

# **Writing Great Briefing Materials**

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# What We Will Cover

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- ▶ Cost of Poor Writing
- ▶ Myths About “Plain Language”
- ▶ Process Considerations
- ▶ Facts About Good Writing
- ▶ Facts About Good Briefing Material
- ▶ Essential Elements
- ▶ Organization of Information & Format
- ▶ Clear Paragraphs and Sentences
- ▶ Examples of Revisions
- ▶ Presenting Data Graphically
- ▶ Resources



# Costs of poor writing

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- ▶ Cycle time

- ▶ Agility

- ▶ Decision Quality

- ▶ Credibility

- ▶ Opportunities

- ▶ Job Satisfaction

- ▶ FTEs/\$\$

- ▶ for reading things several times
- ▶ for calls for clarification
- ▶ for mistakes due to poor communication
- ▶ for revisions

Cost of writing one memo:

First draft	1 hr @ \$50 an hr	=	\$50
One review	.3 hr @ \$70 an hr	=	\$21
Redraft	.5 hr @ \$50 an hr	=	\$25
Clearances	.25 hr @ \$80 an hr X 2	=	\$40
<b>Total</b>			<b>\$136</b>
<b>Total if 3 rewrites</b>			<b>\$408</b>



# Example

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## **ORIGINAL – 119 WORDS**


Agencies are expected to set ambitious goals in a limited number of areas that encourage innovation and adoption of evidence-based strategies that push them to achieve significant performance improvements beyond current levels. OMB generally expects agencies to make great progress on all of their ambitious goals and achieve most of them, but at the same time will work with an agency that consistently meets a very high percentage of its ambitious goals to assure it is setting sufficiently ambitious goals. It will also work with agencies to develop performance improvement plans to support progress on the more challenging goals and objectives. Agencies are accountable for constantly striving to achieve meaningful progress and find lower-cost ways to achieve positive results.

## **PLAIN LANGUAGE VERSION – 72 WORDS**

Agencies will set a limited number of performance targets well beyond current levels. Ambitious goals encourage improvement through analysis and innovation. Further, as programs mature, better results should be achieved at lower costs.

Agencies are expected to achieve most of their goals. However, if all targets are always met, OMB will question the target levels. When agencies are challenged to meet targets, OMB will work with them to develop performance improvement plans.

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# Myths About “Plain Language”

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- ▶ **It’s Optional - Plain Language: It's the law**
  - ▶ President Obama signed the Plain Writing Act of 2010 on October 13, 2010. The law requires that federal agencies use “clear Government communication that the public can understand and use.”
- ▶ **It’s “Dumbed Down”**
  - ▶ The Harvard Business Review is written in Plain Language
  - ▶ The New York Times is written in Plain Language
- ▶ **It’s Not Worth the Effort**
  - ▶ The most effective position papers and budget justifications are written in Plain Language
    - ▶ Plain Language makes you credible



# Process Matters

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- ▶ **Collaborate early or rewrite (several times) later**
  - ▶ Pre-draft conference call
  - ▶ Outline review
- ▶ **Collaborate with who?**
  - ▶ Who knows your audience?
  - ▶ Who will have to “clear” on the paper?
  - ▶ Who is the expert on the subject?
  - ▶ Who has strong opinions on the subject?
  - ▶ Who are the primary stakeholders?
  - ▶ Should other agencies be involved?
- ▶ **What facts will help the process?**
  - ▶ On what points will there be disagreement?
  - ▶ What research will help resolve issues?
    - ▶ Facts
    - ▶ Comparisons and Benchmarks



# Facts about good writing

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- ▶ It looks easy.
- ▶ It's not easy.
- ▶ It takes a lot of time (three drafts minimum).
- ▶ Rework and miscommunication take much more time.
- ▶ Business writing follows different rules than creative writing.



# Facts About Good Briefing Material

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- ▶ **Clarifies objectives and audience**
  - ▶ Inform
  - ▶ “Frame” a decision
  - ▶ Present a position and alternatives for a decision
  - ▶ Provide an action plan & rationale
- ▶ **Simplifies the complicated**
- ▶ **Provides all the important relevant information**
  - ▶ Including and especially bad news
  - ▶ Adds analytic value
- ▶ **Remains brief (one to three pages)**
  - ▶ TLDR = “Too Long; Didn’t Read”





# Organization

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- ▶ Answer the following questions in the first few lines:
  - ▶ What is this paper about?
  - ▶ What is the basic background?
- ▶ Anticipate and answer questions an intelligent reader is likely to ask.
- ▶ Use headings
  - ▶ Allow the reader to quickly find information.
  - ▶ Increase white space on the page (looks more “approachable”)
  - ▶ Question headings help readers relate to the information
- ▶ Use lists and tables to simplify complex material



# Organization

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- ▶ Introduce the COMPELLING FACTS early
- ▶ Make them POP

## Background on Succession Planning

- ▶ 30% of the workforce is eligible to retire

## Background on Exports

- ▶ 85% of new markets are outside our borders

## Background on Digital Economy

- ▶ 70% of Christmas sales were online
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# Example: Proposal to Create a “Green Store”

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## ▶ Purpose:

- ▶ Present the case for creating a central repository for surplus office supplies;
- ▶ Receive authorization to establish this “green store.”

## ▶ Background:

- ▶ Survey showed that BIG DOLLARS of usable supplies are discarded
- ▶ Executive Order directs savings and conservation
- ▶ Review of space showed xx sq ft for storing supplies

## ▶ Proposal:

- ▶ Description
- ▶ Cost
- ▶ Savings
- ▶ Risks and Mitigation

## ▶ Action Plan if Approved:



## Example: E-mail announcement

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This is to let you know that the Agency Priority Goal proposals have been approved by the Executive Office of the President.

The new Agency Priority Goals are:

Please make sure all your employees know what the DOC Agency Priority Goals are, and that progress will be updated quarterly on [www.Performance.gov](http://www.Performance.gov). The information on the site will help everyone appreciate the importance of our work.

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# Identifying the Essential Elements

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- ▶ **Step one: “The Brain Dump”**
  - ▶ In no order at all, list facts, observations, data that the audience should know
    - ▶ Can be done with collaborators or after a pre-draft meeting
  - ▶ Put your notes in affinity groups
- ▶ **Step two: “Explain it to a friend”**
  - ▶ Build a first cut outline from your explanation
  - ▶ Get input on the outline
- ▶ **Step three: “Identify fact gaps”**
- ▶ **Step four: “Research the gaps”**
- ▶ **Step five: Write, rewrite, refine**



# Clear Sentences - Keep them short!

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- ▶ Express only one idea in each sentence
- ▶ Use active voice
- ▶ Keep the subject, verb, and object close together
- ▶ Avoid double negatives and exceptions to exceptions
- ▶ Place words carefully
- ▶ Include only one list per sentence
- ▶ Consider summarizing rather than listing



# Words and Phrases- Keep them simple!

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- ▶ Don't write words and phrases you don't say
  - ▶ “as afore referenced”
- ▶ Limit the number of adjectives
- ▶ Avoid trendy words, e.g., “leverage your education”
- ▶ Be precise
  - ▶ “the budget includes the increase” v. “the budget reflects the increase”
- ▶ Use the simplest form of a verb



# Misplaced Modifiers

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- ▶ **No harm done:**
  - ▶ The girl went to the store in a white hat.
- ▶ **Harm done (from the Washington Post):**
  - ▶ “Twitter’s chief executive addressed abuse on the social network, which nearly doubled its revenue and grew its monthly active-user base over last year.”





## Minimize Acronyms & “Insider References”

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- ▶ The DMC approved the DAO regarding GAO audits of compliance with GPRAMA.
- ▶ To bring on a SVS you need to complete an SF-52, MOA and a SAC form.
- ▶ All the rules are in A-11 and A-123.



# Example of Revisions

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## **BEFORE**

After notification of NMFS, this final rule requires all CA/OR DGN vessel operators to have attended one Skipper Education Workshop after all workshops have been convened by NMFS in September 1997. CA/OR DGN vessel operators are required to attend Skipper Education Workshops at annual intervals thereafter, unless that requirement is waived by NMFS. NMFS will provide sufficient advance notice to vessel operators by mail prior to convening workshops.

## **AFTER**

Vessel operators must attend a skipper education workshop before they begin fishing each fishing season. They will receive a reminder notice from the National Marine Fisheries Service.

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# Clear Paragraphs

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- ▶ Use the “Because” approach

Commerce is an interesting and rewarding place to work. Research conducted by Commerce employees is at the cutting edge of technology. NOAA is developing state of the art weather forecasting models. NIST is developing nano-technology. Commerce agencies save lives during extreme weather events. ITA, MBDA and EDA help save livelihoods by providing technical assistance to businesses and communities.



# Don't Create a "Wall of Words"

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## ▶ Example of a "Wall"

Shortfalls or delays in annual appropriations for the 2020 Census add unnecessary risk to successfully carrying out the most automated, modern and dynamic decennial census in history, one that is designed to save over \$5 billion compared with repeating the paper-and-pencil approach of the 2010 Census, while maintaining high quality results. In 2017, the Census Bureau must complete development, integration, and testing of all of its production systems and finalize plans for its 34 operations for the beginning of the "dry run" 2018 End-to-End Census Test in the fall of 2017. The 2018 End-to-End Census Test is essential to thoroughly test the performance and integration of all IT technologies and data collection methods that will be deployed in 2019 and 2020. Failure to adequately test would lead directly to cost increases and impact data quality in the 2020 Census. The Census Bureau, in consultation with the Economics and Statistics Administration (ESA) and other DOC leadership, is actively mitigating its top risks for the 2018 End-to-End Census Test and 2020 Census through robust enterprise and program-level risk management. This includes systems readiness, lifecycle cost estimation, and IT security, which are some of the top concerns of the Government Accountability Office (GAO), Commerce Office of Inspector General (OIG), and the congressional oversight and appropriations committees via their intensive engagements overseeing 2020 Census preparations.

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# Don't Create a "Wall of Words"

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## ▶ Improvement

Designed to save over \$5 billion compared to 2010, the Census will be the most automated, modern and dynamic decennial census in history. However, shortfalls and delays in annual appropriations put the success of the 2020 Census at risk. Without the funds to test now, the 2020 Census will cost more and produce less reliable data.

The Census Bureau must finish developing, integrating, and testing all of its production systems. Each system will be tested for readiness individually and together. The "dry run" 2018 End-to-End Census Test will assess the integration of all IT technologies and the performance of data collection methods for 2020.

To mitigate the risks associated with cost saving approaches, lifecycle cost estimation, and IT security, must meet standards recommended by the Government Accountability Office (GAO), Commerce Office of Inspector General (OIG), and congressional oversight and appropriations committees.

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# Presenting Data Graphically

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- ▶ Does the title clearly state what is being presented?
- ▶ Are axes clearly labeled?
- ▶ Is a legend provided and clear?
- ▶ Is there too much data?
- ▶ Is the right scale used?
- ▶ Does the image tell the story that needs telling?

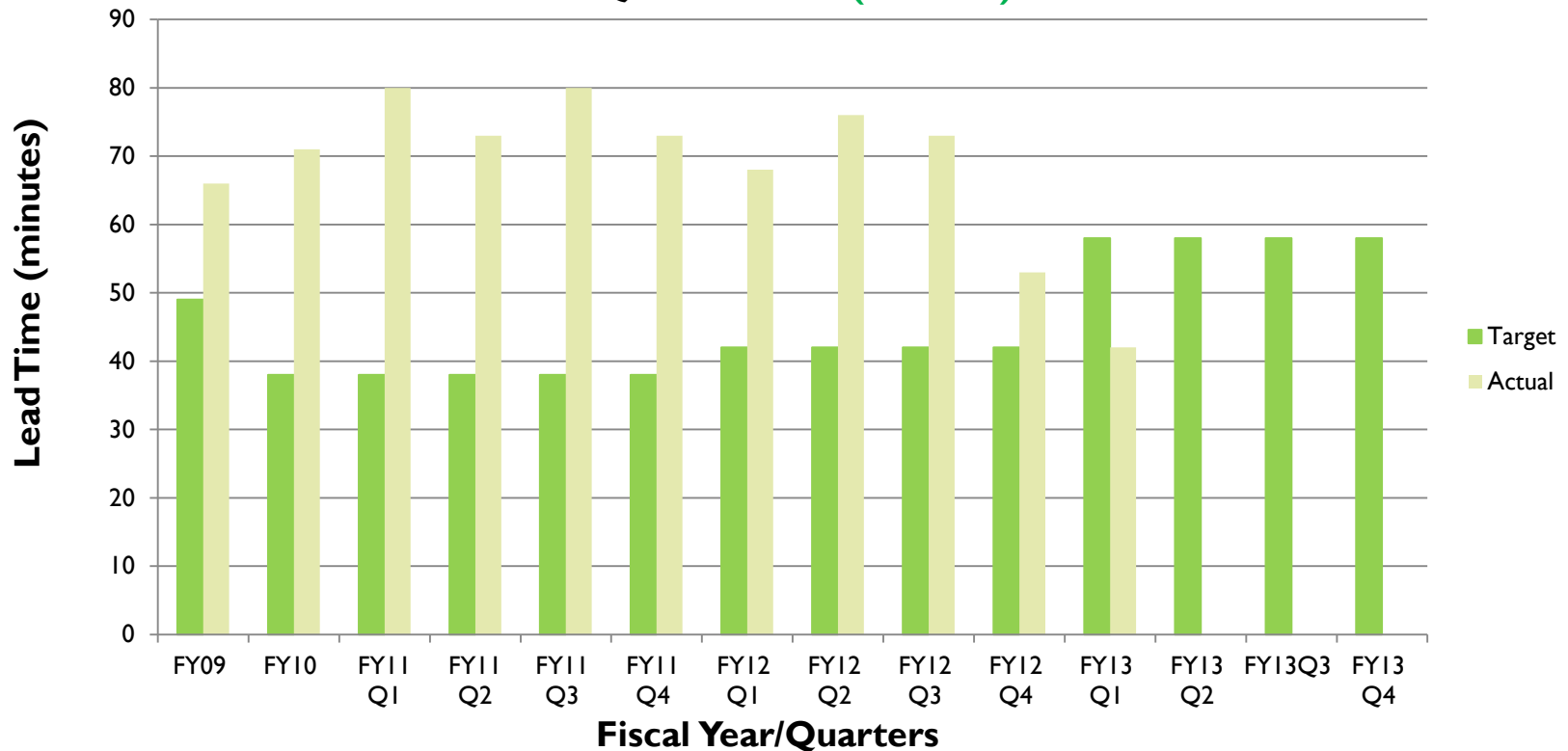


# Suggest Improvements

## Severe Weather Warnings for Flash Floods-Lead Time (minutes)

**\*\*Priority Goal\*\***

**FY13 Q1 Target: 58**  
**FY13 Q1 Actual: 42\* (not met)**



\*The FY 2013 Q1 data only includes October. 42 minutes is preliminary and will be updated with data for November and December

\*\* In FY 2010 measurement transitioned from a county based warning paradigm to an events based paradigm.



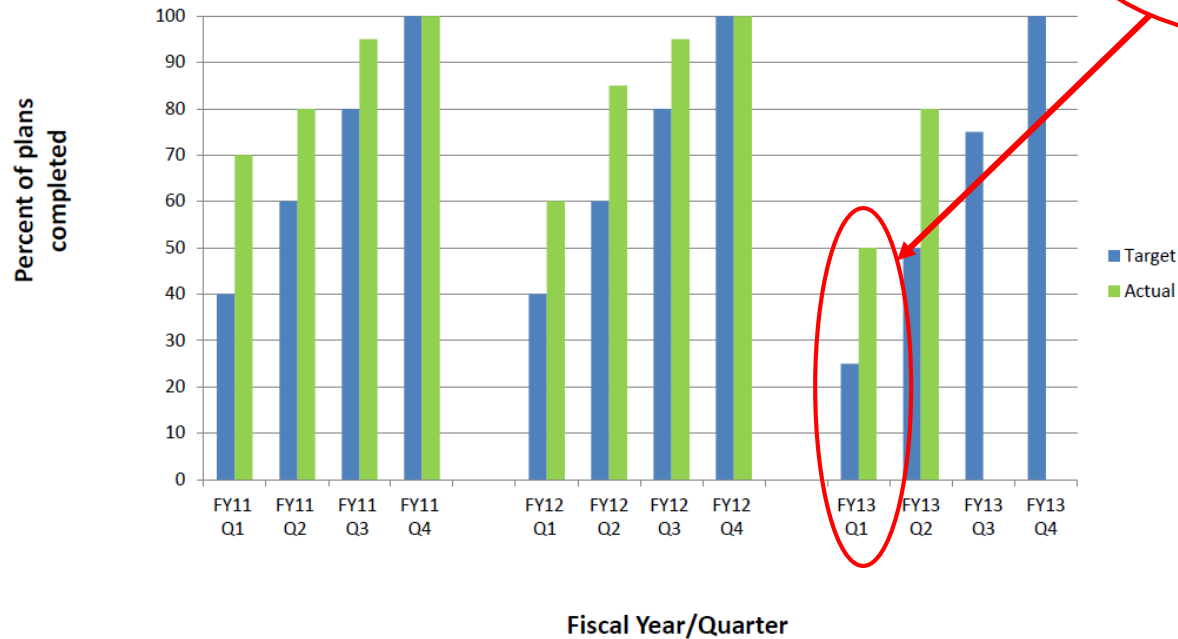
# Examples

## Organizational Excellence

Percent Corrective Actions Plans completed (A-123s)

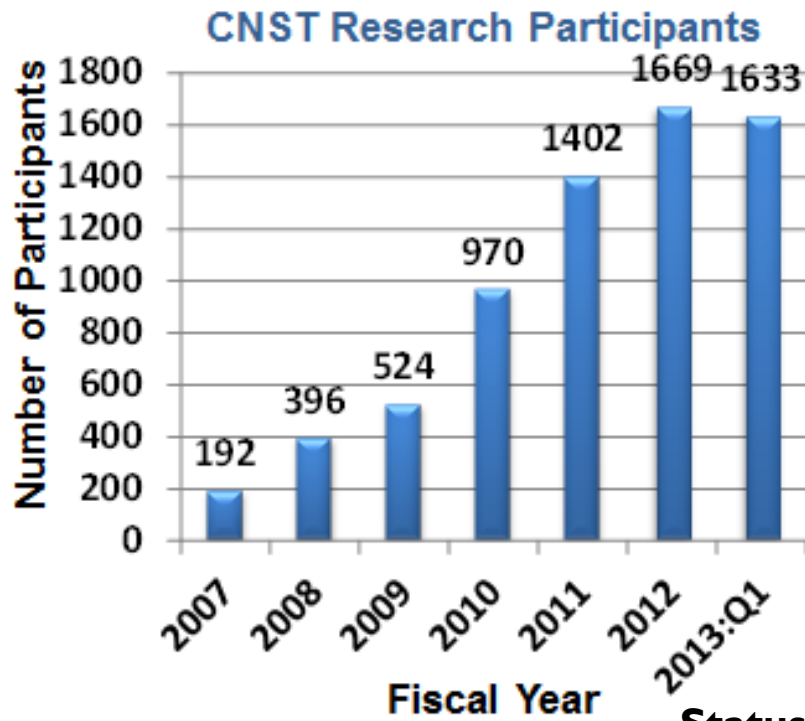
FY13 Q1 Target: 25  
FY13 Q1 Actual: 100 (met)

**Do the numbers in text match to the graph?**





# Examples



***What point is being made? Should the leader be worried?***

## **Status & Significant Developments**

- CNST Research Participants in FY12 increased 19 % and came from a record number of institutions (363)
- Research Participants in FY12 from industry increased 39 %
- The number of NanoFab projects grew by 42 % in FY12
- Project growth continued in FY13 Q1, but Research Participants decreased because a few large projects ended

# Examples

## Targets:

- 100% of systems with valid Authority to Operate
- 100% of Plan of Action and Milestones (POA&Ms) closed on time

## Status and Significant Developments:

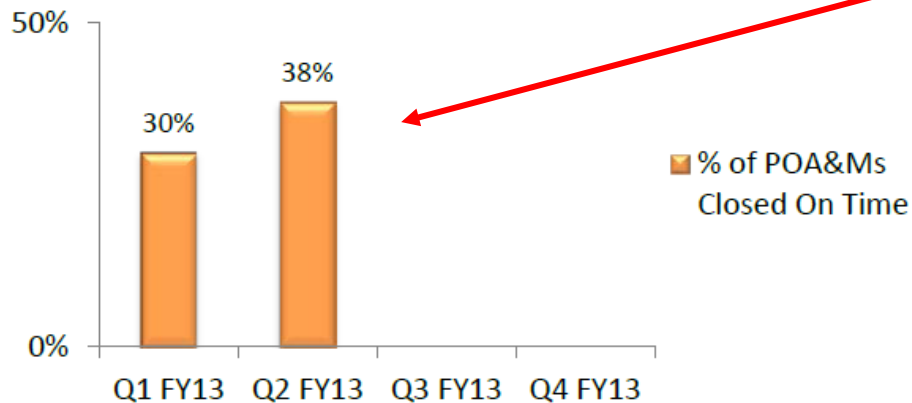
449 total POA&Ms Open at the beginning of the quarter

111 systems with valid ATO / 111 total # of systems = 100% with valid ATO

# of total POA&Ms open at the beginning of each quarter:

Q1 FY13	Q2 FY13	Q3 FY13	Q4 FY13

**% of Plan of Action & Milestones (POA&MS) Closed On-Time**



**Graphic does not communicate that these percentages are far from 100% closed on time target.**

# Examples

## Performance Measures:

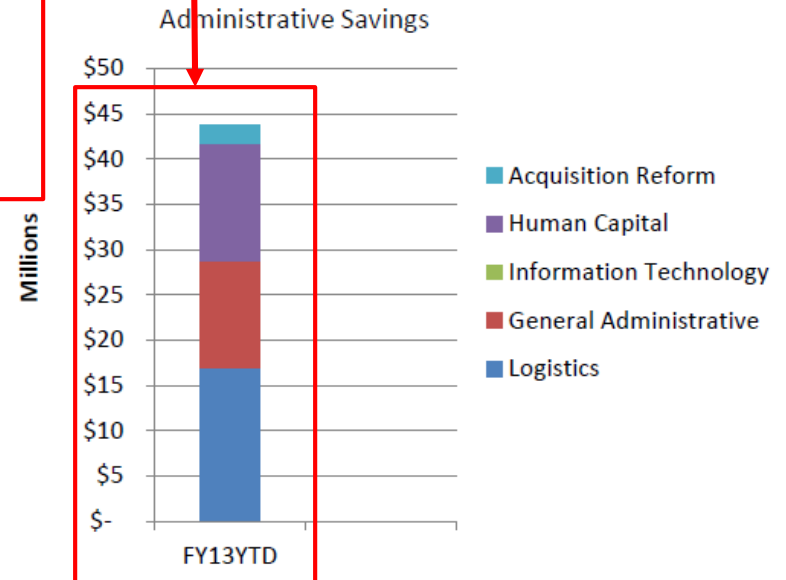
- Administrative Savings (FY13 Target = \$15.7M)

## Status & Significant Developments:

- FY13 Guidance was received after Q1, however, reporting on Q1 and Q2 combined below:

- FY13 Q1-Q2 administrative savings were validated at \$45.1M
- The savings category for FY13 are:
  - Logistics: \$16.9M
  - Acquisition Reform: \$2M
  - General Administrative: \$11.7M
  - Human Capital: \$13M
  - Information Technology: \$0M

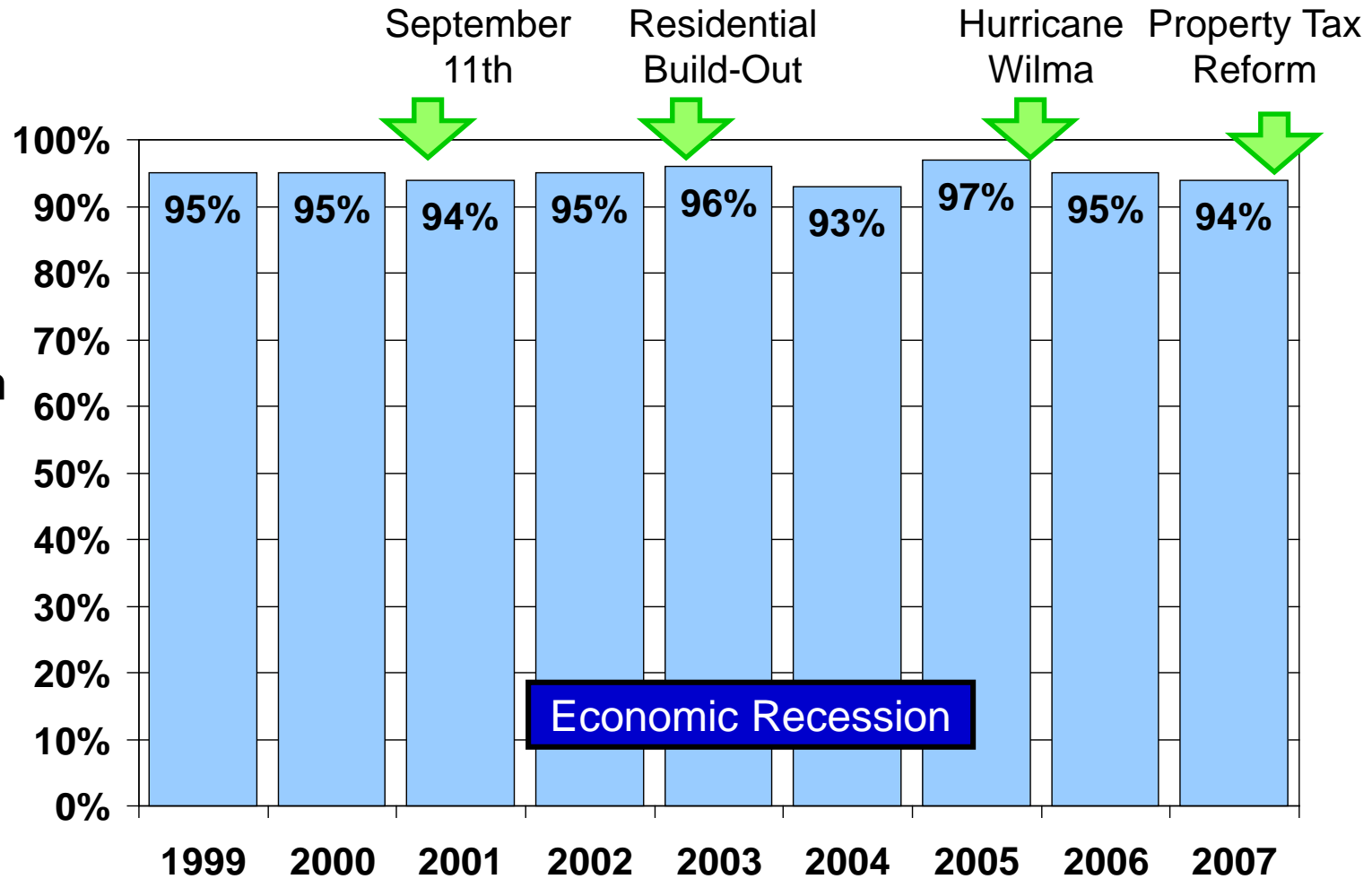
**How does this all correlate? Can you tell?**



# Example

## Sustainability of City's Results

High  
Customer  
Satisfaction  
In Good  
Times and  
Bad



# Crowd Editing for Practice

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- ▶ The Circular requires the Secretary of Commerce to: Coordinate and foster executive branch implementation of the policy set forth in paragraph 6 of the Circular (see paragraph .04 of this Section), and provide, at the Secretary's discretion, administrative guidance to assist agencies in implementing paragraph 8.b.(5) of the Circular, which states that the heads of agencies concerned with standards will "consult with the Secretary, as necessary, in the development and issuance of, internal agency procedures and guidance implementing this Circular, and submit, in response to the request of the Secretary, summary reports on the status of agency interaction with voluntary standards bodies



# Edited Version

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- ▶ The Circular requires the Secretary of Commerce to:  
Lead executive branch implementation of paragraph 6 of the Circular. The Secretary may also provide guidance to agencies on paragraph 8.b.(5). It states that agencies will consult with the Secretary on related internal procedures. Upon request, they must provide summary reports on work with voluntary standards bodies.
- ▶ “Cross References” similar to those in the example paragraph are common in regulations and scientific work. See p. 84 in the Federal Plain Language Guidelines for the best way to write them.



# Crowd Editing for Practice

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- ▶ The Framework has been developed through ongoing engagement with, and input from, stakeholders in government, industry, and academia, including an open public review and comment process, nine multi-day workshops, and staff expert presentations at over 70 international conferences and events.



# Edited Version

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- ▶ The Framework has been developed with stakeholders from all sectors. There has also been a public review and comment opportunity and 9 workshops open to the public. Staff experts presented the Framework at over 70 international conferences and events.





# Crowd Editing for Practice

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- ▶ Broad use of the Framework serves as a model approach to strengthening the critical infrastructure, while discouraging a balkanization caused from unique requirements that hamper interoperability and innovation, and limit the efficient and effective use of resources.



# Edited Version

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- ▶ Broad use of the Framework will strengthen critical infrastructure. This common approach will support interoperability and innovation and use resources effectively.



# Crowd Editing for Practice


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- ▶ **Advocate globally for the United States as a destination for investment (ITA)**. For the first time, the U.S. federal government will actively advocate to business leaders to locate production and investment in the United States, a tactic often employed by competitor nations looking to attract investment. The Department, through Select USA, will coordinate the full support of top federal officials, including the President in advocating with business from around the world to select the United States as the location for new jobs and investment.
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## Edited Version

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- ▶ **Advocate globally for the United States as a destination for investment (ITA).** For the first time, the U.S. federal government will actively advocate investment in the U.S. to foreign business leaders. Many other nations have similar national programs. The Department, through SelectUSA, will coordinate actions by top federal officials, including the President, to increase investment by foreign business in the U.S. When these businesses “SelectUSA,” new U.S. jobs and investment result.
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# Summary

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- ▶ If you remember nothing else:
  - ▶ Write shorter sentences (no more than two lines).
  - ▶ Edit out unnecessary words.
  - ▶ Read your writing out loud for quality control.
    - ▶ (if it sounds weird, it is weird; revise it)
  - ▶ Label charts and graphs carefully.
  - ▶ Use *parallel construction*. (*this list is an illustration*)



# Resources

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[www.Plainlanguage.gov](http://www.Plainlanguage.gov)

The Art of Critical Decision Making

Professor Michael A Roberto

[www.thegreatcourses.com](http://www.thegreatcourses.com)

Thinking Fast & Slow

Daniel Kahneman

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