Written Communication for Engineers

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Lead with the decision or the ask, then the evidence — templates for status updates, PRs, escalations and executive summaries.

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Mental model

Readers decide in the first two lines whether to keep reading, so put the decision, the ask or the news there, and the evidence after it. Most engineering writing fails not because it is wrong but because it is ordered like the work was done — background, investigation, finally the point — when the reader needs the reverse. Write for one named reader, tell them what you need from them, and stop.

Lead with the point

Line	Carries
First sentence	The news, decision or ask
Second sentence	Why it matters to this reader
Bullets	Supporting points, most important first
Last	Links and detail for the curious

This is “bottom line up front”, and it is the core of Axios’s Smart Brevity method: pick the one detail you

want remembered, sum it up in one sentence and say it first, then say why it matters. Google's technical writing course adds the paragraph-level version — one topic per paragraph, and an opening sentence that states it.

```
Before:
  Over the last two weeks we looked at the
  queue, tried three configs, and found...
After:
  We're moving billing to the new queue on
  Thursday; no action needed from you.
  Why: it removes the nightly backlog.
```

> **Gotcha:** "Context first" feels polite and buries the ask. If the reader only reads your first line in a notification preview, they must still know what you want.

Calibrate to the audience

Reader	Wants	Cut
Your team	Detail, trade-offs	Basics they know
Partner team	Impact on them, dates	Your internals
Manager	Risk, decisions needed	Step-by-step log
Non-engineer	Outcome in their terms	Jargon, acronyms

Google's course calls the core problem the **curse of knowledge**: experts forget what newcomers do not know, and their explanations skip the steps a reader needs. Define the target reader before you write, spell out acronyms on first use, and use one term per concept throughout — switching between "job", "task" and "worker" makes a reader think they are three things.

```
Engineer: p99 latency on /checkout rose
  from 300 ms to 2 s after the pool change.
```

```
Sales:    Checkout got slow for some
  customers on Tuesday; it's fixed now.
```

Writing a clear ask

Element	Example
Who	“@dana, as owner of auth”
What exactly	“approve the scope change”
By when	“by Wed 17:00 UTC”
Default	“otherwise we ship without SSO”

An ask without a named owner gets no owner, and one without a deadline gets answered when convenient. Stating the default — what happens if nobody replies — turns silence into a decision instead of a stall. Put the ask in the first line, not after the background.

```
Ask: @dana, can you approve dropping SSO
from v1 by Wed 17:00 UTC? If I hear
nothing, we ship without it and add SSO
```

```
in v1.1. Context: the IdP contract slipped
to January (link).
```

Status updates

Field	Rule
Status	One word: on track, at risk, off track
Since last time	Outcomes, not activity
Next	What lands before the next update
Risks and asks	Named owner and date each

A status update exists so nobody has to ask you for one. Lead with the state and any change to the date, because that is the one thing every reader scans for. Report outcomes (“search ships to 10% of users”) rather than effort (“worked on search”), which tells the reader nothing they can plan around.

```
Search v2 — AT RISK (was on track)
Date: 14 Nov -> 21 Nov, pending index fix
Done: ranking shipped to 10% of users
```

```
Next: reindex prod by Tue
Ask: @ops one extra node by Mon, or we
  slip a further week
```

> **Tip:** Change in status goes first and in words. “At risk (was on track)” survives a skim; a colour on a dashboard does not.

PR descriptions

Part	Contains
First line	What the change does, imperative mood
Why	The problem and why this approach
Risk	What could break, how it was tested
Links	Issue, design doc, benchmarks

Google’s engineering practices treat the description as a permanent record: a short first line saying **what** the change does, written as an order (“Delete the FizzBuzz RPC”), then a body saying **why**, with shortcomings and

background. “Fix bug” is their example of an inadequate description. Reviewers also need to know where to look and how you verified it.

```
Retry webhook delivery with backoff

Why: 2% of webhooks fail on transient 503s
and are never retried (#4812).
How: 5 attempts, exponential backoff, then
dead-letter queue.
Risk: duplicate deliveries; receivers
already dedupe on event id.
Tested: unit tests + replay of 1h prod log.
```

Incident and escalation messages

Field	Rule
Impact	Who is affected, in user terms
Status	Investigating, mitigated or resolved
Next update	A time, and keep it
Ask	The decision or help you need

During an incident, readers want impact and the time of the next update more than the cause. An escalation is an ask under time pressure: say what you need, from whom, by when, and what you have already tried, so the person you escalate to can act in one read.

```
[SEV2] Card payments failing in EU
Impact: ~30% of EU checkouts fail since
  09:40 UTC.
Status: mitigating; failover in progress.
Next update: 10:30 UTC.
Ask: need payments on-call to approve
  switching acquirer.
```

> **Warning:** Never let a promised update time pass silently. “No new information, next update 11:00” keeps trust; silence makes people start their own side channel.

Summarising for executives

SCQA	One sentence of
Situation	What is true and agreed
Complication	What changed or is at risk
Question	The decision this raises
Answer	Your recommendation

Will Larson's guide to presenting to executives recommends opening every document with an SCQA paragraph, and aligning with stakeholders before the meeting so nothing in it is a surprise. Executives read for the decision and its cost; give them both in the first paragraph and put the analysis below for whoever wants it.

```
We run checkout on one region (S). Two
outages this quarter cost an estimated
$40k each (C). Should we fund
multi-region now (Q)? Yes: 6 engineer-
weeks, done by March (A).
```

Editing passes and AI assistance

Pass	Look for
Cut	Words that carry no meaning
Structure	One idea per paragraph, point first
Sentences	Active voice, specific verbs, short
Terms	One name per concept
Facts	Every number and name checked

Edit in separate passes; trying to fix structure and wording at once fixes neither. Google's course centres on exactly these habits: consistent terminology, active voice, specific verbs and one idea per sentence. An AI assistant is a good critic — ask it which sentence is unclear or what a reader would ask next — and a risky author.

```
Prompt: "Here is my status update for the
VP of Sales. Don't rewrite it. List the
sentences they won't understand and the
questions they'll ask."
```

> **Gotcha:** An assistant-drafted update reads fluent and generic, and it confidently fills gaps you did not give it. You own every claim: check its numbers and names, and keep your own phrasing for anything that carries a commitment.

Further reading

- Google Technical Writing One
- Google Engineering Practices — Writing good CL descriptions
- Axios HQ — Smart Brevity 101
- Will Larson — Present to executives