



Follow a hierarchy of ideas.

Have you ever taken apart a set of nesting dolls (Russian *matryoshka* dolls)? One large wooden doll screws apart at the waistline to reveal a slightly smaller doll, inside of which is nested another doll, and so on. Some include as many as eight or nine dolls, the smallest the size of a bumblebee. What's more, all of the dolls clearly belong together: if the largest has brown hair and a red dress, each of the others, down to the smallest, has brown hair and a red dress.

When you're writing an article, report, or any other work beyond a few pages in length, you probably know that you need to break it up into shorter sections that are more manageable to read, and give these sections a heading. Headings serve as signs, telling readers at a glance the topic they're about to "enter." Easy, right? The tricky task is to ensure that the sections you create, along with their subtopics, paragraphs, and individual sentences, fit together like nesting dolls. To do that, you need to move your readers from the broadest topic to successively narrower levels of detail. These must fit within their larger "doll." That is, you need to avoid discussing details that don't belong.

Let's say you're writing an in-house assessment for your company. It has to cover the company's finances, as well as a variety of concerns—about automation, competitors, diversity, climate threats, and more. In structuring the report, you might think in terms of two main sections (or "largest dolls"): finances and challenges. Next, what are the broadest topics within these two? The section on finances could be broken down into sales, expenses, profits, etc. Each of these could be subdivided further; for instance, the section on sales might be divided into quarterly sales and annual sales, international and domestic sales, etc. Paragraphs and sentences discussing 1st quarter international sales would "nest" under an even smaller heading. In outline form, the beginning of this main section might look like this:

- I. Financials
 - A. Sales

1. First Quarter Sales
 - a. International Sales
 - b. Domestic Sales
2. Second Quarter Sales
[and so on]

Do you see how the narrower topics nest within their broader topics? If the analogy of nesting dolls doesn't work for you, try thinking of files within a file folder within a filing drawer; streets within a neighborhood within a city; or a recipe for apple pie within a subsection on fruit pies within a section on pies within a cookbook chapter on desserts. The take-home tip is: When writing longer works, (1) move from broad to narrow and (2) avoid discussing details that don't belong.