

# WRITING FOR IMPACT

## BEST PRACTICES & LESSONS LEARNED

**MATT JONES**

CHIEF IMPACT OFFICER, UNEP-WCMC

CO-CHAIR, IPBES ASSESSMENT ON BUSINESS &  
BIODIVERSITY

# SUMMARY: WRITING FOR IMPACT

- Understand your audience
  - Focus on the 'Why'
  - Understand your narrative before writing
  - State your assumptions
  - Structure paragraphs effectively
  - Craft clear & concise sentences
  - Avoid unnecessary words & phrases
  - Use clear & consistent language
  - Craft effective lists & examples
  - Ensure balance & representation in writing
-

# UNDERSTAND YOUR AUDIENCE



- **Know your audience: consider their needs, levels of expertise** in the subject matter, etc.
  - Be careful when using **complex terms and concepts**, especially in summaries for policymakers
  - **Avoid prescriptive language** unless appropriate for your document type
  - Ensure key messages in summaries are **supported by information in the main text of the technical assessment report**
  - Remember that **your reader may not immediately grasp connections** that seem obvious to assessment authors
-

# FOCUS ON THE 'WHY'



Assessment findings should **address the key policy questions** identified during the *scoping stage*.

Consider:

- Why are we including this section in the assessment?
  - Which **policy question** is this section addressing?
  - Who would benefit from the findings presented in this section?
  - What is the key message in this section? Is it clearly communicated?
-

# UNDERSTAND YOUR NARRATIVE



*Understand your narrative before writing each section*

- Use **sentence outlines** to organise your thoughts before writing
  - Make **connections clear** for your reader
  - **Balance explanation:** balance between drawing a clear connection and overexplaining
-

# UNDERSTAND YOUR NARRATIVE



Include constructive recommendations when stating gaps

NN0

*(X) “we do not yet have clear guidelines for achieving responsible, effective management of natural resources”*

*(✓) “Developing clear management guidelines can improve natural resource management”*



## Slide 44

---

**NN0**

I've included this point under 'understand your narrative' because it feels most appropriate here, but happy to place it anywhere else you feel is more appropriate

Noor Noor, 2024-09-13T16:08:39.371

# STATE YOUR ASSUMPTIONS



*Whenever possible, **acknowledge the key assumptions** underlying your work to help readers follow your logic*

*Make relevant links to the assessment's conceptual framework to help readers understand key assumptions*

---



## Slide 45

---

**NN0**    [@Matt Jones] - this section may not be as relevant, so feel free to amend or delete as you see fit  
Noor Noor, 2024-09-12T17:12:47.383

**MJO 0**    I think this is still relevant in a the context of a national assessment  
Matt Jones, 2024-09-17T17:01:12.341

# STRUCTURING PARAGRAPHS



- **Lead with key findings, not background information**  
Assessment report ≠ textbook: problems, threats & actionable items should come first- background/educational text can be cited or annexed
  - **Emphasize present knowledge over historical context**  
*(X) “There is a long history of concern over the environmental effects of fishing in coastal habitats, but the vast scope of ecological degradation is only recently becoming apparent (citation)”*  
*(✓) Cite the source then say, “fishing practices are causing widespread destruction”*
-

# CLEAR & CONCISE SENTENCES



*Use short sentences to make your point clear*

- Long sentences are harder to understand
  - Short sentences are **easier to translate**
  - Long sentences often **get longer when edited**, while short sentences are more likely to **remain unchanged**
-

# CLEAR & CONCISE LANGUAGE



*Use clear & definitive language, avoid **speculative** wording*

*(X) “there is a chance that the ongoing disappearance of wetlands might lead to enormous impacts on local communities.”*

*(✓) “loss of wetlands can have enormous impacts on local communities, including...”  
(stating precisely what those impacts are, based on best knowledge, citing data / references)*

*Use straightforward language, with less **jargon***

*(X) “utilisation of synergistic monitoring & evaluation frameworks to maximise impacts for multi-sector stakeholders ”*

*(✓) “the use of jointly developed monitoring frameworks can enhance impacts across multiple sectors”*

---

# CLEAR & CONCISE LANGUAGE



- Avoid **sensational** language and **colloquial** sayings

(X) “catastrophic impacts” - (✓) “*significant impacts*”

(X) “*the elephant in the room*” - (✓) “*the unaddressed yet significant issue*”

(X) “*think outside the box*” - (✓) “*offer innovative solutions and ideas*”



# CONSISTENT LANGUAGE

- **Develop common glossary for authors**
    - Agreed **definitions** of terms & concepts for consistency & coherence
    - Examples: IPBES Glossary, Global/Regional Assessments, National Reports, etc.
  - **Consider developing a ‘style guide’**
    - A guidance document that outlines rules for writing, i.e. English spelling guide, referencing style, using numbers, geographic names, capitalisation, etc.
-

# CONSISTENT LANGUAGE

- **Agreed definitions:** ensure consistency & coherence with agreed terms (i.e. common glossary)
  - **Address concerns:** tackle definition concerns directly, especially deviations from established definitions (e.g., CBD).
  - **Consistency in descriptive language:** (e.g., “negative impacts” vs. “adverse impacts”)
  - **New concepts:** be cautious when introducing new concepts to avoid multiple interpretations.
-

# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [Ecosystems and Human Wellbeing: A Manual for Assessment Practitioners](#) (UNEP-WCMC)
    - See pp 147 - 148 for guidance on "presenting complex information".
  - [IPBES Guide on the Production of Assessments](#)
    - Box 2.1 and Box 2.2.3 provide guidance on writing for the technical assessment report (see examples on next page)
-



# EXERCISE

1. Read through the sample text & **identify issues** based on the guidance
2. Rewrite the text to address these issues, focusing on best practices →
3. Present / discuss the changes made and the rationale behind them.
4. Compare your rewrite to the sample improved version, noting similarities and differences in approach.

## BEST PRACTICES

1. Lead with **key findings**
2. Use **active voice**
3. Use **clear & definitive language**
4. Avoid **speculative wording**
5. Emphasise present knowledge over **historical context**
6. Highlight **constructive recommendations** when stating gaps
7. Avoid **sensational language** and **colloquial sayings**

# TEXT 01 – READ

---

There is a long history of concern over the environmental effects of fishing in coastal habitats, but the vast scope of ecological degradation is only recently becoming apparent.

It is believed by many researchers that there are reasons to think that some declines in marine ecosystems can be slowed or even reversed, although this remains to be seen. There is a chance that the ongoing disappearance of coastal wetlands might lead to enormous impacts on local communities.

Unfortunately, we do not yet have clear guidelines for achieving responsible, effective management of these natural resources. The situation could potentially become catastrophic if action is not taken soon.

# TEXT 01 – ISSUES

---

- Opens with historical context instead of key findings
- Uses passive voice (e.g., "*It is believed by many researchers*")
- Contains speculative language (e.g., "*there is a chance*", "*might lead*", "*could potentially*")
- Lacks specific, actionable information or recommendations
- Vague terms without quantification (e.g., "*enormous impacts*")
- Uses sensational language ("*catastrophic*")
- Lacks citations or references for o key findings
- No specific examples of ecological degradation or impacts

# TEXT 01 - SAMPLE REWRITE

---

Recent studies document widespread ecological degradation in coastal habitats due to fishing practices [Citation].

Evidence suggests opportunities for slowing and reversing marine ecosystem declines through targeted interventions, including implementation of sustainable fishing quotas, habitat restoration, and pollution reduction measures [Citation].

The ongoing loss of coastal wetlands significantly impacts local communities, affecting food security, flood protection, and economic stability [Citation]. To address these challenges, the following actions are recommended [Insert recommendations & citations]

# TEXT 02 – READ

---

For a very long time, indigenous peoples and local communities have known a lot about fishing and how to manage fish populations. But nowadays, this knowledge is disappearing at an alarming rate.

It is thought by many experts that there might be some ways to save this knowledge, but it's not clear if it will work. There's a possibility that losing this knowledge could have a huge impact on how we manage our fisheries in the future.

Unfortunately, we don't really have any good plans for preserving this knowledge right now. If nothing is done soon, there will be disastrous consequences for fish stocks.

# TEXT 02 – ISSUES

---

- Begins with a vague time reference ("*For a very long time*") instead of specific findings
- Uses passive voice (e.g., "It is thought by many experts")
- Uses informal, sensational/alarmist and colloquial language
- Contains speculative and uncertain language (e.g., "might be some ways", "not clear if it will work")
- Lacks specific examples of Indigenous knowledge or its applications
- Does not offer specific, actionable recommendations when stating gaps
- Lacks citations for claims and expert opinions

# TEXT 02 – SAMPLE REWRITE

---

Indigenous and local knowledge (ILK) systems contain valuable insights for sustainable fishing practices and fisheries management [Citation]. However, recent studies indicate a rapid decline in the transmission and retention of this knowledge [Citation].

The loss of ILK significantly impacts fisheries management, affecting the understanding of local ecosystem dynamics [Citation], sustainable harvesting techniques [Citation], and traditional conservation practices [Citation]

Research identifies several factors contributing to ILK loss, including urbanization and migration away from traditional fishing communities [Citation], changes in education systems [Citation], and declining fish stocks due to overfishing and habitat degradation [Citation].