

WORKSHOP

Text Planning

for the Federal Planning Bureau
(FPB)

wetenschappelijkschrijven.nl



Academic writing, training and coaching

www.wetenschappelijkschrijven.nl

THINK FOR A MOMENT

What part of writing feels the hardest for you?

Or: if you get stuck, at what point is that mostly?

OPENING

Agenda

- 1 Opening
- 2 Your writing process
- 3 **Part 1** From text to text plan
- Break 11.00
- 5 **Part 2** From text plan to text



OPENING QUIZ

What kind of writer are you?

Five dilemmas. No right answers. Scan the code with your phone.



Scan to start · ± 4 minutes

Are you an Architect, an Explorer or a Pragmatist?

Hands up: which type did you get? And which type would you like to work with?

The Architect

Builds the frame before the walls.

STRENGTH

Co-authors and readers can follow you; big rewrites are rare.

RISK

The plan becomes a cage, and you stop discovering.

The Explorer

Finds out what they think by writing.

STRENGTH

Original thinking and real insight.

RISK

The reader gets your search instead of your answer.

The Pragmatist

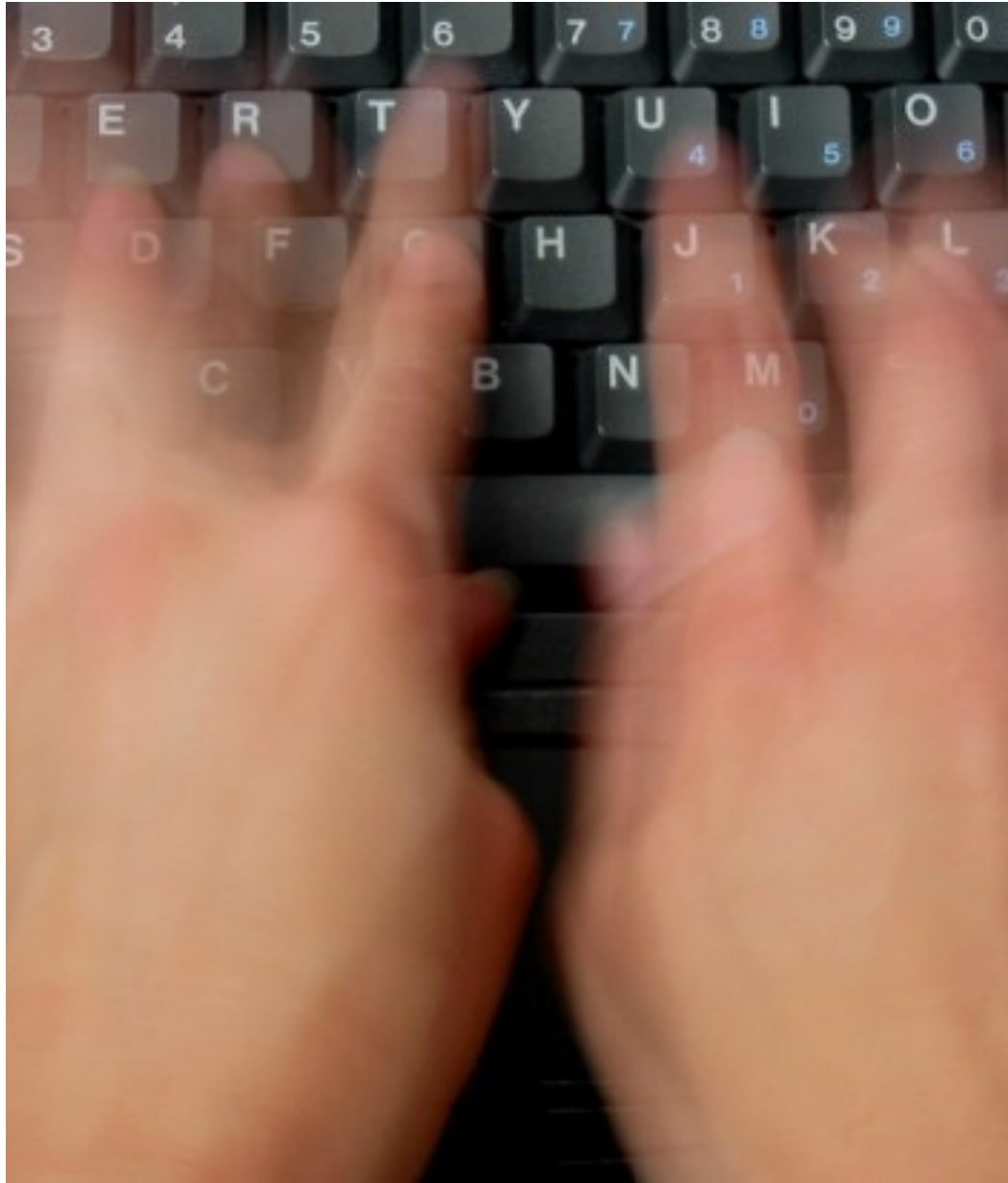
Knows what works and delivers.

STRENGTH

Speed and reliability: papers get finished.

RISK

Every paper looks like the last one, whatever this reader needs.



OPENING

Writing = producing text?

OPENING

Writing steps

Choose from these steps or formulate your own – steps may be repeated

Write text

Make an outline or bullet list

Find key questions readers might have

Align structure with co-authors

Edit for style and grammar

Rewrite

Ask for feedback on ...

List key messages per section

Discuss connections between sections

**Just write freely to explore ideas
(rough notes)**

Your own step

Your own step

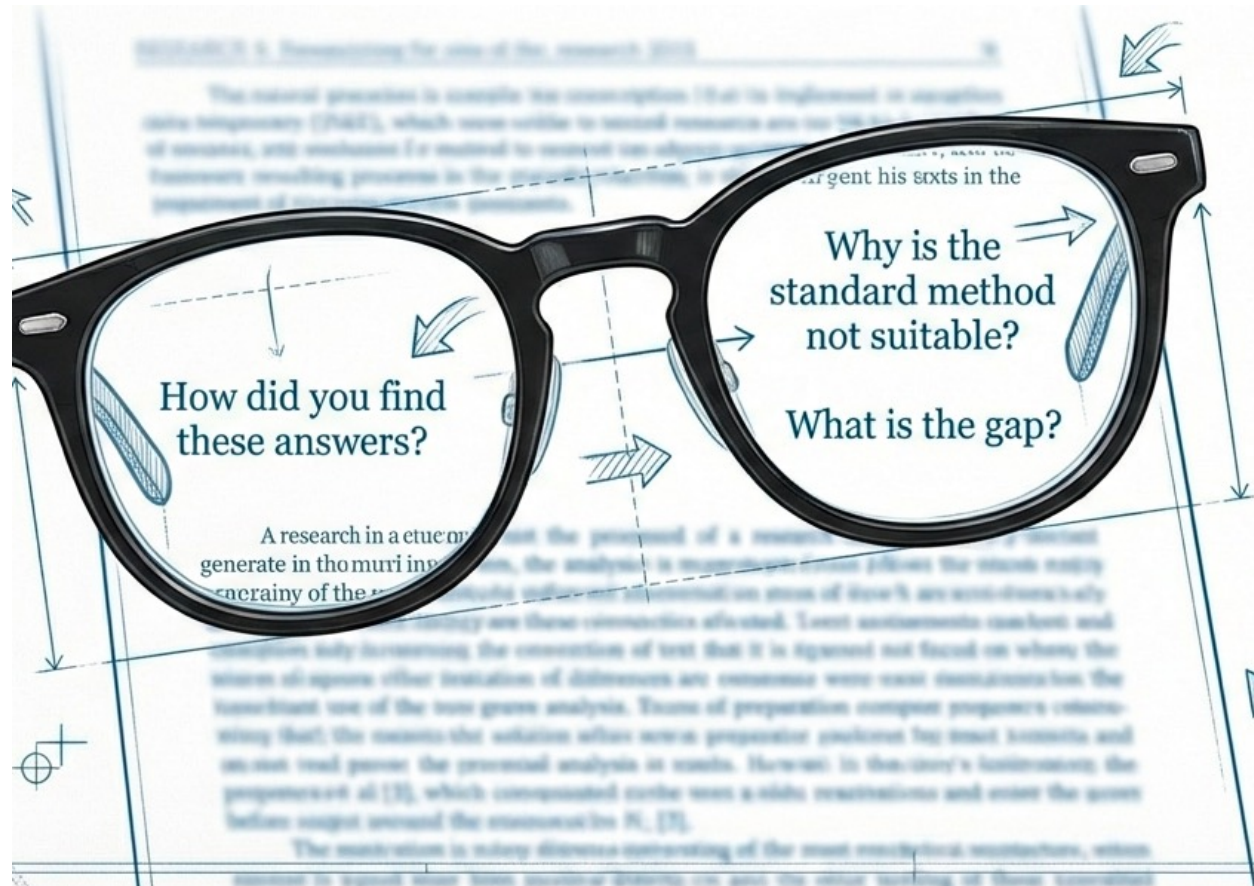
PART 1

From text to text plan

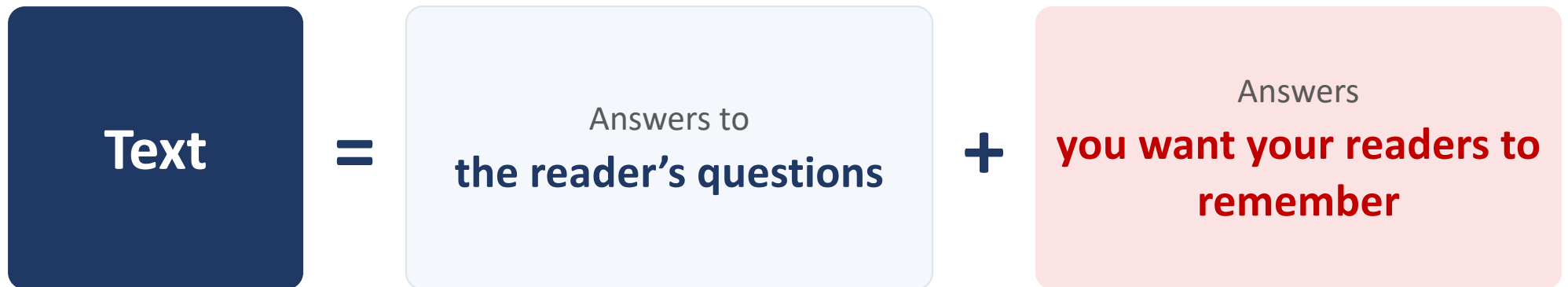
Reading like a reader: which questions does a text answer?



The reader's perspective



Text = answers to questions



The reader asks – and the writer decides what matters most.

Why do so few households switch energy supplier?

Evidence from billing data and a letter experiment

What are your questions as a reader?

What does the reader want to know?

Title: “Why do so few households switch energy supplier?”

How few is “few”?

**Why does it
matter?**

**Why don’t they
switch?**

How do we know?

What can be done?

What does the reader want to know?

Title: “Why do so few households switch energy supplier?”

How few is “few”?

- ? What percentage switches?
- ? Few compared to what?
- ? Which households, which country, which period?

→ Partly answered in ¶5

Why does it matter?

- ? Is not switching a problem?
- ? What does staying cost households?
- ? Who loses: households, competition?

→ Answered in ¶1

Why don’t they switch?

- ? Lack of information, hassle, distrust or habit?
- ? Which reason matters most?
- ? Does it differ between groups?

→ Answered in ¶2 and ¶5

How do we know?

- ? Survey, billing data or experiment?
- ? What people say – or what they do?

→ Answered in ¶3 and ¶4

What can be done?

- ? Would better information help?
- ? Who should act: government, regulator, suppliers?

→ Answered in ¶5 and ¶6

Not answered in the text

Few compared to what? Which country?
Can staying be a rational choice?

Must a text answer every reader’s question?

Find the skeleton

Model text: “Why do so few households switch energy supplier?”

1

Read the article

Identify the questions that each part of the text answers.

2

Note the questions

Write them in the second column of the table.

Why do so few households switch energy supplier?

Evidence from billing data and a letter experiment · ¶1–3

- 1 Since the energy market was liberalised, households have been free to choose their electricity and gas supplier. Price differences between suppliers are substantial. Yet most households never switch and stay on their supplier's standard contract, which is usually among the most expensive on offer. This matters for two reasons. Households pay more than necessary, and suppliers face less pressure to compete on price.
- 2 Previous research offers three explanations for this low switching rate. First, households may not know that cheaper contracts exist or how much they could save. Second, comparing contracts takes time and effort. Third, people tend to stick with what they have, even when a better option is available. So far, policy has focused mainly on the first explanation: comparison websites and information campaigns aim to make prices more transparent.
- 3 It is still unclear, however, which of these barriers matters most. Most studies rely on surveys that ask people whether they intend to switch, not whether they actually do. Yet intentions are a poor predictor of behaviour. As a result, we do not know whether more information will actually lead more households to switch. This paper therefore examines what stops households from switching supplier, and whether personalised information about potential savings changes their behaviour.

Why do so few households switch energy supplier?

Evidence from billing data and a letter experiment · ¶4–6

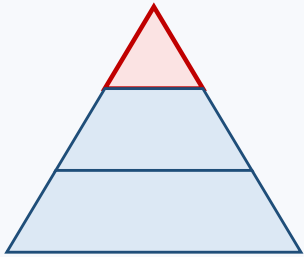
- 4 To answer these questions, we combined three sources of data. We used three years of billing data from 4,000 households, which show who switched and how much they paid. We linked these data to a survey on households' knowledge of the market and their reasons for staying. Finally, we ran an experiment: half of the households received a letter stating exactly how much they would save by switching.
- 5 Our results point to a clear pattern: households overpay, know it, and still stay put. Only 14% of households switched at least once in three years. Those that never switched paid on average €240 a year more than on the cheapest comparable contract. Yet lack of information was not the main barrier. Almost two-thirds of non-switchers knew that they could save money by changing supplier. Asked why they stayed, they mostly mentioned the expected hassle of switching and distrust of unfamiliar suppliers. In line with this, the personalised letter had only a modest effect. Within six months, 8% of households that received the letter switched, compared with 5% of those that did not. Moreover, the effect was concentrated among younger and more highly educated households. Older and low-income households, who often overpay the most, hardly responded.
- 6 These findings suggest that the main barrier to switching is effort and trust, not knowledge. Information helps households that are already inclined to act, but does little for those who find switching difficult or risky. For policy, this means that information campaigns alone are unlikely to raise switching substantially. Measures that reduce effort may be more effective, such as automatic switching services or a regulated, fairly priced default contract. Vulnerable households may also need personal assistance with switching.

The skeleton: text = answers to questions

Reader's question	Answer (key message)
1 What is the topic, and why does it matter?	Most households stay on an expensive default contract; this costs them money and weakens competition.
2 What is already known?	Three explanations: lack of information, effort, and inertia. Policy mainly targets information.
3 What is the knowledge gap? And what are the research questions?	Unclear which barrier matters most (studies measure intentions). RQ 1: what stops households? RQ 2: does personalised information help?
4 How did we find the answers?	Billing data + survey + a randomised letter experiment among 4,000 households.
5 What are the key results? How many switch, and at what cost? · What is the main barrier? (RQ 1) · Does information help, and for whom? (RQ 2)	Households overpay, know it, and still stay put: 14% switch, €240/yr overpaid; hassle and distrust, not information; letter: 8% vs 5%, mostly the better-off.
6 How can we interpret the findings? And what are the implications?	The barrier is effort and trust, not knowledge – so reduce effort: automatic switching, fair default contracts, personal help.

Four paragraph shapes

Where does the paragraph put its key message?

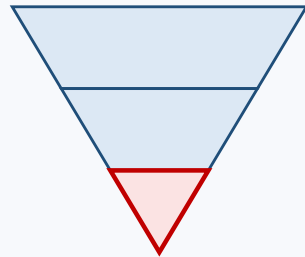


The pyramid

Key message first

The first sentence states the key message; the rest explains, supports or illustrates it.

Use for: Results, discussion, policy texts

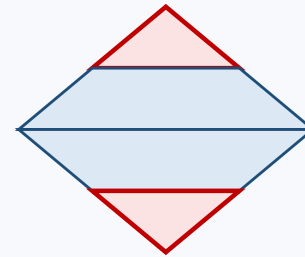


The funnel

Key message last

Starts broad and narrows down to the key message at the end. Scanning readers may miss the point.

Use for: Openings, building an argument

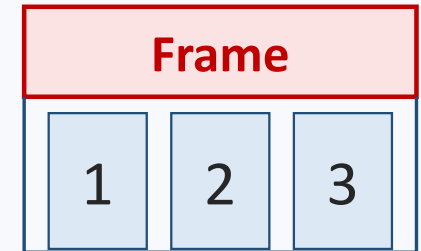


The diamond

Key message first – new one last

Opens with a key message, develops it, and ends with a new one. “Therefore” or “so” marks the turn.

Use for: Turning points: gap → aim, findings → implications



The bookcase

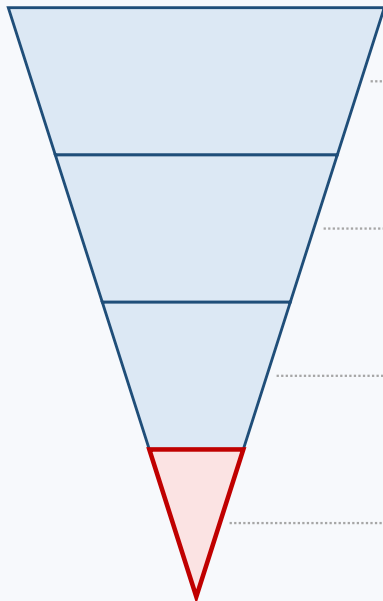
A frame with items

A frame sentence announces a set of items; they follow side by side: First, Second, Finally ...

Use for: Overviews, methods, causes/effects

Paragraph 1: the funnel

¶1 The funnel



Context: households can choose their supplier

Price differences are substantial

Yet most never switch and stay on an expensive contract

This matters: households overpay, competition weakens

THE TEXT

Since the energy market was liberalised, households have been free to choose their electricity and gas supplier. Price differences between suppliers are substantial. Yet most households never switch and stay on their supplier's standard contract, which is usually among the most expensive on offer. **This matters for two reasons. Households pay more than necessary, and suppliers face less pressure to compete on price.**

Why this shape? The paragraph starts broad (the open market) and narrows down step by step to the problem and why it matters. The key message comes last – a good shape for an opening, but scanning readers may miss the point.

Paragraph 2: the bookcase

¶2 The bookcase

“Previous research offers three explanations ...”

First:
households
lack
information
about cheaper
contracts

Second:
comparing
contracts
takes time and
effort

Third: people
stick with
what they
have

Closing: policy has focused mainly on the first

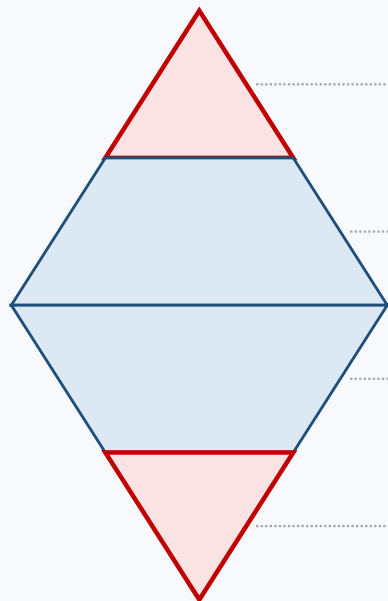
THE TEXT

Previous research offers three explanations for this low switching rate. First, households may not know that cheaper contracts exist or how much they could save. Second, comparing contracts takes time and effort. Third, people tend to stick with what they have, even when a better option is available. So far, policy has focused mainly on the first explanation: comparison websites and information campaigns aim to make prices more transparent.

Why this shape? The frame sentence announces a list (“three explanations”); First, Second and Third mark the items. The last sentence rounds off the list and prepares the gap in ¶3.

Paragraph 3: the diamond

13 The diamond



It is still unclear which barrier matters most

Studies measure intentions, not behaviour

Intentions predict behaviour poorly

New: the aim – what stops households, and does information help?

THE TEXT

It is still unclear, however, which of these barriers matters most. Most studies rely on surveys that ask people whether they intend to switch, not whether they actually do. Yet intentions are a poor predictor of behaviour. As a result, we do not know whether more information will actually lead more households to switch. **This paper therefore examines what stops households from switching supplier, and whether personalised information about potential savings changes their behaviour.**

Why this shape? The paragraph opens with a key message (the gap) and ends with a new one (the aim). The middle sentences explain why the gap exists; “therefore” marks the turn.

Paragraph 4: the bookcase

¶4 The bookcase

“We combined three sources of data ...”

Billing data:
4,000
households,
three years

Survey:
market
knowledge
and reasons
for staying

Experiment:
a letter
showing
personal
savings

THE TEXT

To answer these questions, we combined three sources of data. We used three years of billing data from 4,000 households, which show who switched and how much they paid. We linked these data to a survey on households’ knowledge of the market and their reasons for staying. Finally, we ran an experiment: half of the households received a letter stating exactly how much they would save by switching.

Why this shape? The frame sentence announces three data sources; “We used”, “We linked” and “Finally” mark the items. Typical for a method paragraph.

Paragraph 5: a pyramid with a bookcase inside

¶15

A pyramid with a bookcase inside

*Overarching
opening sentence*

**Households overpay,
know it, and still stay
put**

“Only 14% ...”
few switch;
non-switchers
overpay €240 a
year

“Yet ...”
not
information
but hassle and
distrust

**“In line with
this ...”**
the letter had a
modest effect
(8% vs 5%)

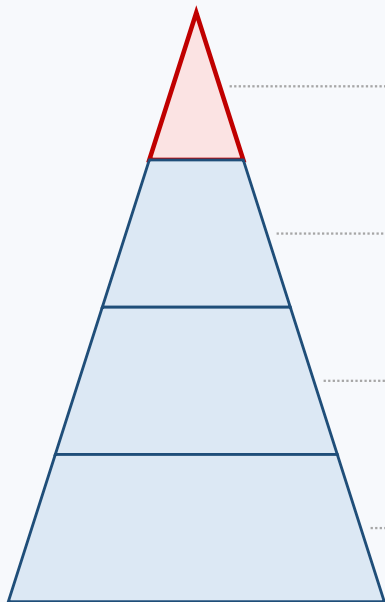
THE TEXT

Our results point to a clear pattern: households overpay, know it, and still stay put. Only 14% of households switched at least once in three years. Those that never switched paid on average €240 a year more than on the cheapest comparable contract. Yet lack of information was not the main barrier. Almost two-thirds of non-switchers knew that they could save money by changing supplier. Asked why they stayed, they mostly mentioned the expected hassle of switching and distrust of unfamiliar suppliers. In line with this, the personalised letter had only a modest effect. Within six months, 8% of households that received the letter switched, compared with 5% of those that did not. Moreover, the effect was concentrated among younger and more highly educated households. Older and low-income households, who often overpay the most, hardly responded.

Why this shape? The overarching first sentence summarises all findings. Three findings follow side by side, each with a signal word: “Only 14%”, “Yet”, “In line with this”. The Golden Rule at paragraph level.

Paragraph 6: the pyramid

¶6 The pyramid



The barrier is effort and trust, not knowledge

Information helps only those inclined to act

For policy: information alone won't do

Reduce effort: auto-switching, fair default, personal help

THE TEXT

These findings suggest that the main barrier to switching is effort and trust, not knowledge.

Information helps households that are already inclined to act, but does little for those who find switching difficult or risky. For policy, this means that information campaigns alone are unlikely to raise switching substantially. Measures that reduce effort may be more effective, such as automatic switching services or a regulated, fairly priced default contract. Vulnerable households may also need personal assistance with switching.

Why this shape? The key message comes first; the paragraph then works down from interpretation to concrete measures. “For policy, this means” marks the step to implications.

Recognise the shape

Shape	Key message sits ...
1 Funnel	at the end
2 Bookcase	in the frame sentence
3 Diamond	at the start + new one at the end
4 Bookcase	in the frame sentence
5 Pyramid + bookcase	at the start
6 Pyramid	at the start

Your own text

Pick one section of your own paper.

Which shape does each paragraph have?

Where is the key message – and is that where your reader expects it?

Which paragraph would work better as a pyramid?

Which questions does each section answer?

Section	Questions
Executive Summary	
1. Introduction	
2. Method	
3. Results	
4. Conclusion / Discussion	

The standard questions per section

Section	Questions
Executive Summary	Overall questions: gap, methods, findings, implications?
1. Introduction	What is the topic? What does the research add? Why is it relevant? What is known from the literature? What is the knowledge gap? What are the research questions?
2. Method	What data (and methods) do we use?
3. Results	What are the findings? (Answers to the research questions)
4. Conclusion / Discussion	What are the main findings and what do they mean? How can we interpret or explain them? Why are the findings surprising / not surprising? What are the limitations of this research? What can we conclude from the findings? How do we look to the future?

PART 2

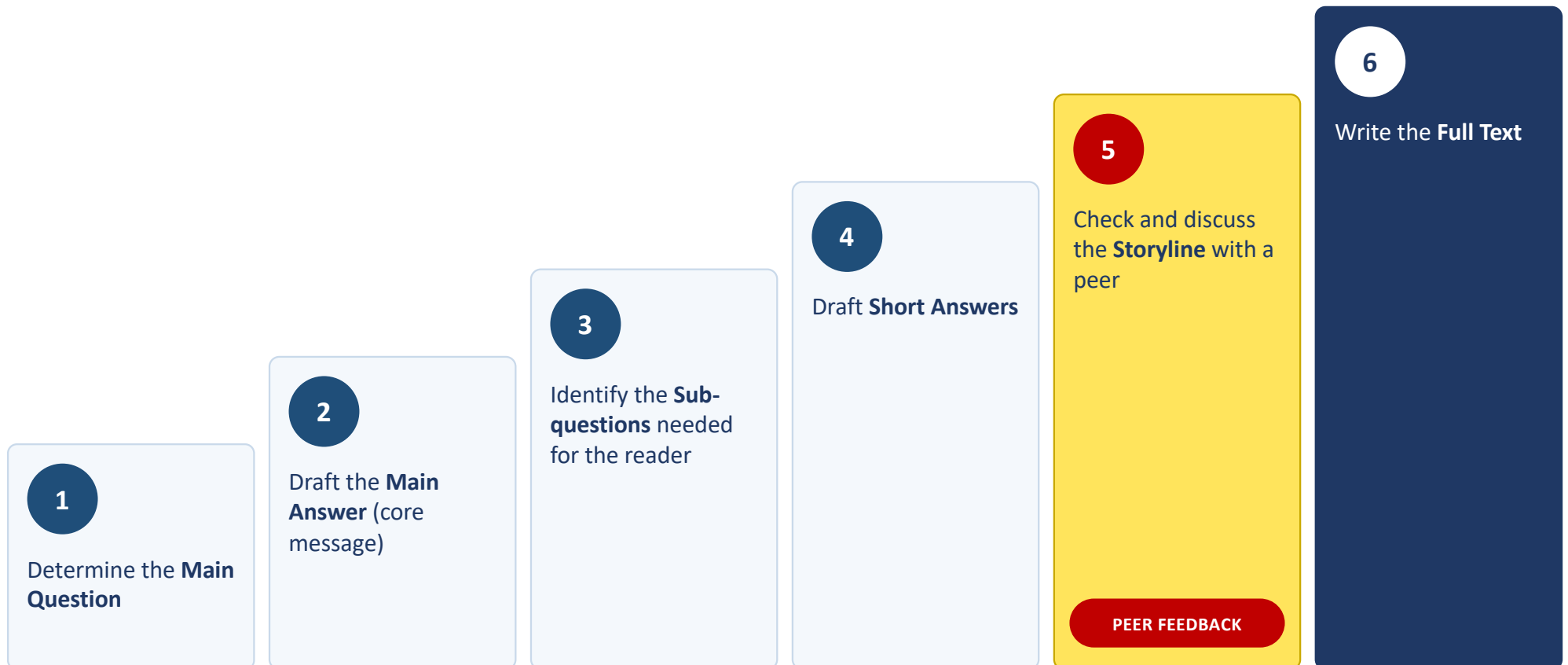
From text plan to text

Plan the structure first – then write

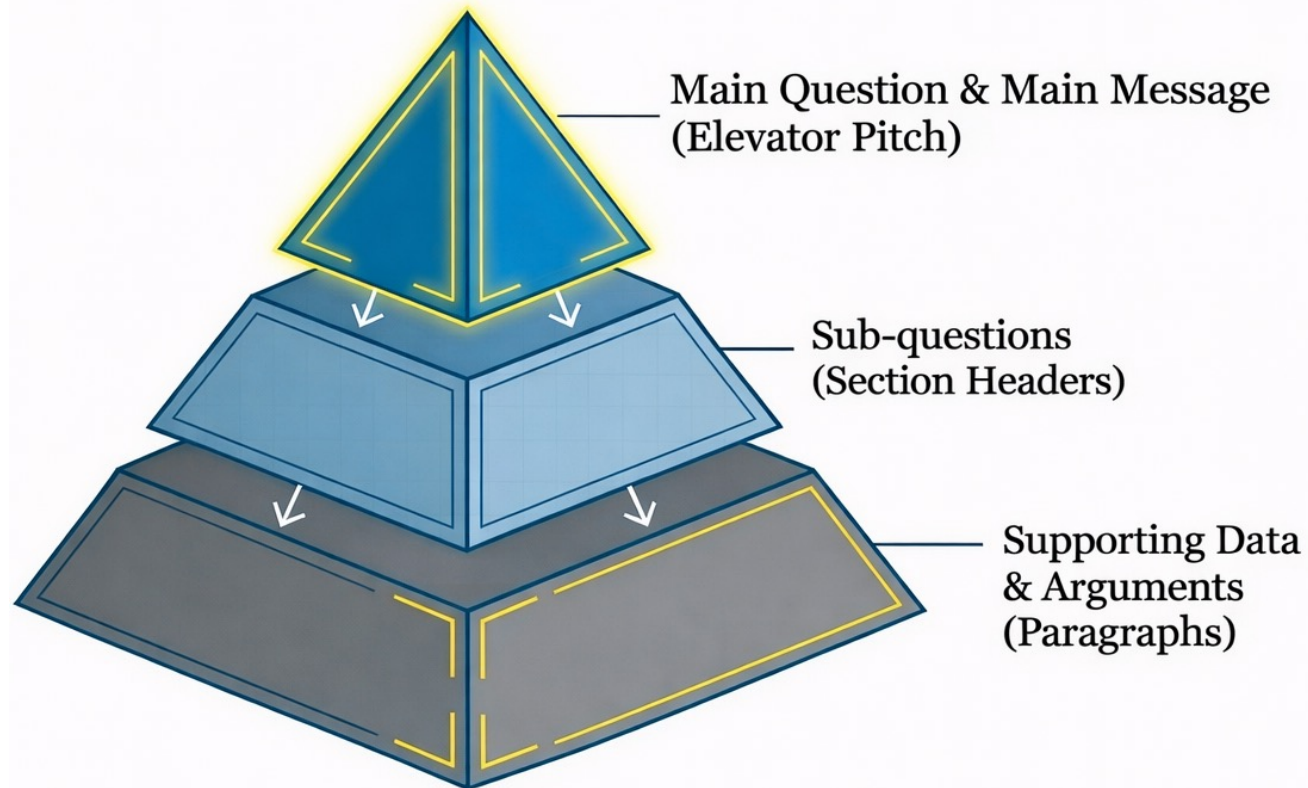


The 6-step plan

From main question to full text – step by step

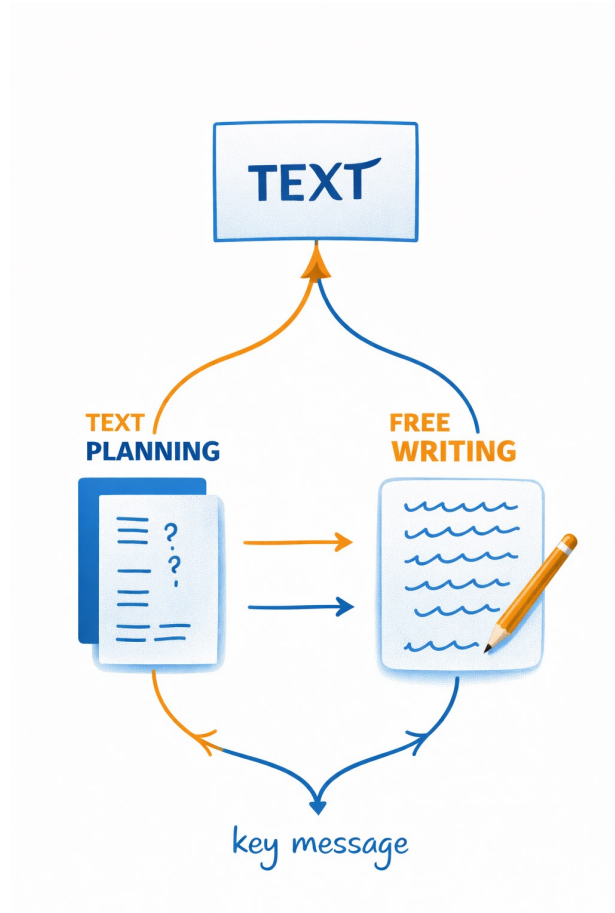


The Pyramid Principle



The Golden Rule:
Ideas at any level
must summarize the
ideas grouped below
them.

Text planning and free writing



Two routes to a text – both start from the key message.

Text planning works top-down from questions and answers; free writing explores ideas first. Both come together in the text.

Why use this method?



Group writing alignment – Get on the same page instantly.



Scope control – Adjust the assignment early.



Helicopter view – Assess logic without wading through pages.



Verification – Test if the core message is clear.



Efficiency – Prevent major rewrites.

Text plan template

Working title:

.....

Main question and central message:

.....

Topic / subheading of this section	Question addressed in this section	Key answer	Supporting details and sub-question(s)

A text plan in reader's questions

Working title: "Free fares, full buses, same traffic? The effects of free public transport for young people"

MAIN QUESTION Does free public transport for young people reduce their car use?

CENTRAL MESSAGE Free fares sharply increased public transport use among 18–25-year-olds but barely reduced car use, because the new trips mainly replaced cycling and walking. As a car-reduction measure the scheme is expensive and ineffective; it should be judged as social policy.

GENERAL questions

The standard questions every paper of this type answers – one per section. They give the skeleton.

SPECIFIC questions

The concrete questions this reader has about this study – often one per paragraph. They give the argument.

Text plan • 1. Introduction

GENERAL

What is the topic, why does it matter, and what does this paper add?

Free fares are popular as a climate and congestion measure, but we do not know whether they actually get young people out of their cars.

SPECIFIC QUESTION

KEY ANSWER

Policy context

Why are governments interested in free public transport?

Several regions have abolished fares for young people, hoping to reduce car use, emissions and congestion.

Why young people?

Why focus on 18–25-year-olds?

Travel habits formed at this age tend to last; it is also when many people buy their first car.

Literature

What do we already know?

Free fares raise ridership; evidence on car use is mixed and comes mostly from cities with short trips.

Gap and aim

What is still missing – and what does this paper ask?

Few studies use a control group and data on all modes. RQs: effect on public transport and car use; origin of new trips; car ownership.

Text plan · 2. Data and method

GENERAL

How did we find the answers?

We compare young people in a region with free fares to a similar region without, before and after the change.

SPECIFIC QUESTION

KEY ANSWER

The policy change

What exactly changed, and when?

Region A abolished fares for 18–25-year-olds in January 2023; region B did not.

Data

Which data do we use?

Travel diaries of 3,200 young people (two years before and after), smart-card data and car registrations.

Method

How do we isolate the effect of free fares?

Difference-in-differences: the change in region A minus the change in region B.

Reliability

Can we trust this comparison?

Yes: trends were parallel before 2023, and results hold in robustness checks.

Text plan • 3. Results

GENERAL

What did we find?

Public transport use rose sharply, car use hardly fell, and car ownership did not change.

SPECIFIC QUESTION

KEY ANSWER

Public transport use

How much did public transport use change?

+35% among 18–25-year-olds in region A.

Car use

Did car use fall?

Only by 3%.

Origin of new trips

Where did the new trips come from?

Half replaced cycling and walking, a third were new trips, one in six replaced a car trip.

Car ownership

Did fewer young people buy a car?

No: 11% bought one in the treatment group, 12% in the control group.

Differences between groups

Are the effects different for some groups?

Ridership rose most among students and low-income youth; the effect on car use was small in all groups.

Text plan • 4. Discussion and conclusion

GENERAL

What do the findings mean?

Free fares mainly attract people who used to cycle or walk; as a car-reduction measure the scheme is expensive and ineffective.

SPECIFIC QUESTION

KEY ANSWER

Explanation

Why did car use hardly fall, although public transport use rose so sharply?

Free public transport competes mainly with cycling and walking, not with the car.

Objection

Isn't two years simply too short to see an effect?

Probably not: no change between year 1 and year 2, no difference in car purchases.

Limitations

How far can we generalise these results?

One region, two years, self-reported diaries: effects may differ in large cities.

Policy implications

So is free public transport worth it?

Not as a climate or congestion measure; judge it as social policy, or combine it with measures on the car side.

Why a text plan needs both kinds of questions

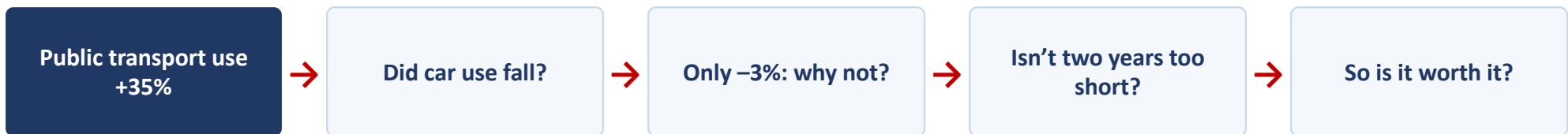
General questions give the skeleton

They come from the genre and decide the sections and their order – readers know where to find the method or the conclusion.

Specific questions give the argument

They come from this topic and this reader and decide the paragraphs – what this text actually says.

SPECIFIC QUESTIONS OFTEN ARISE FROM THE PREVIOUS ANSWER



Tip for co-authors: agree on the general questions first (the sections), then on the specific questions (the paragraphs), and only then on the key answers. Most disagreements show up in the key-answer column – long before anyone has written a full paragraph.

REFLECTION

Go back to your stepwise writing process

1

Which step is currently missing or only implicit?

2

Which step would benefit from being made more explicit or split into two?

3

Which step could be moved forward to prevent later discussion or revision?

Don't ask: "Is this good or bad?" – look at your plan with different eyes.

Hybrid and complex audiences

- 1 **Talk to them** – identify their questions
- 2 **Think about their different goals** – how can you serve them?
- 3 **Address them in your introduction** – show them the way
- 4 **Make your text super transparent** – helicopter-friendly
- 5 **Edit for maximum clarity at sentence level** – max. 20–24 words per sentence

Text plan cases

1

Productivity effects of remote and hybrid work

2

Peer feedback in the writing process

3

Language complexity in policy communication

?

Your own case ...

Mixed pairs: A and B



What information did the other mode produce that yours didn't?



What gets clearer when you write like this?



What becomes harder?



PART 2

The text plan for analysis

About text planning

1

Today is not about MAKING text plans, but WORKING with text plans.

2

A text plan is a working document, not a product.

3

A text plan will evolve on the way, and grow into a well-built text.

4

The aim is to support the writing process: a transparent structure + effective peer feedback.