

Seven Steps of Review

Read first sentence. Do I have a clear idea of what message to take away? Do I have a sense of where the piece is going?

Quickly read the entire article. Is the body of the piece consistent with the first sentence? Does the analysis go beyond what a reasonably intelligent generalist would know or conclude? Does it move the reader from the present (what we know) to the future (what we think will happen)?

Read the title. Does the title accurately reflect the tenor of the piece and not promise too much? Is it consistent with the lead sentence, but not repetitive?

Check logic flow. Do the lead sentences of each paragraph follow logically? Are they in the right order? Is it clear what the function of each paragraph is? (Is it providing a new fact? Context? Outlook? Implications for the US?)

Check argumentation. Are the lead sentences of each paragraph analytic and limited to one main point per paragraph? Are judgments sound and well-supported? Is the evidence in the paragraph consistent with the lead sentence? Are there any sourcing questions?

Line edits. Weed out extraneous detail, correct any grammatical errors, typos, awkward sentence constructions.

Reread entire text. Sanity check. Are the title and lead sentence clear and consistent with each other and with the rest of the text? Does the text flow? Is the piece concisely and precisely written and free of errors? If a graphic is used, does it effectively complement the piece?

Writing for Decision Checklist

Threshold. Is your message of importance to those you are writing for? Is the development new and analyzed in ways that provide new insight? Have you provided your analysis in a timely manner? Is it clear why you are writing now?

Message. Is your main point clearly and prominently stated in the title and lead sentence? Does your message go beyond the obvious? Is it clear why the US should care?

Analysis. Does your piece make judgments and not just provide facts? Does it anticipate readers' questions and provide answers to them? Have you clearly distinguished between what you know, what you don't know, and what you assess to be true? Is the reasoning behind all judgments transparent and persuasive? Is the reliability of your information clearly articulated? Could the same evidence support different or alternative conclusions, and if so, are those alternatives accounted for?

Compelling argument. Is your piece logically and coherently organized? Have you bounded the subject, making only a few key points? Is the most important material up front? Have you provided sufficient and compelling evidence to support your judgments, with just enough detail to give the customer the flavor and texture of what is happening? Have you made sure the "connective tissue" between the analysis and implications is clear? Is your tone balanced and objective, free of value-laden terms or advocacy?

Structure. Is your title true to your piece? Does the lead contain the new development and why the US should care? Does each paragraph and sentence advance the story? Have you avoided redundancy by grouping like with like?

Presentation. Is your piece concise? Have you used precise language and illustrated general points with concrete examples? Are your sentences direct (subject and verb appear in first 6-8 words) and grammatically correct? Is your paper free of typos and misspellings?

Writing for Decision

Title. Conveys the main message; is declarative with a clear subject/action verb; is analytic when possible. Dare to be bland—nothing cute, nothing hyped that would derail a reader.

Lead sentence. Single most important element because it must convey the one clear message the reader will take away from the piece. It must be analytic—identifying the new development and what means. Lead builds on title without repeating it.

Structure. The structure of your piece must support your one clear message by outlining two or three supporting points, one point with supporting evidence per paragraph. Strong analytic judgments are clearly conveyed in the topic sentences of each paragraph, each paragraph advances the story. The piece should move the reader from the present—definition of the development or problem—to the future or a possible solution to the problem.

Set up the problem. Provide details of the new development. Identify the main actors and why events are unfolding now. Provide a small amount of background and context to size up the problem—possibly comparing it to historical events, similar events in other countries, or linking it to broader issues for the country or region. Identify visible reactions to the development that provide a foundation for what will happen next.

Provide outlook and opportunities. Analyze what is at stake/risk because of the change/development. How might the new development affect US interest? How might it change the government's policies toward the US? How might it affect broader regional trends? Provide opportunities for US policymakers to affect the situation, while avoiding policy prescription. For example, identify leverage points for the US to influence what will happen next, or describe what might be wanted from the US.

Sourcing. All judgments must be supported by evidence or clearly laid out reasoning. Be explicit about what you know and what you assess by clearly identifying where information has come from.

Graphics. Add context or detail, present data so it is more easily absorbed. They should complement the text without repeating it.