The Readability of Government Reports: a Case Study from Zambia

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Government reports are a vital means of policy recommendation and implementation – national and international – for all countries. The extent to which they achieve their purpose, however, depends in part on how well they are written. This article examines Zambian government reports, to identify linguistic and organizational features that contribute to their mal-readability. It concludes with outline proposals for a short report-writing course for civil servants, with a view to overcoming the problems identified.

INTRODUCTION

Every government has a set of objectives which constitute its policy. Because government policy is intended for the benefit of the public, in performing their duties, civil servants serve the public – hence their name 'public servants'. In the Zambian context, Secretary to the Cabinet, Manyema (1987:1), puts it precisely:

> The role of government is to formulate policy affecting all groups and individuals in the state. Therefore the task of the civil servant is liaison between groups and individuals.

A significant part of civil servants' work involves writing. It is through reports that policy makers are informed about progress made in the various government ministries and departments, and problems encountered. In the same way, public and international organisations (eg. foreign aid agencies) are kept informed of what various ministries and departments are doing. In most cases, subsequent action by government authorities and foreign aid agencies follows the publication of reports. It is therefore very important that these reports are written in a clear, readable manner so that the reader's task is not made unnecessarily difficult. Unfortunately, government reports – the world over – are often not easy to read and understand. It was for such writers that Gowers wrote his *Complete Plain Words,* commenting in the revised (1986:2) edition:

> Professional writers realise that they cannot hope to convey what they intend to convey without care and practice in the proper use of words. The need for the official is even greater, for if what the writer has written is wearisome and obscure, readers can toss (away) the book and read no more.

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All too often, however, official documents are wearisome and obscure because they are full of officialese, 'a style of writing which is marked by pecularities of officials' (Fowler 1968:411). Verbosity, complex syntax and difficult vocabulary are common characteristics of official documents which make them difficult to read and understand. This kind of writing is consequently inefficient, because readers either have to ask for clarification from the writer, or re-read the documents before they can understand them. A lot of valuable time and energy is thus wasted in order to overcome this. People all over the world are striving for 'plain English', especially where the writing of official documents is concerned. For example, Thatcher (1988) comments with characteristic determination:

> Too often clarity and simplicity are overwhelmed by pompous words, long sentences and endless paragraphs. If we all wrote in plain English how much easier – and efficient – life would be. It is no exaggeration to consider plain English as a fundamental tool of government.

Recognition of the efficacy of plain English has gained momentum all over the world. Eagleson (1983) reports that in the last decade the plain English movement has grown in the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada, and it has started in Australia. In fact, some states in America like New Jersey, Connecticut and Minnesota have passed laws which demand the use of plain English (Fry 1988).

GOVERNMENT REPORT WRITING IN ZAMBIA

In Zambia, there are 73 local languages and dialects. Clearly the choice of one of these as the country's official language is not an easy matter. The most widely spoken of these local language (eg. Bemba, Lozi, Tonga and Nyanja) each operate as the lingua franca in various provinces in the country. Monthly provincial newspapers are published in, and important public notices translated into these languages. However, for political reasons, the government found it necessary to adopt English as the official language at independence in 1965.

As in all countries, report writing is a major aspect of government administration in Zambia. Such reports are written by officials in senior administrative posts – such as permanent secretaries, directors, and commissioners.

The reports are intended for three types of audience. Firstly, they are intended for higher government authorities. Secondly, they are written for international organisations such as aid agencies. Examples of these agencies are the European Community (EC), the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and the Finnish International Development Agency (FINNIDA). Thirdly, the reports are meant for the Zambian general public: the reports are sold, and any member of the public is free to buy and read them.

The purpose of these reports is to inform their intended readers about the activities and progress of various ministries and departments every year. The reports are important because they are a major source of official information. This is why it is necessary for them to be written in as readable a manner as possible. If the reports are mal-readable, the intended reader will either miscomprehend their content, or become frustrated.

In our research into the readability of Zambian government reports, we have examined thirteen recently published reports. In the following analysis we cite instances of mal-readability, then suggest more readable versions of the extracts selected. At certain times we invite our readers to take part in the analysis by asking them to suggest more readable versions of some extracts. In the extracts of reports that follow, italicised words and phrases are highlighted only for purposes of this article: they were not italicised in the original reports.

LEXIS

The considerable body of research evidence (eg. Klare (1963), Schlesinger (1968), Kirkman (1980)) cites the following characteristics as most strongly contributing to lexical difficulty in written text: frequency/familiarity, abstractness, length, abuse of terminology, nominalization, noun compounding, and use of unfamiliar idioms. In the Zambian corpus, too, lexis is in many cases unnecessarily difficult.

An instance of mal-readability caused by the writer's use of **unfamiliar words** is this extract from the Anti-Corruption Commission report:

> Once committed a serious *instance of* corrupt practices can *inflict irreversible* damage to the economy and a successful investigation of the crime may only *exact* limited *retribution* from those evil persons proved to have been responsible.

If this extract were meant for lawyers – well and good. But for the man-in-the-street in Zambia or the Chilean World Bank Official, working in Washington, the writer could certainly have made his readers' task easier, ie.

> Once committed, a serious *offence of corruption* can *cause permanent* damage to the economy, and a successful investigation of the crime may only *demand* limited *punishment* for the evil persons proved to have been responsible.

(Commas have also been added to enhance readability.)

Other instances of officialese are: (X's indicate bad practice, √'s our suggested improvement)

X   to assume total responsibility
√   to be responsible

X   discharge their duties
√   do their work
X   as and whenever possible
√   when possible
X   in view of the fact that
√   because
X   render efficient service
√   work efficiently

With regard to official terminology, while it is difficult to avoid using terms that are subject-specific, it is also important to note that abuse of terminology (ie. jargon) causes the non-specialist reader considerable difficulty. In reading government reports, one cannot escape the impression that, most of the time, writers have forgotten that they are writing for a mixed audience. In fact, the number of non-specialists (the general public together with many civil servants in different ministries) is larger than the specialists – the officers in the particular department which the report comes from. The following is an extract which exemplifies this point, taken from a report emanating from the National Commission for Development Planning.

X Guidelines of the Department

In formulating sectoral targets policies and programmes the department carries out a careful quantitative analysis of the performance of present investment, capacity, maintenance investment for present capacity (rehabilitation), production targets and shortfall of present capacity to meet productive targets in order to finally make an accurate estimate of shortfall in investment either to augment present capacity or to create new capacity to meet various production targets in both the short- and long-run.

On first reading, this is more like a brain teaser than an extract from an official report. The problem is exacerbated, of course, by the writer's reluctance to use punctuation, and the extreme length of this particular sentence. In order to suggest a more readable version, it is not possible merely to attend to the terminological problem: it is necessary to punctuate, and this in turn necessitates rewriting the original single sentence into shorter ones, eg.

√ Guidelines Followed by the Department

In formulating the targets for various sectors, their policies and programmes, the department carefully analyses a number of things. It analyses the amount of present investment and how much this can achieve in the economy; the amount that is to be spent on restoring this investment; production targets

and how much present investment fails to meet these targets. The department does this in order to estimate accurately the inadequacy of present investment. On the basis of this information, it then decides whether to increase the amount of investment or create new amounts for both long- and short-term production targets.

Nominalizations are a common feature of all the reports analysed. Usually, they are longer than their more readable verbalization equivalent; and, unfortunately, nominalizations frequently trigger off the passive voice rather than the more readable active:

X In *collaboration* with other government institutions such as the Provincial and Local Government Administration Division and the Ministry of Works and Supply the Building Construction Sector provided the necessary financial data which went into the *preparation* of the 1982 Annual Plan. Meanwhile the *collection* of data and technical information necessary for the *preparation* of the 1983 Government Budget and the 1983 Annual Plan was embarked on from August to the end of the year, and completed in *collaboration* with the Department of Investment Policy.

In the first sentence, the choice of the nominalization *collaboration* is followed by a long prepositional phrase, then by the main clause. Thus, the reader has to hold subsidiary information in short-term memory, while awaiting the arrival of main information. In the second sentence, the nominalizations *collection* and *preparation* give rise to the 'empty' passives *embarked on* and *completed*, thus compounding the reader's difficulty.

A more 'reader-friendly' version of this extract would be:

√ The Building and Construction Sector *collaborated* with other government institutions such as the Provincial Local Government Administration Division and the Ministry of Works and Supply, in order to provide the data which was needed *to prepare* the 1982 Annual Plan. Meanwhile, the Sector began *to collect* data and technical information which was needed *to prepare* the 1983 Government Budget and the 1983 Annual Plan. The Department of Investment Policy *collaborated* with the Building and Construction Sector in order to complete this.

There were many instances of **idiomatic expressions** in the reports. Idioms are not easy for L2 readers to understand, because a word-by-word attack strategy is useless, and context rarely assists. Here are two instances of idioms from the reports:

Placement of graduates from the University of Zambia and other higher

institutions of learning was a *'thorn in the flesh'*.

It was observed that most Zambian missions abroad did not take seriously my instructions requiring them to submit their annual reports to Lusaka head office not later than 31st March each year. Telex messages sent to them *drew a blank*.

The writer's use of 'thorn in the flesh' could easily be misinterpreted by members of the general Zambian public to refer to physical pain. In Zambian local languages, too, idioms are used for emphasis but only in oral face-to-face communication, where they can be explained if there is a need. The writers of the reports must have transferred this oral use of local idioms into their report-writing practice. But this is inappropriate, since use of idioms in written reports merely inhibits their readability. Instead, a factual statement is more readable:

Placing graduates from the University of Zambia and other higher institutions of learning is a *very big problem*.

(The nominal *placement* has been changed to *placing*, to enhance readability.)

It was observed that most Zambian missions abroad did not take seriously my instructions requiring them to submit their annual reports to Lusaka head office not later than 31st March each year. These missions *did not even respond to the telex messages sent to them*.

Most of the **noun-compounds** in the corpus are so complex that the reader would have to work very hard to 'unlock' their meaning:

As a basically *project/programme identification and implementation document,* the 1982 Annual Plan contained details of expenditure and work programmes of both the government and parastatal sectors.

The noun compound is made even more difficult by the writer's use of the nominalizations, *identification* and *implementation*. The readers must therefore work extra hard to puzzle out the meaning of the noun compound: "a document which contains guide-lines for identifying and implementing projects or programmes."

The reader would also find the original sentence easier to understand if it were split into two, so that the first one contains an explanatory clause in place of the less readable noun compound:

The 1982 Annual Plan is basically a document which contains guidelines for identifying and implementing projects or programmes. It contained details of expenditure and work programmes of both the government and parastatal sectors.

Another example of a noun compound contributing to mal-readability is:

> X . . . . and cater for the transportation costs *of the permanent structure building materials and the construction casual labour payments* . . . .

This is even more of a problem that the first, because there are two compounds following each other. The government official, Finnish aid adviser, or a member of the Zambian public would find this quite a difficult extract to understand. When the noun compounds are italized as above, it is difficult enough to process them. The task becomes even more difficult when they are presented as in the original report:

> X . . . . and cater for the transportation cost of the permanent structure building materials and the construction casual labour payments . . . .

The writer could have made his reader's task a lot easier by using an explanatory clause as follows:

> √ . . . . and cater also for transport costs of the materials used for building permanent structures, and the money used to pay casual labourers working on the construction . . . .

SYNTAX

Commonly-attested syntactic or syntax-related difficulties in text readability are: length of sentences; late position of the main clause in the sentence; unnecessary use of the passive; extended subject; embedding; and inversion.

Of the six syntactic features listed above, **over-long sentences** are the major cause of mal-readability in Zambian government reports. The reason is that sentence length is frequently the result of sentence complexity. Sentences such as the one below are a common feature of all the reports analysed:

> X Once again the Commission would like to reiterate the great importance it attaches to the probationary period given to officers on first appointment and would, therefore, like to emphasise the need for Responsible Officers to continually remind probationers of the requirement of General Order No. B15, which among other things, requires them not only to pass the Civil Service Obligatory Examinations during the probationary period but also to prove that they are suitable for admission to the Permanent and Pensionable establishment by rendering efficient service.

Sentences as long as this are more likely to frustrate the reader than help the writer to achieve his purpose: to inform. The Zambian government official, the ILO expert reading in English as a second or third language, or members of the general

public will certainly have to read this sentence more than three times in order to understand what the writer is trying to say. The sentence could actually be split up as follows:

? The Commission would like to reiterate the great importance it attaches to the probationary period given to officers on first appointment. The Commission would also like to emphasize the need for Responsible Officers to continually remind probationers of the requirement of General Order No. B15. Among other things, this order requires probationers to pass the Civil Service Obligatory Examinations during their probationary period. It also requires probationers to prove that they are suitable for admission to the permanent and pensionable establishment by rendering efficient service.

Splitting up the original, however, is not enough. There are many facets of lexical difficulty that need to be attended to in order to enhance readability even further. *Reiteration* and *Responsible Officer* can be replaced by more frequent/familiar words; the nominals *importance, need* and *requirement* can be replaced by verbs; *continually* and *rendering efficient service* can be replaced by shorter expressions; and *permanent and pensionable establishment* need not remain the complex noun phrase that it is. Thus the text above is even more readable when written like this:

√ The Commission would like to repeat that it considers as very important the period of probation it gives to officers on first appointment. The commission would also like to emphasise that it is necessary for supervisors to always remind probationers what General Order No B15 requires. Among other things, this Order requires probationers to pass the Civil Service Obligatory Examinations during the period of probation. It also requires probationers to prove that they are efficient, in order for them to be admitted to the permanent establishment and to be entitled to a pension.

Sentences with **extended subjects** are a common feature of the reports, eg.

X In recognition of the crucial role the parastatal sector is envisaged to play in fulfilling the Third National Development Plan (TNDP) objectives and targets in housing and related infrastructure *the planned investments (both in financial and physical terms) of the parastatal group of companies that directly invest or lend for investment in Housing and Real Estate,* were reflected in the 1982 Annual Plan.

In this sentence, the reader's task is even more difficult because the extended subject is placed after a long subordinate clause.

Faulty punctuation makes it even more difficult for the reader to recognise the sentence skeleton. Beside the problem of punctuation, the sheer length of this

sentence also contributes to its mal-readability. It should therefore be written as three short sentences:

√ The parastatal sector is envisaged to play a crucial role in fulfilling the targets and objectives of the Third National Development Plan (TNDP) in housing and related infrastructure. This is why planned financial and physical investments were reflected in the 1982 Annual Plan. These investments were of the parastatal group of companies that directly invest or lend for investment in Housing and Real Estate.

Very often, **late siting of the main clause** contributes to the mal-readability of a sentence, eg.

X Vital as the Commission considers its preventive role to be, it is recognised that Operations Branch officers must acquire practical experience of investigating corrupt practices as a pre-requisite . . . .

The following version would be more readable:

√ The Commission recognises that its preventive role is vital, but Operations Branch officers must acquire practical experience of investigating corrupt practices as a pre-requisite . . .

While there are many simple 'clause inversions' like the one above, equally there are many others that are so complicated that re-writing them is not simply a matter of clause re-ordering. The following is taken from a report of the National Commission for Development Planning:

X In recognition of the crucial role the parastatal sector is envisaged to play in fulfilling the Third National Development Plan (TNDP) objectives and targets in housing and related infrastructure the planned investments (both in financial and physical terms) of the parastatal group of companies that directly investo or lend for investment in Housing and Real estate, *were reflected in the 1982 Annual Plan.*

How are the intended readers expected to store such a large quantity of subsidiary information in short-term memory before they receive the information carried by the main clause? Even if this sentence were to be written with the main clause early, the amount of subsidiary information is still too much for the reader to process as one chunk. In other words, the following is still not readable, even though the main clause is placed early:

? The planned financial and physical investments of the parastatal group of companies *were reflected in the 1982 Annual Plan* in recognition of the crucial role that parastatal sector is envisaged to play in fulfilling the

objectives and targets of the Third National Development Plan (TNDP) in Housing and Real Estate in which the parastatal invest or lend for investment.

A further re-write is necesary in order to avoid such a long sentence. The reader may care to turn our own single-sentence re-write into two or three shorter sentences.

The excessive length of many of the sentences stems automatically from the fact that they are heavily **embedded,** eg.

X During the year, two public notices *designed to draw the public's attention to the need to support corruption, and to help prevent corruption,* were produced, *and over 10,000 copies were distributed throughout Zambia* for display in public places.

(Of course, the phrase "need to support corruption" is clearly an error in the original. Presumably the writer's intention was something like *"need to support the government in its campaign against corruption."*) To 'un-embed' the sentence, it is necessary to divide it as follows:

√ During the year, two public notices were produced for display in public places. These notices were designed to draw the public's attention to the need to support the government in its campaign against corruption, and to help prevent corruption. Over 10,000 copies of the notices were distributed throughout Zambia.

It is true that in writing official reports, one may quite often be required to emphasize the action rather than the doer, when the latter is not known or is not important. But **over-use of the passive** is common in Zambian government reports. Even when the doer of the action is clearly known, writers choose to 'hide behind' the passive instead of the more readable active. In the extract below, for example, the writer has made it clear that he was one of those who performed the actions he has described. He might, therefore, have used the active voice with **we** as subject, rather than dissociate himself from the actions being reported:

X It was observed that most Zambian Missions abroad did not take seriously my instructions requiring them to submit their Annual Reports to Lusaka head office not later than 31st March each year. Telex messages sent to them drew a blank. It was not known why some missions abroad did not implement the requirements. It was therefore decided that future defaulting missions would be listed and sent to Cabinet Office for appropriate action. For those missions which submitted their Annual Reports, it was observed that there was room for improvement in certain areas. There was therefore need for the Head of the Department to make regular inspections of missions where passports were issued and renewed.

The following re-write might be more readable:

√ We observed that most Zambian missions abroad did not take seriously our instructions requiring them to submit their annual reports to Lusaka Head Office not later than 31st March each year. Telex messages sent to them drew a blank. We did not know why some missions abroad did not implement the requirement. We therefore decided, in future, to make a list of defaulting missions and to send this list to Cabinet Office, who will act appropriately. We also observed that those missions which did submit their annual reports needed to improve their performance. It was therefore necessary for the Head of Department to regularly inspect missions which issue and renew passports.

TEXT ORGANIZATION

Ambiguous Anaphoric Reference is a serious problem in all the reports. Below is one of the numerous instances:

X Staffing

The department of sectoral planning is headed by a Director who is responsible to the Deputy Director-General. He is assisted by two Assistant Directors who are directly responsible to him. In turn, Senior Economists in charge of the various sectors are responsible to the Assistant Directors and are generally responsible for the supervision and working in collaboration with their subordinate economists.

It is not clear who *he* and *him* refer to; either the Director or the Deputy Director-General can be called *he* or *him*. According to the hierarchy, We assume the writer is trying to explain the following relationship:

Deputy Director-General

Director (Department of Sectoral Planning)

Assistant Director   Assistant Director
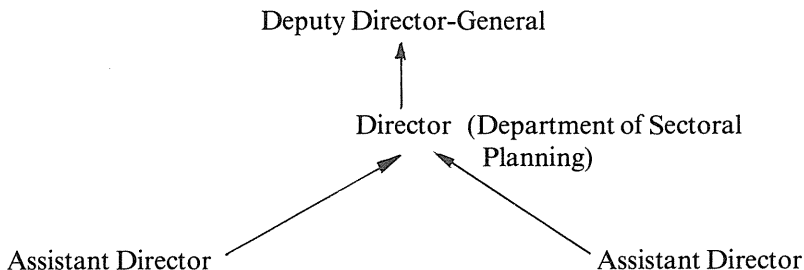
This relationship is more clearly explained by repeating *Director* in place of *he*, as follows:

The Department of Sectoral Planning is headed by a Director who is responsible to the Deputy Director-General. The Director is assisted by two Assistant Directors who are directly responsible to him. In turn . . . .

Conjunctions can be valuable signposts to the reader, facilitating his journey through the text. But if not used appropriately, they only serve to confuse. In the following extract, one cannot escape the uneasy impression that the writer has simply scattered conjunctions around without stopping to think about their appropriacy. (The extract is taken from the Rural Information Services report, and the context is that capital expenditure had not been allocated to the department for the year under review, so the department could not buy broadcasting equipment.)

X 13.01   Thirdly, as you are already more conversantly aware, our major role is that of service to the Ministry as a whole, its parastatals and the statutory boards. However, to do this satisfactorily and indeed effectively, the department routinely undertakes radio broadcasting and the publication of various educative agriculture booklets and other handouts for distribution to the farmers. Consequently, as the broadcasting recording equipment is purchased from the capital expenditure allocations, no such items were therefore bought that year and the department was forced to have rely wholly on the mean recurrent expenditure funds allocation in order to keep the minimum amount of scale of services running.

The second sentence explains what the writer means by *role . . . of service* in the first sentence. It is therefore difficult to understand why the writer has signalled contrast by the use of *However*. The third sentence indicates the contrary to what was expected from the second sentence, so the writer would have been advised to signal *contrast* rather than *result*. The paragraph would be more readable if it were written:

√ Thirdly, as you are aware, our major role is to serve the Ministry as a whole, its parastatals and the statutory boards. And in order to do this successfully and indeed effectively, the department routinely undertakes radio broadcasting and the publication of various educative agriculture booklets and handouts for distribution to the farmers. However, as the broadcasting recording equipment is purchased from the capital allocations, no such items were bought this year and the department was forced to have rely wholly on the mean recurrent expenditure funds allocation in order to keep the minimum amount of scale of services running.

Headings, too, frequently present problems. Specifically, many are vaguely worded, and so do not help the reader to predict the content of the text. Also, often the heading is not reinforced in the subsequent text for some time, if at all. The following extract, for example, is taken from the Zambian Forest College report. The heading does not say what area of the institution has been developed. The reader is thus likely to assume that the text will discuss overall development of the

whole institution.

X Chapter IX

Development

The following capital projects were undertaken during the year:
a) Completion of one medium density Staff House – expected time of occupation is the first quarter of 1984.
b) One 3V Staff House.
c) One additional classroom block.

Within the framework of the FINNIDA Technical Assistance construction of 3 3V Staff Houses and four student hostels was started and partially completed. The work is being carried out by a private contractor. Expected time of completion of the buildings is end of March, 1984.

The text, in fact, outlines capital projects with regard to staff and student accommodation and classrooms. A more predictive heading would enhance the readability of this text eg:

√   DEVELOPMENT: STAFF AND STUDENTS HOUSING AND
CLASSROOMS

Examination of the reports demonstrates that there is still a lot of room for improvement in the **organisation of ideas in paragraphs.** Consider the following:

X 4.4.4 Of the incidents not involving machinery over 50 per cent were concerned with explosives, either blasting malpractices or abandonment. In one case the Chief Inspector was made aware of an incident by a news item on television and had to follow this up with mine management instead of the dangerous occurrence being reported as required in the explosives regulations. As has already been stated there is an unwelcome trend in the number of incidents due to mishandling of explosives.

The paragraph starts with a sentence which gives specific information about the number of accidents concerned with explosives. The second sentence cites one case of such accidents. The third is a general statement about how explosives cause accidents. What is more, this sentence presumably links the information in this paragraph to that given previously in the text, because it starts *As has already been stated.*

The muddled sequence of sentences (and thus information) in this paragraph only serves to confuse the reader. The paragraph would become more readable if it were written as follows.

√ As has already been stated, there is an unwelcome trend in the number of incidents due to mishandling of explosives. Of the incidents not involving machinery, over 50 per cent were concerned with explosives, either blasting mal-practices or abandonment. In one case the Chief Inspector was made aware of an incident by a news item on television, instead of the dangerous incident being reported to him as required by the explosives regulations. He then followed up the case with mine management.

Careful structure and sequence of ideas should not only apply at paragraph level. The paragraphs in a text should be well-sequenced, and have a clear link from one to the other. In the extract below, as in many others from our corpus, there seems to be a problem with text organization:

X c) **Reports from Press Attachés**

In a modern world, so increasingly susceptible to constant changes in technology the inevitable psychological impact on people, resulting in subtle changes in social attitude and disposition makes the work of an Information Attaché more complex.

An Information Attaché was transferred to London while the post at New York remained vacant after the recall of the officer to the Prime Minister's Office. Zambia generally received favourable coverage of some significance being the overwhelmingly favourable reporting of the Presidential and General Elections in October, in the British Newspapers.

Financial and manpower constraints continued to limit the work of Information Attachés. London and Washing Press Attachés were given only K3,000 and K4,000 respectively, for publicity work.

From the heading, we expect to learn what specific press attachés have been doing. However, in the first paragraph the writer gives us an overall view on the impact of technology on people and the resulting complexity of the work of information attachés. In the second paragraph, the writer moves on to something completely different: transfers of press attachés. In the same paragraph, the writer tells us about the favourable coverage of Zambia's Presidential General Elections in British newspapers. It is interesting to note that the writer does not attribute this publicity to the work of any press attachés, as he suggest in the heading. The writer only mentions the problems of press attachés in the third paragraph, but does not say what work they actually did. As paragraphs in a unified text, by what criteria did the author decide on their sequence?

There are many instances where **tabulating information** would have made it more readable than prose. One of these instances is:

X 2. PASSPORTS

From the 2nd January, 1983 to 31st December, 1983, seven thousand three hundred and eleven passports were issued (7,311) and of these one hundred and six were diplomatic ones (106). Thirty-five (35) diplomatic passports were withdrawn from recalled officers. Three thousand five hundred and forty-six (3,546) passports were renewed. Twelve thousand two hundred and twelve (12,212) local travel documents were issued during the period under review and one thousand seven hundred and eighty-seven (1,787) travel documents of identity were issued. One hundred and seventeen (117) United Nations Convention travel documents for refugees were issued and seventy-six (76) were renewed. Five hundred and sixty-eight (568) Namibian travel documents were issued and during the same period one thousand and ten (1,010) Namibian travel documents were renewed.

By the time readers have reached the end of the text, they are likely to have forgotten all those figures; and in order to check, they will need to read the whole text again. This text is best presented as two tables, so that the readers do not have the tedious task of reading long strings of figures expressed in words. In representing the figures, the writer's aim is to compare the number of issued, renewed and withdrawn passports and other travel documents. The readers are likely to find this difficult when the figures are scattered all over the text in a disorderly manner. Reading them off a chart is a lot easier. Tabulated, the information in the paragraph above could lokk something like:

√ Between 2nd January and 31st December 1983, passports and other documents were issued, renewed and withdrawn as follows:

a) Passports Issued, Renewed and Withdrawn

Type of Passport	Number Issued	Number Renewed	Number with-drawn from recalled officers
Ordinary	7,205	3.546	—
Diplomatic	106	—	35

b) Other Travel Documents Issued or Renewed

Type of Travel Document	Number Issued	Number Renewed
Local	12,212	—
Travel Document of Identity	1,787	—
UN Travel Document for Refugees	117	76
Namibian	568	1,010

PUNCTUATION

Lack of, or inappropriate use of punctuation greatly contributes to the mal-readability of Zambian government reports. Overlong sentences is a major characteristic of the reports, and this in itself poses problems of punctuation. This is because long sentences require more thought than short ones when punctuating them.

For example, **commas** are frequently omitted when they should be included. In other instances, commas are wrongly used with restrictive relative clauses, or in place of a full stop or conjunction.

In the following extract, omission and mis-use of commas makes the reader's task a difficult one:

X 4.0 ENGLISH AGRICULTURE PROGRAMMES

4.01 In order to cater for the elite farmers, the Rural Information Services regularly undertook in 1981 broadcasting in English agricultural technical information under four radio programme titles, which are, Rural Note Book, Zambian Land and the People, Farm Magazine, and Rural Development Corner as per time table tabulated below:

Programme	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Rural Note Book	0650 hrs	0650 hrs	0650 hrs	0650 hrs	0650 hrs

? The extract is somewhat easier to read when written:

In order to cater for the elite farmers, the Rural Information Services regularly undertook, in 1981, broadcasting in English, technical information under four radio programmes which are, Rural Notebook, Zambian Land and the People, Farm Magazine and Rural Development Corner . . .

But when a text has too many commas as this one now has, its readability is lowered. A total rewrite of the sentence is therefore necessary:

√ In 1981, the Rural Information Service broadcast technical information in English through the following programmes: Rural Notebook, Zambian Land and the People, Farm Magazine and Rural Development Corner. These programmes were intended for the elite farmers.

The **colon's** main function of cataphoric signalling could have been valuably used

quite often to enhance the readability of reports. One such instance is the following:

> X There were 103 live broadcasts during the year and over twenty-nine voice-casts during the year and over twenty-nine voice-casts, five from the Non-Aligned Conference, eight from the United Kingdom during His Excellency's State visit at the invitation of Queen Elizabeth the Second, four from Tanzania on the party Secretary-General's visit and eight from the Commonwealth Conference in New Delhi. Nine countries were fully covered during Dr Kaunda's visits. These were the United Kingdom, India, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Ethiopia, Zaire, West Germany and Bangladesh. Six Heads of State were also covered when they visited Zambia.

The list of items containing the number of voice-casts from each country mentioned could have been signalled by a colon after *voice-casts*. The comma which is used in place of the colon does not help the reader to predict the list of items that follow. The reader, therefore, has to read the whole list in order to understand the relationship between *voice-casts* and *five* . . . which follows immediately. The sentence could have been written as follows:

> √ There were 103 live broadcasts during the year and over twenty-nine voice-casts: five from the Non-Aligned Conference; eight from the United Kingdom during His Excellency's state visit at the invitation of Queen Elizabeth the Second; four from Tanzania on the Party Secretary General's visit; and eight from the Commonwealth Conference in New Dehli . . .

Because of the colon at the beginning of the list, the items in the list have to be separated by semi-colons instead of commas.

On the whole, the colon is the least used of punctuation marks in the corpus. This is probably due to writers' uncertainty as to its use. If it were used, report writers would have a wider repertoire of punctuation marks (and hence of signalling meaning) at their disposal.

It is interesting to note that there are no problems with the use of the **hyphen** for word division at the end of lines. On the other hand, the hyphen is not used at all in many noun compounds where it is necessary, and this is likely to cause problems of readability. The following is an example:

> X The engineering section should be commended for giving *very good work on the spot repair service* to the department.

A rewrite might be:

> √ The engineering section should be commended for giving very good *on-the-spot* repair service to the department.

Another example is:

> X The seriously injured rate for Chingola and Luanshya division (58.19 and 53.88) are approximately 2.5 times as high as those for Mufulira Division.

Readers who are not familiar with the adverb + verb compound noun may well misread the sentence to mean that 58.19 and 53.88 have been injured. But this is not what the writer intends to say. What he intends to convey is *the rates of the seriously injured:*

> √ The *seriously-injured rates* for Chingola and Luanshya divisions (58.19 and 53.88) are approximately 2.5 times as high as those for Mufulira Division.

READABILITY PROBLEMS IN COMBINATIONS

This far, we have indicated the contributions of lexis, syntax, text organization and punctuation to the mal-readability of Zambian Government reports. But is is necessary to stress, of course, that each of these factors in isolation may not in itself make part of a text too difficult to read. It is when a text contains a number of these factors that serious problems of mal-readability arise. An example of this is:

> X GUIDELINES OF THE DEPARTMENT
>
> In formulating sectoral targets policies and programmes the department carries out a careful quantitative analysis of the performance of present investment, capacity, maintenance investment for present capacity (rehabilitation), production targets and shortfall of present capacity, to meet production targets in order to finally make an accurate estimate of shortfall in investment either to augment present capacity to or create new capacity to meet various production targets in both the short- and long-run. Inter-sectoral co-ordination also involves careful planning designed to achieve sectoral integration of the whole economy. For instance, production targets of agriculture must be determined keeping in view the capacity of the industries processing those products. Likewise the new manufacturing industries have to keep in mind the quantities of raw materials originating from the agriculture and mining sectors. Manpower needs of various sectors have to be taken into account in planning the intake of institutions and the setting up of new institutions. In short, inter-sectoral co-ordination involves development of backward and forward inter-sectoral linkages.

The mal-readability factors of this extract are:

a) The heading is insufficiently predictive.
b) The first sentence is too long.
c) The list of items is not correctly punctuated.

d) There is gross misuse of terminology (ie *capacity, investment* etc.), which amounts to the extract being complete jargon.
e) There are many nominalisations (*co-ordination, performance, integration, rehabilitation* etc.) which could be replaced.
f) Noun compounds *maintenance investments* and *production targets* are not the simple 'x of y' type.
g) The writer has used *augment* instead of the more frequent *increase*.
h) The last sentence in the extract is clumsy and opaque.

We need also to emphasize that in discussing these factors of mal-readability, we are not suggesting that writers should totally stop using certain aspects of lexis and syntax. Indeed, elements such as abstract words, noun compounds and nominalisation are integral features of the English language, and they help the writer to be more concise. Writers therefore have to use them. Likewise, there are times when a long sentence may be more appropriate than two shorter ones. What we have been at pains to emphasize, however, is that writers should be more sensitive to their choice of lexis and the way they construct their sentences and organise their texts. They should do so with their intended readers' purposes in mind, otherwise they will fail to communicate effectively or even fail to communicate at all.

Having delineated the problem, we must now propose an attempted solution, in the form of a training programme for government report writers.

TRAINING PROGRAMME

The future writers of Zambian government reports are trained at the National Institute of Public Administration, Lusaka. On the basis of our investigation into the mal-readability of government reports, we now propose a short programme for these trainees, with a view to teaching them to write readable reports.

The proposed programme will be outlined only, with a brief indication of its associated teaching methodology.

Duration: 30 hours   Materials: Authentic Zambian government reports

Item	Time	Activity
1. Introduction: Awareness of mal-readability of Zambian government reports	1 hour	Pairwork. Scrutiny of given extract for mal-readability.

	Item	Time	Activity
2.	The Reading Process and Audience Awareness	2 hours	– Trainees/participants read given mal-readable extracts – Lecture on reading process and audience awareness
3.	Choice of appropriate lexis: consider – length – frequency/familiarity – concreteness – association value What about: – noun compounds – nominalisations – idioms – terminology – officialese – colloquial expressions?	6 hours	– Teaching about lexical factors of mal-readability – group discussion of extracts toned-up or toned-down – re-writing for enhanced readability (Students' own work from their departments, followed by display/presentation)
4.	Syntax – length – extended subjects – embeddedness – position of the main clause –inversion – when to use the passive	6 hours	– Teaching on mal-readability factors of syntax – group discussion of text with syntactic factors of mal-readability – re-writing for improved readability
5.	Punctuation – comma – colon – semi-colon – hyphen	2 hours	– Teaching on good punctuation as an aid to readability – group discussion of badly punctuated texts – re-writing or better punctuation
6.	Cohesion – ellipsis – anaphoric reference – conjunction	2 hours	– Teaching on mal-readability caused by faulty cohesion – group discussion of extracts without cohesive ties or with inappropriate ones – re-writing for proper cohesion

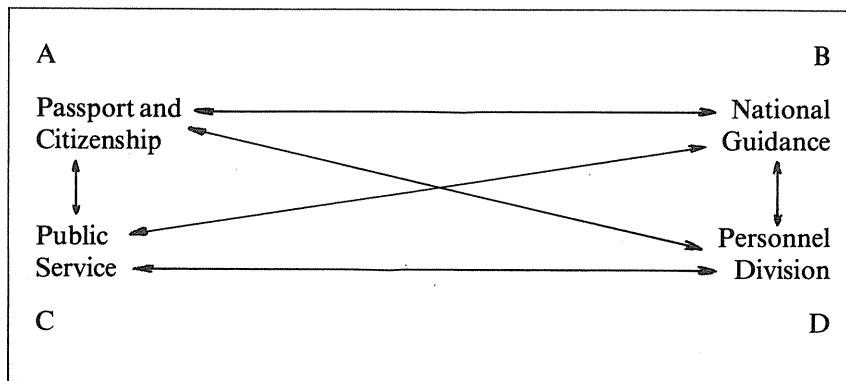| Item	Time	Activity
7. Coherence – Paragraphs: structure and sequence of information – Headings: early reinforcement of contents, predictiveness of headings and sub-headings – Tabulation of information as an alternative to prose	3 hours	– Teaching on organisational features which contribute to readability of text – Group discussion of badly organised texts – Re-writing for improved readability
8. How readable is my report?	3 hours	Students write a report for intended audience
9. Presentation and feedback	5 hours	– Class discussion

In terms of teaching methodology, it is important for learning strategies to be as process-oriented as possible. An indication as to how element 1 might be handled will serve to clarify the approach proposed.

From the outset, it is important that trainees understand that the effectiveness with which they inform is crucial, and this depends on the readability of their reports. Because they are serving officers in the Civil Service, trainees will probably not be aware that government reports are difficult for their intended audience to read. The aim of this introductory one hour, therefore, is to get them to identify the problem: mal-readability of government reports.

In groups of three, the trainees will attempt to discover why the extracts they are given are mal-readable. The idea here is that rather than tell them, it is more effective when they **themselves** discover the mal-readability of the reports. This can be done through the following activity.

Step 1

Divide the class into groups of three. The group should be made up of people from the same or related ministry/department as far as possible. Each group is then given three extracts of mal-readable reports from government ministries/ departments, including their own. This can be explained better through the following diagram:

```
A                                                           B
Passport and  ←─────────────────────────────→  National
Citizenship   ↖                             ↗    Guidance
    ↑           ╲                         ╱         ↑
    ↓             ╲                     ╱            ↓
Public        ←     ╲                 ╱        Personnel
Service       ←─────────────────────────────→  Division
C                                                           D
```

Example: Group A (Passport and Citizenship Department) will get one mal-readability extract from each of the three groups B, C, and D and another from their own department.

Step 2

Group A will then read the extracts from the four ministries/departments. It must be stressed that the extracts chosen are highly mal-readable, so Group A are likely to find their extracts very difficult to read. Group A will then ask each one of the other groups at a time to explain what they think the writer of the extract from their ministry/department had intended to write. The arrows of the diagram show how the four groups can interact during the activity described above.

CONCLUSION

The concept of readable writing has in recent years become prominent in countries where English is used as a mother tongue – largely through the impetus of organizations such as Britain's "Plain English Campaign". Readable writing is far less prominent, however, in second-language contexts. Vast amounts of time and money are spent in improving readers' reading ability. But if a fraction of that time and money were to be spent on improving **writers' writing ability,** the reader's task would be made so much easier and enjoyable. Nowhere is this more true than in the case of government reports.

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