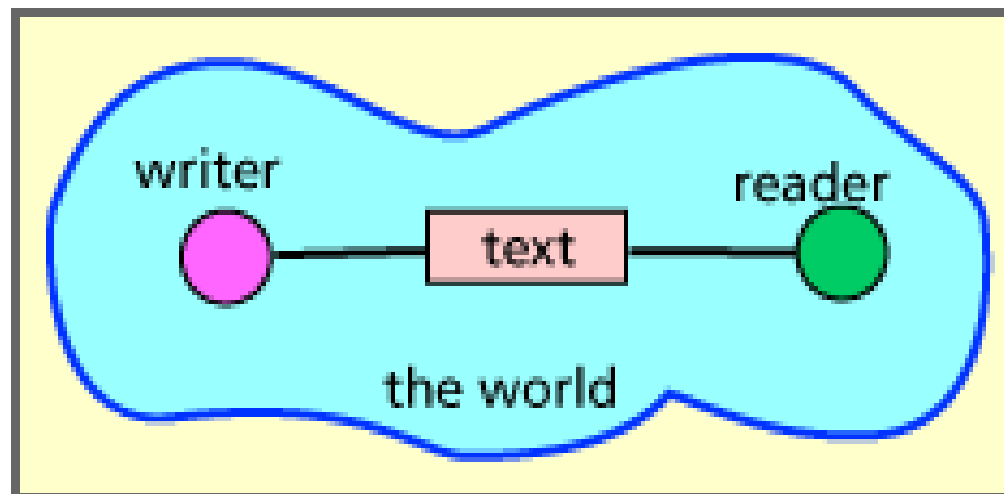


# Clear writing – key points + scientific conventions



# Good writing - Stanford Uni

- What makes good writing?

**Have something to say, clear thinking and writing**

1. Good writing communicates an idea clearly and effectively – think about what you are writing: think about each word, each sentence, each paragraph – what is your message ?

2. Good writing is elegant and stylish – “craft” your writing

**Takes time, revision, and a good editor**

# What makes a good writer ?

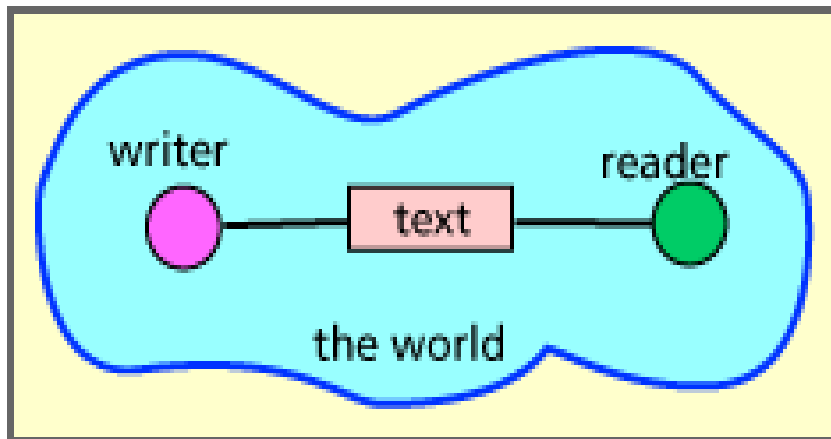
- Logical and clear thinking, translated into logical and clear writing – **clear messages for your readers**
- What am I trying to say ? Have I said it ?
- Learnable rules of grammar, expression, style, layout and use of words
- Clear, effective writing can be learned
- Don't be scared!

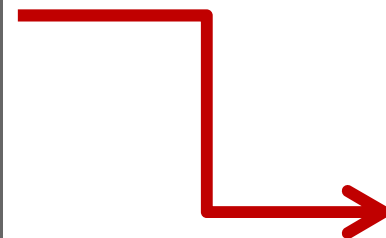
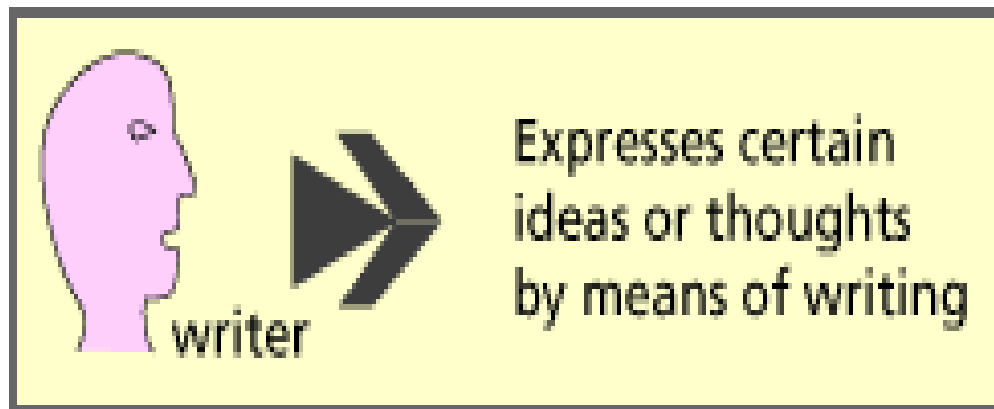
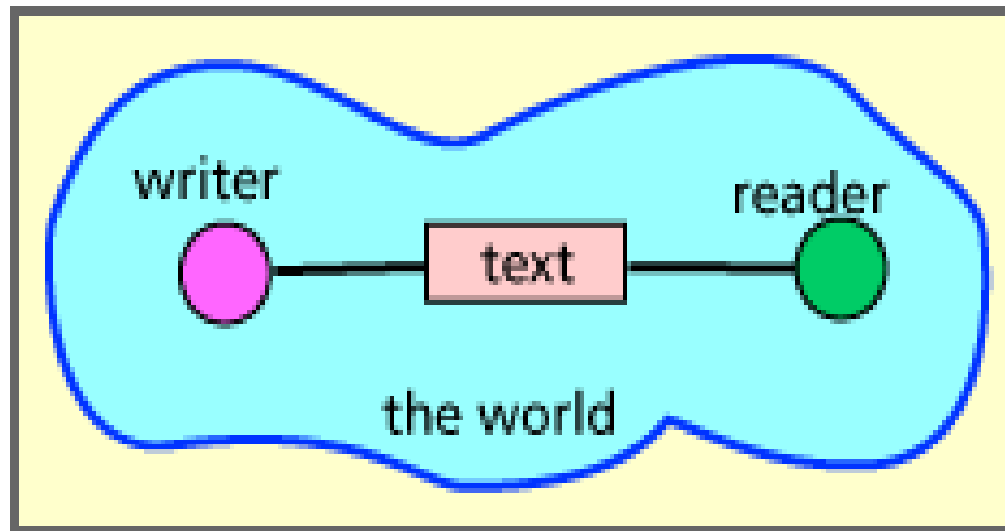
# Writing is a craft

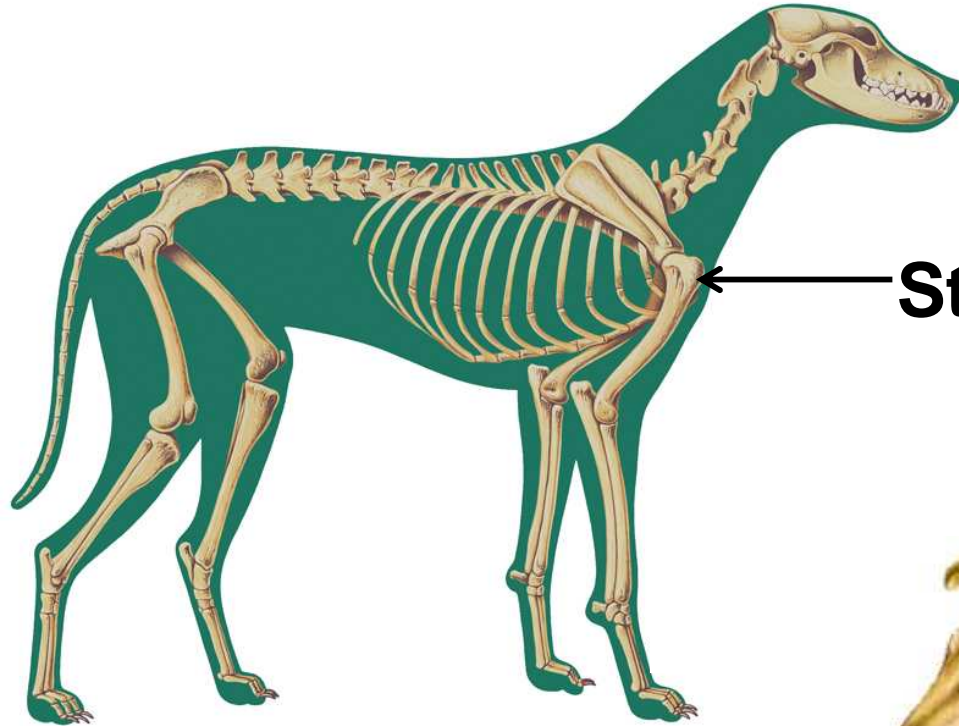
- What are you trying to say – writing is for the READER - NOT for the writer
- Carefully put your words, sentences, paragraphs, sections and paper together
- Start with skeleton of report - sections, paragraphs, dot points, then (**and only then**) fill in details
- **DO NOT** - start at the beginning and 'dump' words in until you get to the end....

# Purpose of writing

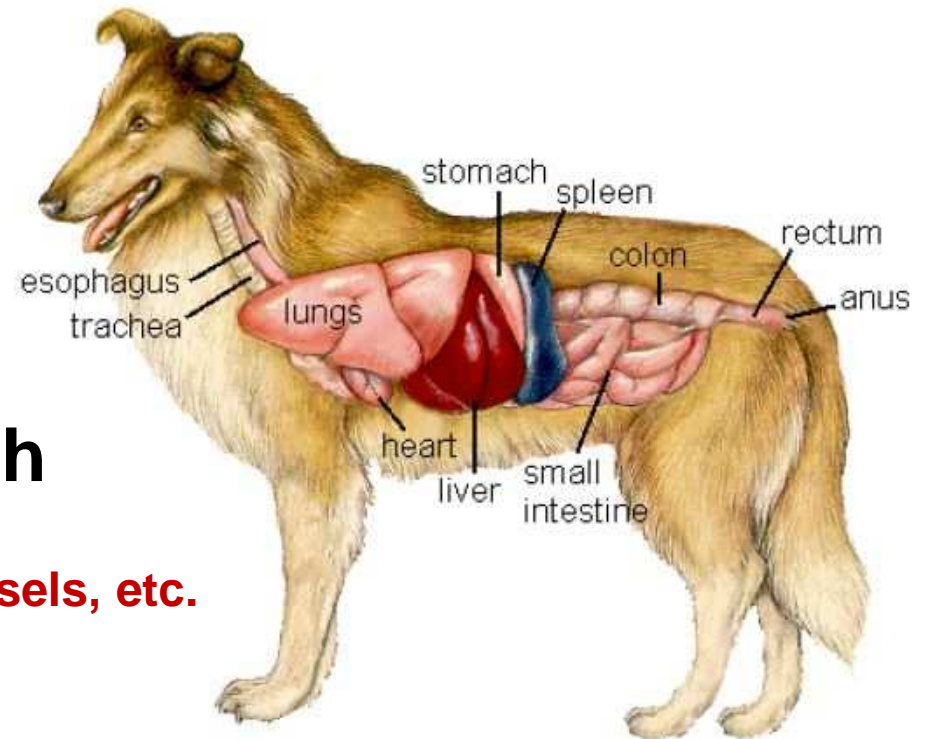
- You expressing your results/ideas in words, sentences, paragraphs, sections and the paper so that the reader can.....
- Understand your results /ideas by reading your words, sentences, paragraphs, sections and paper







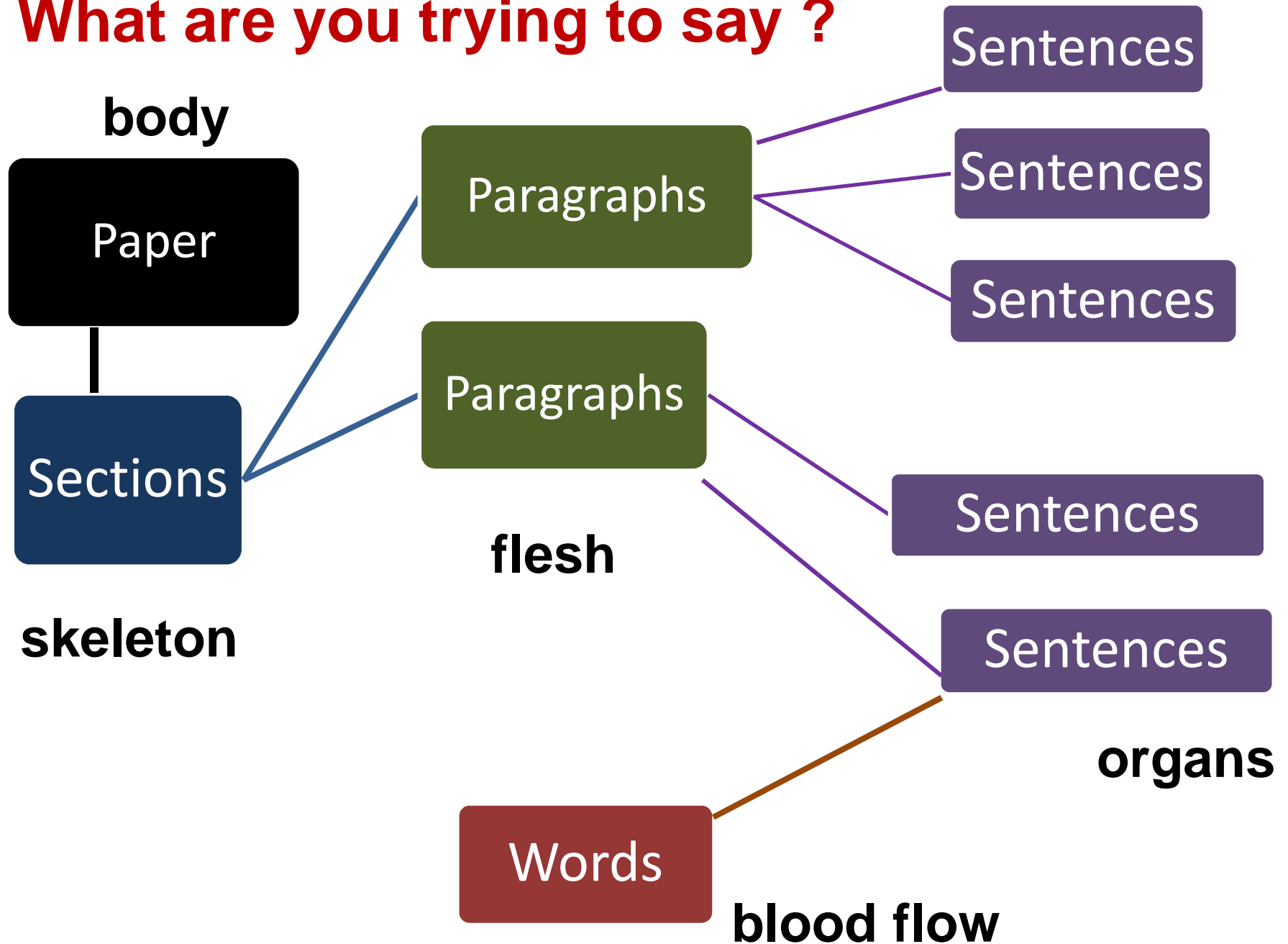
← **Structure/skeleton**



**Flesh**

**+ Brain, skin, blood vessels, etc.**

# What are you trying to say ?





- **List sections and sub-sections**
- **Within sections/sub-sections, write dot points for paragraphs – check – is order of paragraphs logical ??**
- **Then, write sentences in logical order in the paragraphs, generally paragraph by paragraph – but write and can re-order**
- **Do not write stream of consciousness**
- **Leave draft – go back to it**

- **Remove redundant words.**
- **Turn sentences around so they are direct – active voice**
- **Split sentences so they are short**
- **Check order of sentences in paragraphs, and order of paragraphs make sense**
- **Does your writing (your prose) flow or is it “jerky” or “rambly” or out of order ?**



Do not fall in  
love with  
junk words



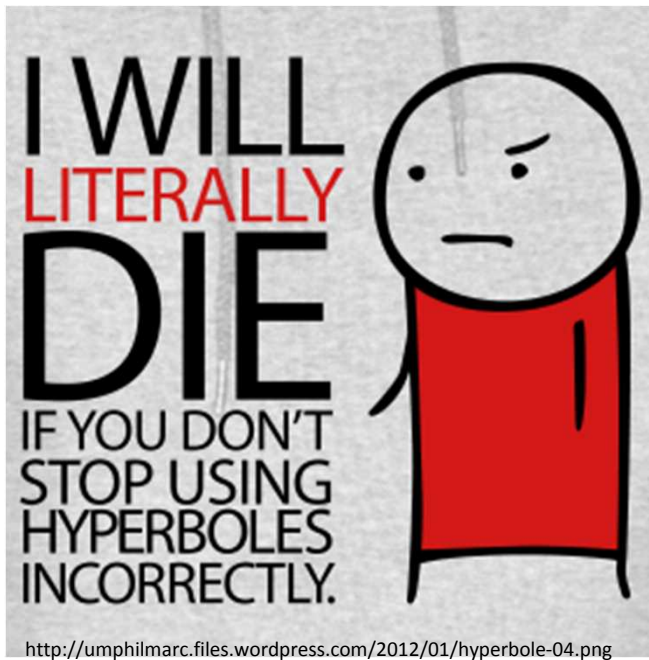
- Check every word to see if it can be deleted or replaced by a simpler word
- Use ‘because’ instead of ‘based on the fact that’, ‘for’ instead of ‘for the purpose of’
- Don’t use “however” twice in one paragraph
- Don’t use “however” more than once every 10 paragraphs

• **Never** write “furthermore”, “moreover”, “nonetheless”, “in addition to”, “it therefore follows”, ‘in terms of’, ‘in fact’, ‘in point of fact’, ‘in actual fact’, ‘in reality’, ‘in order to’, ‘as such’.. etc. **These words are meaningless and redundant. They are junk words.**

- Be careful with “also”, “in addition”, “therefore”, “however”, “includes”.....
- Ask yourself – is this word/are these words necessary, or are they “junk” words - **delete**

- **Keep jargon and acronyms to a minimum.**  
**Explain any jargon or acronyms that you use**
- **Do not be sarcastic**
- **Avoid hype (hyperbole) and exaggerated language.** ‘Extremely’, “huge” etc. are rarely necessary
- **Do not use emotional language,** eg, ‘catastrophic’, ‘devastating’.... Do not write polemics.... **What is a polemic???**





**What is a polemic???**

**Use words according to their meaning  
understood by the average person**

**Beware of malapropisms -**

- **She's as headstrong as an allegory  
(instead of alligator)**
- **Suppository instead of repository**
- **Lavatories of innovation and democracy**
- **Make sure you know the meaning of  
words and how to use them – read novels  
and quality newspapers**



# Active voice and short sentences

- **SUBJECT – VERB – OBJECT = ACTIVE VOICE**
- **The cat sat on the mat - NOT -**  
**The mat was sat on by the cat**
- **One point (or two) in each sentence**
- **“The cat sat on the mat and licked her paws”, “The cat sat on the mat, which was beside the stove”**
- **No more than two clauses, or a clause and a phrase in a sentence**

- **Never use dangling phrases “Walking slowly down the road, he saw a woman with two children”**
- **Avoid phrases at beginning of sentences. Do not write “For the largest colony, we found X seals..” Instead “We found X seals in the largest colony” Don’t start sentences with “For...”**
- **Avoid compound nouns. Say “a modified test of statistical significance” rather than “a modified statistical significance test”**

- **Do not go off on tangents. Do not “ramble”**
- **Do not make assertions. Do not go on “fishing exercises” – for one view or finding**
- **Do not generalize incorrectly. Do not say ‘some’ if only one instance**
- **Do not use semi-colons, and use commas and colons correctly**

# Tangents rambling fishing



**Be VERY CAREFUL with pronouns –  
It, This, These, They.**

**Repeat the noun, if in doubt**

**“The cat sat on the cat. It was black.”**

**What does “It” refer to ?? Ambiguous  
pronoun – do not use this construction**

**‘This’ on its own is ambiguous.  
Write ‘This test’ or ‘This problem’.**

**Do not start sentences with “It”  
(also ambiguous)**



# Tenses

- Use **simple past tense** to refer to results (yours or others)
- Use simple **present tense** to discuss them.....
- “Smith (1989) **reported** a similar result. Together, these findings **indicate**.....”

- Generally use simple past tense when referring to results (yours or others) in the past “Jones (1999) **found** that...” or “This study **showed** that...”

and.....

- Generally use simple present tense when you are discussing or commenting on something, including your own results – “My results **differ (present tense)** from those of Jones (1999) who **found (past tense)** that...”

## Affect or effect ?

- “affect” is a verb (verb**al**)
- “effect” is (usually) a noun (noun**e**)

Temperature affected the outcome.

Temperature had an effect on outcome.

Note: The new regime effected (i.e. caused) changes.



# **How to refer to different types of literature**

- **Empirical evidence – peer reviewed journal or book (or maybe peer reviewed report – be careful) – “results showed”**
- **Interpretation (Discussion) in peer reviewed document. “X concluded”.....**
- **Results in non-peer reviewed document – “results in D indicated or suggested”**
- **Discussion in documents and papers – be careful – are statements based on findings or are they assertions ??**

## Referring to different types of information

- **Someone else's empirical results (usually in refereed literature) – X found, X showed, X provided evidence that, X's results indicated (if not clear cut) or **X's results suggested****
- **Modelled data – Modelling by X showed or modelling by X indicated (if not clear cut)**
- **Someone's interpretation – X suggested, X argued, X considered, X concluded**

**X considered, suggested, argued are NOT evidence, they are opinions X concluded...**

- **Blog – usually assertions. Say X asserted, or X considered, or X stated if statement is measured, thought out, not just a rave**
- **Be careful with quoting modelled data – do NOT quote modelled data as “fact”**
- **Never write “X mentioned”. People do not “mention” things in academic literature or in most documents. People verbally mention things, not in scientific writing**
- **Do not use different verbs for the sake of it**
- **Verbs have meaning**

- **NEVER** say “it is generally agreed...”, or “it is well known” or “research has shown”
- “**WHO** generally agrees ??”, “**Why** is it well known, and by whom?”, “**Whose** research has shown ???”
- **Can** say “research by X and Y has shown”
- Always be specific as to **who** found, says, agrees, whose research has shown....
- **Never, ever** write “it is a well known fact...” or “it is well known that” or .....

# Some scientific conventions

- Check rules for your target journal/s
- Use numbers for 0-10 and words for >10
- Reporting P values (what if “almost sig.”)
- **MUST REPORT** df of statistical tests
- NEVER use dashes in tables or figures.  
Dashes are ambiguous. Write ND if no data
- Layout
- Order of authors on paper
- Decimal places

# **Do NOT report spurious accuracy**

**Rule of thumb -**

**0-<1: report 2-3 decimal places**

**1-10: report 1-3 decimal places - depending on nature of data**

**>10-100: report 1-2 decimal places - depending on nature of data**

**>100-1,000: report 0-1 decimal places**

**>1,000 – report 0 decimal places**

**Citing papers – when to start with citation/s,  
when to put citations/s at end of sentence –**

**eg, Specific - “Bloggs (1999) found that bird  
species richness in open woodland is related  
to...”**

**cf.**

**General - “Bird species richness in  
vegetation communities is related to ...  
(Smith 2000; Wagner and Trickett 2003)”**

**Never “dump” words from other documents**

- “Amoeba species X are killed by ethyl alcohol (Jones 1967; Davies et al. 1989)

cf. Marchant et al. (2002) found that 60% ethyl alcohol killed Y% of amoeba species X in Z minutes.”

- Cite primary documents. What to do if cannot find primary document..

- **CITE HONESTLY**

- Order of citations in text

- Footnotes



# **Your views and research writing**

**You will have your views and –**

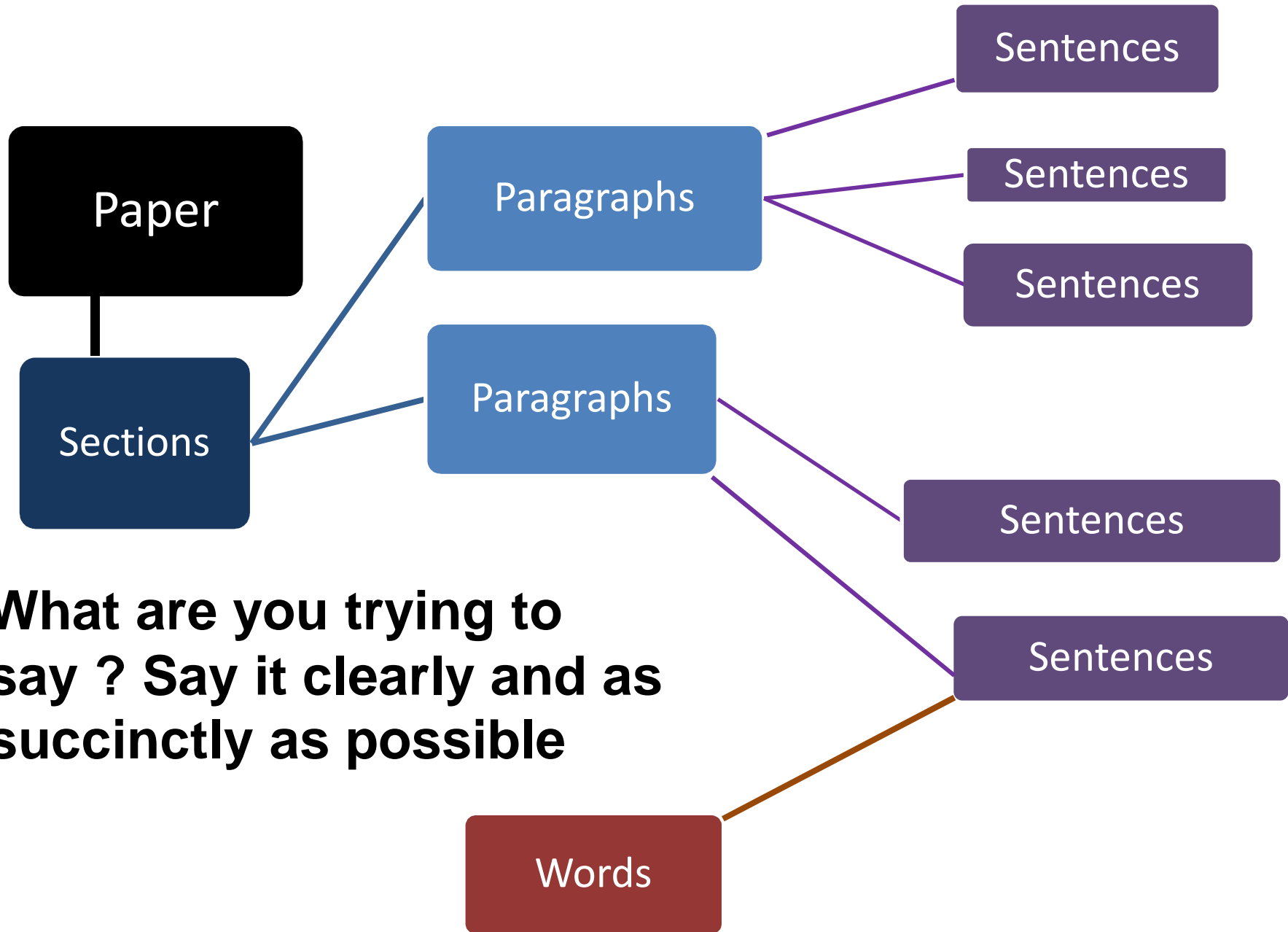
**Drawing on these in discussing your results is fine but –**

**Ensure you distinguish between data (empirical results) and your views**

**Be balanced. Do not use your data/results (or of others) to back up your views. Instead -**

**Let your results speak for themselves and then honestly and fairly interpret and discuss them in the context of your research question/aims and the literature**

**Do not speculate without evidence**



**What are you trying to say ? Say it clearly and as succinctly as possible**

# **Good writing starts with clear thinking**

**Before you start writing, ask:**

**“What am I trying to say?”**

**When you finish writing, ask:**

**“Have I said it?”.....**

**... make sure your messages are logically and clearly expressed, so other people understand your writing**

- **Structure your writing:** section, paragraphs, sentences, words
- **Start with the structure – dot points**
- **Then prepare early draft**
- **Revise.** Nobody gets it perfect the first time. Writing is hard for everyone
- **Cut ruthlessly.** Do not become attached to your words
- **Do not “fall in love” with “junk words”**
- **Read your text out loud**
- **Use a good editor!**