copy and paste content. Copy, edit, and then paste the content.

Dr. Christine Hartmann: I’m just giving people a couple extra seconds, because we were talking. Valerie do you have some responses coming in and are able to put them into a document.

Valerie Clark: I’m working on that now. We’re, they’re still streaming in.

Dr. Christine Hartmann: Okay.

Valerie Clark: Okay, I think, I think I’ve got a couple that a, that look good.

Dr. Christine Hartmann: Perfect. Okay. All right. Let me see here. Excellent. So the examples that you have moved things around, which is creative and important I think. So we have an example where it says we propose selecting a stratified random sample of 64 sites, period. So we propose selecting that’s something we propose, subject-verb. And then we based is the subject-verb for the next one, we based this on extensive preliminary analysis, blah, blah, blah, analyses blah, blah, blah. And then the second example it moved that around and then it said the subject and verb are we considered our extensive preliminary analyses blah, blah, blah. And then based on these, and that’s the information that you need to know ahead of time, very nicely done, we propose selecting a stratified random sample of 64 sites. Okay, wow! These are really nice examples. Thank you everybody for participating and thinking this through in different ways and a little bit creatively. I really appreciate that. I’m glad these exercises are looking as though they are helpful to all of you.

So I’ll go back to the next tip here which is, this is a little bit more advanced I would say. And that is thinking about the list that we write when we write grant proposals or we write, you know emails. I can think of so many times when I want to write a list of things that I want people to remember. It is important to remember that lists, the numbers that you include in those lists have a potentially powerful meaning for the reader. One is that if you have a triad of a list it is something that I often shoot for. And when you read now with this in mind you will notice that sometimes powerful writing in a newspaper story that you read or a book that you read is often focused on this idea of a triad. So there will be some sort of list and a parallel construction and you will have three things in that list. It is a very fulfilling feeling to read a list that has three things in it. If you limit your list to two things which is sometimes something you want to do, it creates a dichotomy so be aware that if you only have two things in your list that it creates sort of a zero/one, black/white scenario for your reader. And then if you have more than four things it’s often good to give more, you know, more than that just to show that you are really aware that this is the infinity of possibilities. So one of the things that comes right to mind for me is that the beginning of a specific aims base for writing a grant proposal, we often talk about the impact of the disease state or the problem on something. And then we often list those things and we squish it all together because we don’t have a lot of space, it’s only one page and so that ends up being a long list. So it is important, I think to think about the order of that list. So thinking about back to the two-three-one, one-three-two rule that the first and last things and particularly in a list like this the last thing is going to be something that the reader remembers because the rest of the sentence precedes that list. The beginning of that list is really not at the beginning of that sentence and it is the last thing that becomes important for the reader to know.

So we’re going to practice a little bit and here’s where I’m hoping you actually have a little bit of fun with this. I’m going to ask you to write this sentence with these things in the sentence and make it into the order that you would like to see. But don’t necessarily think of this as a grant proposal. Think of it as you’re trying to convince somebody in your family or you’re writing an email to friends or you’re putting a tweet out there. How would you construct this list if it’s the sentence begins, poor sleep quality is associated with and then you have decrease in memory, decrease in mobility, decrease in health, decrease in energy, decrease in survival. So write yourself an interesting sentence or a couple of sentences that include a list of these things and I will start the timer right now. And then wait for those responses to come in. So have a little fun with this one if you can. Okay Valerie we are coming up on a minute.

Valerie Clark: Well we, we’ve got a lot of creative people in the crowd, so.

Dr. Christine Hartmann: Glad to hear it!

Valerie Clark: Okay, I can, I think I’ve got a few.

Dr. Christine Hartmann: Okay, excellent. I’m excited to see them. All right. Wow! All right. Good. I see an exclamation point that’s always a sign of creativity. Excellent. Okay so we have some and I’m sure there were a whole bunch, right? These are just some examples?

Valerie Clark: Yes. Yes.

Dr. Christine Hartmann: Yeah. Okay, great. So we have, okay first one, poor sleep quality is associated with decreased energy, memory, mobility, health, and survival and boom, actually I see that all of them end on survival. So point taken home by all of you that you want to end on something that people will remember. So if they only remember the first and last part of that sentence, poor sleep quality is associated with survival, that is a pretty important take-home message I would say. Excellent. So we have another example here, poor sleep quality is associated with many terrible things including decreased energy and memory and lower rates of mobility, health, and survival. That’s, that is also a really memorable sentence. And then I love this, get more sleep, poor sleep quality is associated with decreased health, memory, energy, morbidity, and survival. Fantastic. That really puts the, that’s following the one-three-two rule of let’s put the main message upfront, get more sleep. I think we could all use that in our lives! Thank you everybody. This is more than fun than I even anticipated it being. So thanks a lot. I’m having a great time with your examples.

Okay so we have two more tips to go. And one of them is eliminating clutter and promoting beauty. Promoting beauty is one of the ways that you can promote cognitive ease. So there are many ways to promote cognitive ease as I said. No one has time to get into the whole wonderful world of cognitive ease but one of them is promoting this lack of stumbling and lack of messiness in your writing. And so stumbling would be on the part of the reader. And what you want to do is remember that clutter, and that, I think you could also encompass in that word verbosity works against you because it makes your writing more difficult for your audience of choice to understand. So again, if that’s in an email or if that’s in a grant proposal it is more difficult to understand writing that is cluttered with things that could be simplified.

So we’re going to go through a couple of examples. So I have, I organized this into three separate slides. One here is words and phrases. So there are lists online and in that book by, I say that book you haven’t been introduced to that book yet so I have some resources for you at the end here and so there are books that will tell you things that could be reduced in size. But let’s just talk about the first word here utilize. It is a, I guess a pet peeve of mine it is difficult, more difficult to understand than use and as are all of the words here in this list. And I encourage you to think about the words that you love to use. That you, and I’m sorry because I know I, I will say this only because I know I suffer from the same problem myself that I think sometimes I sound more intelligent if I use these words. It is actually not about how intelligent I sound it is about how the reader is able to read my writing. And if I keep that in mind then I can edit myself down out of things like I have to say I default to in order to many more times than I would like and it’s on this editing path, remember the you know the essence of good writing is rewriting. So keep that in mind and I don’t beat myself up when I have yet another in order to in my writing and I take it down because 99% of the time you can get rid of the in order and just have it be to and get right to the point.

Another thing that you can keep in mind that is easy to focus on is the word that. And I have two examples here. If you’d just take a second and read the first and second sentence. So the first sentence is, serious concerns exist about the quality of care that is received in nursing homes. And the second one, serious concerns exist about the quality of care received in nursing homes. You can just see that even, I mean I deliberately paused a bit on the that but I think in your own brain as you read these sentences for the first time you saw that the second sentence was easier to read. Always think about promoting cognitive ease and if you can read the sentence without the that in it, take the that out of the sentence. And that is a really easy way to both shorten word count and get some more space in your grant proposal for example. But also to promote cognitive ease in your reader.

And then another thing that we learned in high school was all about, or maybe we learned this in junior high school, was all about adverbs. And what we didn’t learn is that adverbs are almost always useless. They take away from the power of the verb and especially in a type of writing that all of us listeners do, we are I would say we would do well to remember to remove those adverbs. I italicized the adverbs in the first sentence here and took them out in the second. I hope you see that it’s easier to read. But I will also home in on this word importantly. Because there are a lot of grant proposals that value the reviewer edit where I see people using words like importantly, significantly, surprisingly, and I encourage you to reconsider using those words for two reasons. One is that readers don’t like being told what to do. With particularly a grant proposal reviewer doesn’t like to be told what to do. So if you are telling them that this is an important point or significant point or a surprising point, I think they might react well let me make up my own mind whether or not that’s significant. Secondly if you follow the one-three-two rule or the two-three-one rule you don’t need to put that there. Because you will be organizing all of your writing such that the first and second most important things are in places that your reader will remember and therefore because they remember them they will recognize them as important. And so it, I think is a, it is an artifact that will drop out of your writing style once you embrace the writing style that actually understands the reader’s perspective and how you can place your most important pieces of information such that the reader is likely to remember them. Then you don’t need a word like importantly to call something out.

So we’re going to do one final write in the question box scenario for all of you. And this, okay I am pleased to say this was not an actual sentence of mine. I took an actual sentence of mine and added more clutter. Okay. So please rework this sentence. There’s a lot of clutter in here. Please have some fun, rework this, take it out. I think you could probably make this sentence super-duper short. But in any case work on it a little bit. I will time you for a minute here and then I’ll have Valerie put some things in, on the screen. Oh and I should read this out loud; significantly regarding the question as to whether we should treat asymptomatic patients, we do not have enough information to date due to the fact that little research has been done in this area and that which has been performed is equivocal in nature. Holy cow. Good luck.

Rob: Tina, significantly I believe that we will have time for Q & A but there’s been a couple of comments and one question. Would you like me to read those to you now? Or just be silent?

Dr. Christine Hartmann: Why don’t, just because it might be difficult for folks, why don’t we save those if it does look like we’ll have a little bit of time. Unless it’s a question that’s relevant right now.

Rob: No.

Dr. Christine Hartmann: Okay, great. I do encourage all of you writing in your responses to be creative. You don’t have to use all the words on the screen. You can add your own. Okay Valerie we’re coming up at a minute.

Valerie Clark: [unintelligible 43:02] so you can get a couple more responses and then I think I can make my final selection.

Dr. Christine Hartmann: Okay great.

Valerie Clark: Okay. How’s that.

Dr. Christine Hartmann: [unintelligible 43:27] Perfect. Thank you. I imagine here there were also, there was a large variation in what people had sent in, is that right?

Valerie Clark: Yeah, yeah I mean we, they got more creative as they went along, so.

Dr. Christine Hartmann: I’m so glad to hear it. So that really makes me happy. So one, the first one is here, should we treat asymptomatic patients. So starting with a question, that is awesome, wonderful hook to hook your reader in with a question. And then provide the answer, the little research that exists doesn’t give a clear answer. So that would be, I mean I would read farther if I were reading that one. Very nicely done. And then, no conclusive research exists on whether to treat to asymptomatic patients hampering decision making. Very nice. Also took what was here, rather complex, and full of clutter and made it a very clear statement. So I’m sure the other ones were also equally as creative and interesting. And Valerie thanks so much for, I know it’s a hard job to be able to pull out of a, you know, a continually sliding number of responses, so thank you very much for that. Great. And I will just take over here again and we will move onto tip number six.

Which is that we often neglect I think to remember the power of reading aloud. So what, for those of you who are already doing this I think you know how powerful a read-aloud is. But I will tell all of you that I, for every journal article I submit these days and for every grant proposal I submit I print the whole thing out and read it aloud. And when I mean aloud I don’t mean silently and I don’t mean whispering. I mean close the door have people think you’re on a conference call and read the entire thing slowly and aloud to yourself. You will be surprised at what you find. And one of the things to watch out for is your own cognitive ease. Because when you read aloud you are hearing that piece of writing the way the reader will hear it. And it is different from hearing it in your head. You will be able to point out to yourself when you stumble. And when you find something difficult to understand. Even if you’ve been working on it up to the last second and you print it out and read it aloud. Or you don’t have to print it out, I just find it’s different, it feels also different to put it in a different medium. I operate exclusively electronically but then I print this out in large print and it looks different to me. And I also have that experience of seeing it in a different way that helps break the cycle in my head of oh I know what I wanted to say. But it is really the power of reading something aloud. So for those of you, that enables you to find the places of cognitive strain that the reader might encounter. So for those of you who aren’t doing this right now, it is the, so I organized this presentation in the one-three-two rule so the first most important thing was the one-three-two rule, the two-three-one rule and the second most important thing was the read aloud. If you do nothing else please organize around two-three-one and please read aloud.

So I, I also have now created it’s the last part of what I’ll go through are some resources that I created for all of you. So I wanted you to have one slide that summarized everything. And the reason I wanted you to have one slide that summarized everything was because you can print it out. And I’m not a big paper fan but, or you could put it on your desktop. The, having all of this together especially when some of these things are new to you and as you get better at these things you could put other things on and print them out and tape them to your monitor or wherever it is that you’re going to be seeing them. It is helpful when you have them right in front of you so that you can remember the things that you are trying to do when you edit. It helps both as you are going through the process of writing in the first place. And as you get better at these things you’ll catch them immediately as you put them to the page but even if you don’t do it as you put it to the page and you’re only catching this as you’re doing the editing that is fine. It’s helpful to have that list there. So I made that list for you.

So some other resources are going to come up in the second of the Cyberseminar series. So we have another of these, we have two more of these writing series. And I’ll just talk a little bit about the second one because that’s coming next, in February. What I did for the February one was sent a survey out to top people in VA and NIH who have really excellent, highly funded researchers and good writers and I sent them this survey. They responded and I am collating their results about what constitutes good writing and what constitutes bad writing. So I can tell you that some of these results are really interesting, to me anyway because they both have a common thread. It’s amazing how these people who aren’t talking to each other and we have some international responses, these people don’t know each other. Or they don’t know that I sent each a survey individually so they don’t know who the other people are who are responding. They have similar answers in some ways. And then they have other tips that the other people didn’t have. So this is going to be not based on me or books but really on successfully funded research investigators and also I sent it to a small cohort of people who are just really good writers. So authors of books who are really good writers. And got their input and I’m really looking forward to sharing all of that with you in the second seminar of this series.

I put together some do-it-yourself exercises for all of the tips that we went over today. So to the extent that you’re interested these ones in red are the six things that you can do if you want to practice a little bit more than you got to do today. How to implement these tips when you’re doing your own writing.

I also pulled together a set of books for you. So these are not in the one-three-two rule, these are in the first, second, and third, fourth order of books I would recommend if you’re looking to improve your own writing. I’ve read tons of books on writing and editing and these are the ones that I really would say if you’re looking to improve your editing number one choice would be this Writing Tools book by Roy Peter Clark is a simple, easy to read book. And it breaks things up and a lot of what you saw today you will also see in this book. The second book isn’t a writing book. It is a book about how to make your ideas stick in the mind of your audience. So it goes along with this principle of cognitive ease, how can you make something easy for people to remember. And people who know me, know that I am a big fan of Chip and Dan Heath and this was their first book called Made to Stick. And I highly recommend it. So I also recommend the other books on this list as well. But if I were choosing one for all of you it would be the Writing Tools book. And then a close second of course Made to Stick.

I have myself, as Rob said I’m, you know I’m successfully funded VA/NIH. I have a number of large plans and book rules. I have written books and worked with the editors on those books. I’ve taken writing classes, editing classes, scriptwriting classes, and I felt like I needed a place to make a brain dump. Because I wanted a place where if you’ve searched for something you weren’t going to get the answer, oh well we know how to help you write a better proposal but you need to pay us $200 to get our exclusive blah, blah, blah. So this is a not for profit Tina Hartmann brain dump, basically a blog post website where I put a, things organized into different categories. And so I think you can now see, this is the actual site and you can sign up for getting tips in your inbox, that’s the only reason that it’s an automated process. I don’t even see the emails. But once a week or so I post another tip and you can get those right in your inbox. You can see that there are different things. You can look at editing for example. And the site actually can be reached it just has to load first. So there are posts on editing, there are posts on grammar here, polishing, revisions, specific aims. There are a whole bunch of different things that I cover and you can see that the two-three-one rule is the most important rule, ever! As listed here. So to the extent that you’re interested this is a place for more information and it actually will grow over time.

We do have a little bit of time Rob and I would just, before we go into any kinds of questions, just again this was an experiment here for all of us here at HSR&D in the Cyberseminar series to try to make this a little bit more interactive instead of just having one person talk at you the whole time. I want to thank the audience so much for participating in the interactive portion of this. I am glad that you participated. I hope you found it helpful. And I want to thank all of you for spending the time here. I know your time is precious and I hope that this was able to give you at least a primer on what things to do to edit your own writing. And look forward to your participation in the next two pieces of this Cyberseminar series. And then Rob, I’ll hand it over to you in case there are questions. But thank you everybody so much. I’m not trying to end it prematurely I just wanted to make sure to get my thanks in there before the top of the hour.

Rob: Yeah we do have a few questions and comments, but not a lot of time. So quick answers I guess.

Dr. Christine Hartmann: Yeah.

Rob: During the sleep, proper sleep section, one person asks does the list need to repeat the verb for emphasis?

Dr. Christine Hartmann: Oh. I would say if it’s a different verb for each one. But I deliberately picked the same, so it was all heading in the same direction. No. I would not repeat the verb in that example for emphasis because it is one more thing for the reader to remember and the reader will slide through that list with the verb in mind because the verb is the proverbial, not proverbial my example was the coat hanger, right? So you’ve given them the coat hanger unless you want them to switch coat hangers or the list is extraordinarily long meaning each component of the list is extraordinarily long I don’t see any reason to repeat the verb there.

Rob: Thank you. One person says, humans like threes this is an observation from anthropology and religious studies. Another person comments, I feel that the problem with some of the rewrites, these rewrites is that they add length which is a premium for grant proposals.

Dr. Christine Hartmann: So that, so I’m trying to think of one of the rewrites that added length but yes, length is a premium but I, I agree. Length is a premium. I think that by self-editing for cognitive ease you will be able to eliminate words, more words than you add. And so sometimes cognitive ease promotion requires adding some words, often it requires taking away words. And so I think if you keep in mind the cognitive ease principle as you write a grant proposal that you will find that it works to your advantage. I will also say that I have had the distressing personal experience of having to cut one entire page out of a grant that was, I thought tightly edited because of my own stupidity. And I will tell you that no matter how tightly edited you think your grant is, it could be more tightly edited. And I know that from personal experience. So keep that Roy Peter Clark book in front of you and edit the heck away and never sacrifice space for cognitive ease.

Rob: Thank you. We have two questions left. I’m going to leave the last one, I think it’s the most important but I’m going to leave that one to the last. This person writes, wait I thought rhetorical questions were pretty much always a no-no? And we have one after this.

Dr. Christine Hartmann: Okay, rhetorical questions. So is that, I imagine that might be referring to the should we treat asymptomatic patients?

Rob: I think so. It was towards the end.

Dr. Christine Hartmann: So you, this isn’t a rhetorical question. This is a question that you are assuming your reader doesn’t know the answer to. And there’s a difference. So if you actually think that your reader doesn’t know the answer, you as the grant author obviously know the answer. For you it might feel like a rhetorical question. But remember that you’re, if you’re writing a grant proposal your reviewers are not necessarily in your field as a matter of fact you’ll be lucky if one of your reviewers is in your field. And so in that case this question would come across as a hook, as opposed to a rhetorical question.

Rob: Thank you. This last one this person asks, can you please go over one-three-two and two-three-one rules. I did write to them that it’s the same thing and that you went over it earlier\_

Dr. Christine Hartmann: Yes.

Rob: \_ but that I’d ask if we had time.

Dr. Christine Hartmann: Yes. So basically it’s your call I would say in some cases you want the first thing that the person reads to be the most important thing and in some cases the last thing that people read, you want them to remember. As I read somewhere and I don’t have, I couldn’t find it but I read somewhere that people are actually most likely to remember, this might be in the marketing realm, most likely to read and respond to a P.S. in an email more than anything else in the email. And that, that would then follow the two-three-one that the thing you put last is actually the thing that in email people are most likely to respond to. So it is a judgment call whether you choose to do a two-three-one or a one-three-two. The main thing to remember is three is in the middle.

Rob: Well thank you Tina Hartmann and Valerie Clark, assistant extraordinaire. I think this was a success! Audience members don’t forget that this was session one of three, there’ll be two more. One next month and one the month after. You can go ahead and sign up for them if you already haven’t, at the same website that you found this one at. With that I will just thank you both Tina and Valerie again for preparing and presenting today. We got a lot of people saying this was fantastic, this was great, I really enjoyed these tips, I really, I’m going to put this into use. So again I think this was pretty successful. And I’m looking forward to the rest of the series. So with that I’ll just say thanks one more time and wish everyone a good day.

[ END OF AUDIO ]