The power of one idea per sentence

Write more clearly and persuasively with this strategy, advises Lynn Gaertner-Johnston (www.businesswritingblog.com): Remember the “power of one idea.” That is, one idea for each message, one idea for each paragraph, and one idea for each sentence.

Example: If you’re replying to your boss’s request for more information about a client, do not include a reminder that you’ll be out of town for two days next week, she says. That way, you won’t obscure important points.

Here’s how to remake sentences using the “one idea” strategy. First, take a look at the following sample sentences from Gaertner-Johnston. Notice that each includes several ideas that compete for the reader’s attention:

"Thank you for helping me with this project and filling in during my absence, both of which made a tremendous difference to the effectiveness of our team effort. While a portion of the budgeted dollars is spent on design and construction deficiencies, most of the maintenance budget dollars are spent for normal upkeep and operational costs, for example, landscaping, fire protection, access control, equipment maintenance, power washing, lighting, painting, and elevator and HVAC maintenance and repairs."

Now, notice how each idea stands out when you stick to one idea per sentence:

"Thank you for helping me with this project and filling in during my absence. Your help made a tremendous difference to the effectiveness of our team effort. A portion of the budgeted dollars is spent on design and construction deficiencies. However, most of the maintenance budget dollars are spent for normal upkeep and operational costs. For example, the budget covers landscaping, fire protection, access control, equipment maintenance, power washing, lighting, painting, and elevator and HVAC maintenance and repairs."

An added benefit to shorter sentences is that they’re easier to write and punctuate. Keep it simple!

— Adapted from “Use the Power of One Idea,” Lynn Gaertner-Johnston, Better Writing at Work.