



SAO LEGAL WRITING

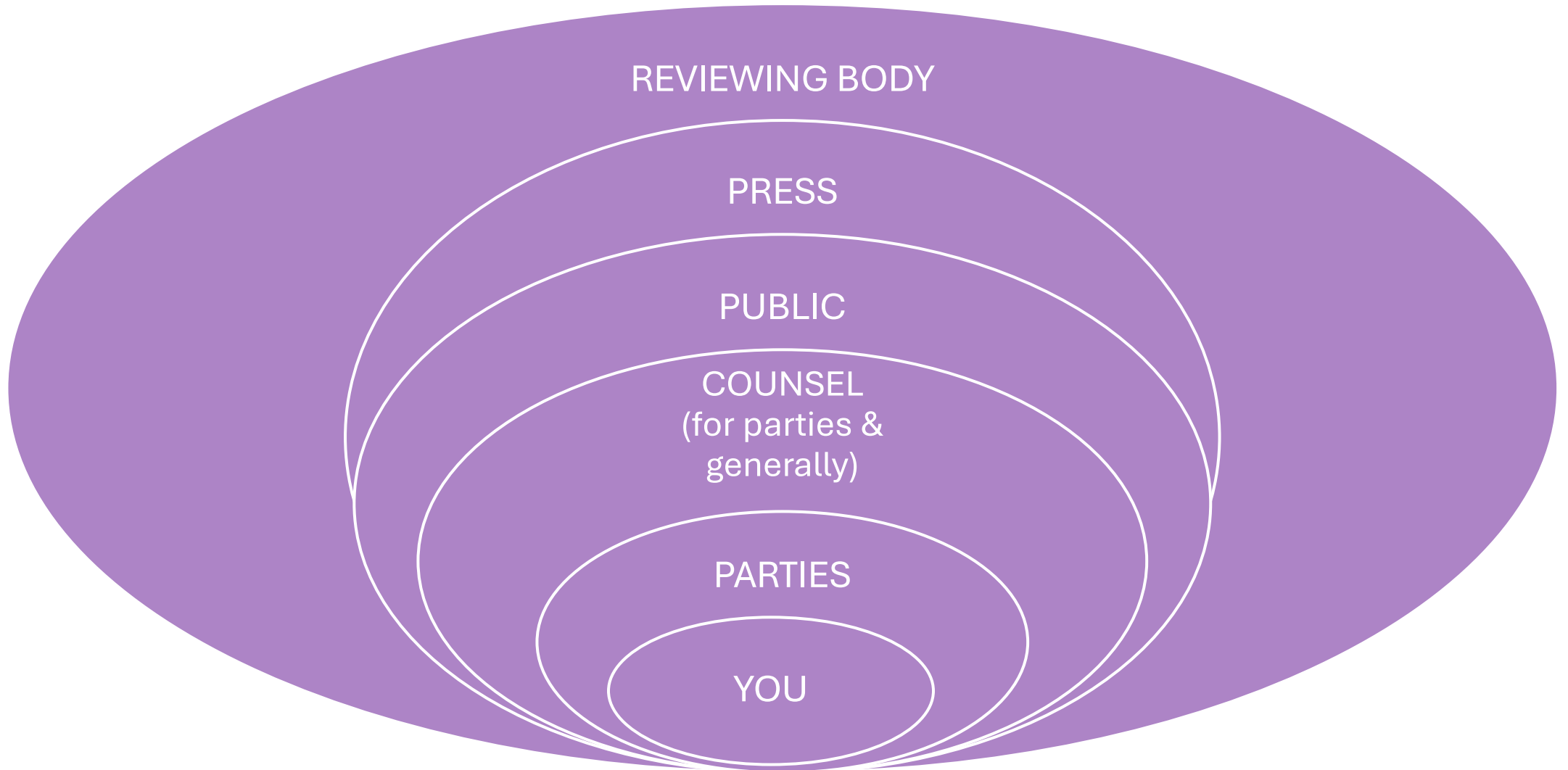
# Effective Decision Writing: Key Principles & Best Practices

## Part 1

Workshop Presented to BCCAT

November 5, 2024

# Your multiple readers



“

**Clear thinking becomes clear writing;  
one can't exist without the other.”**

~ William Zinsser

”

# “The curse of knowledge”

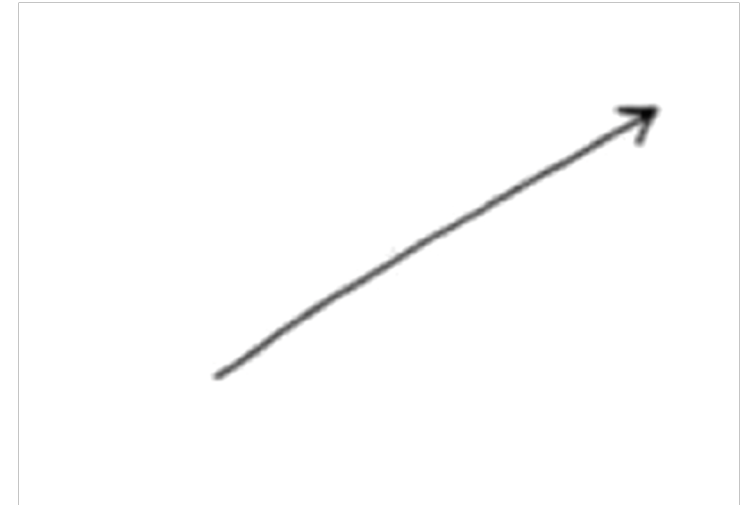


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**“Watch me think”**  
(writer-centred writing)

**“Let me show you”**  
(reader-centred writing)



# Key principles of effective decision writing

1. ADOPT	2. PROVIDE	3. GROUP	4. CONSTRUCT	5. DEVELOP
a reader-centred approach	context before details	related information together	clear, direct, & simple sentences	an effective writing process

# Principle 1: Adopt a reader-centred approach



## CCAT's definition of plain language

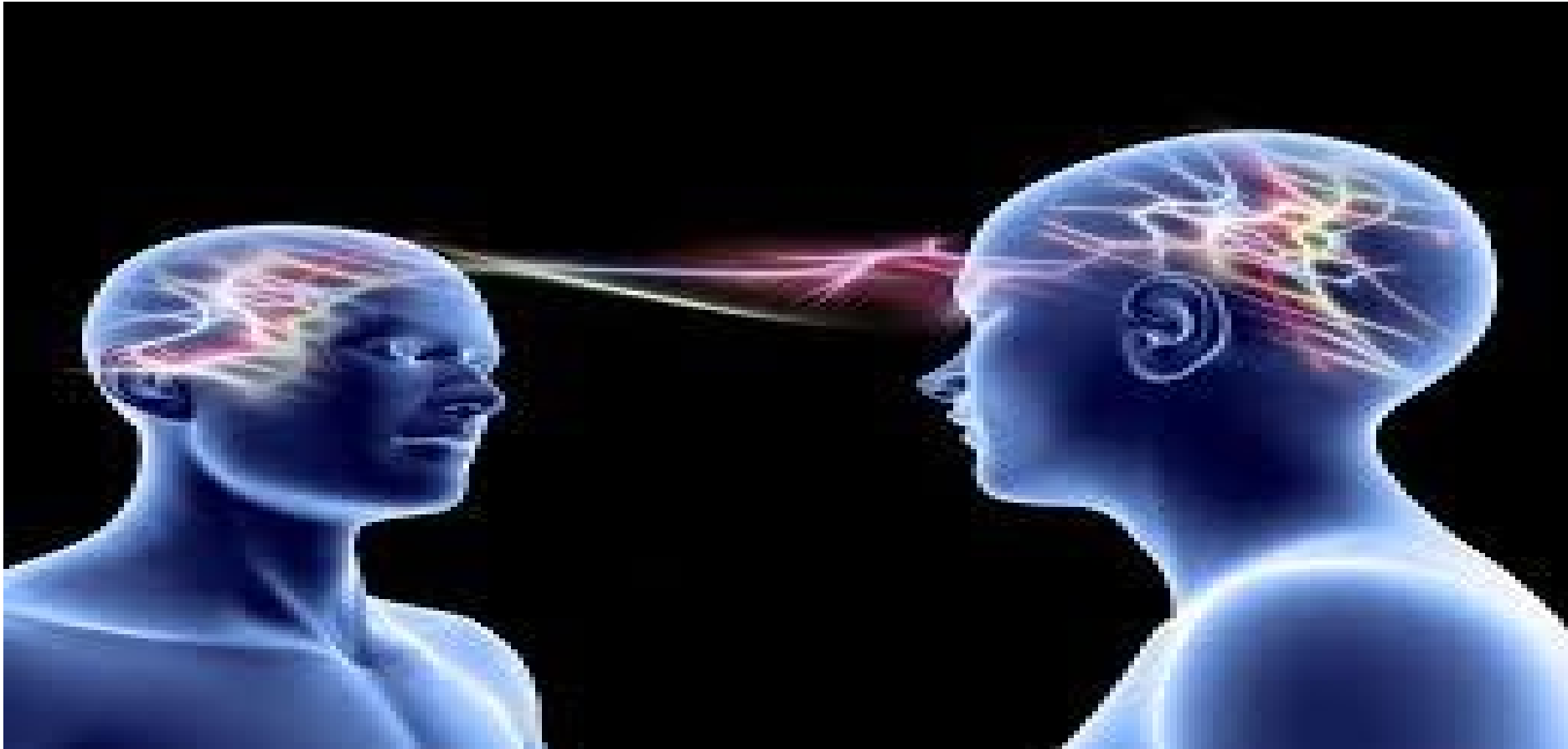
“Plain language is clear, simple writing that is easily understood by the **people it is written for**. Plain language focuses on a **reader's needs and abilities**. Its goal is to make sure that a **reader can understand everything** that the writer wants to communicate.”



“What do my readers need to know next?”



“Make your readers feel smart”



## Principle 2: Provide context before details



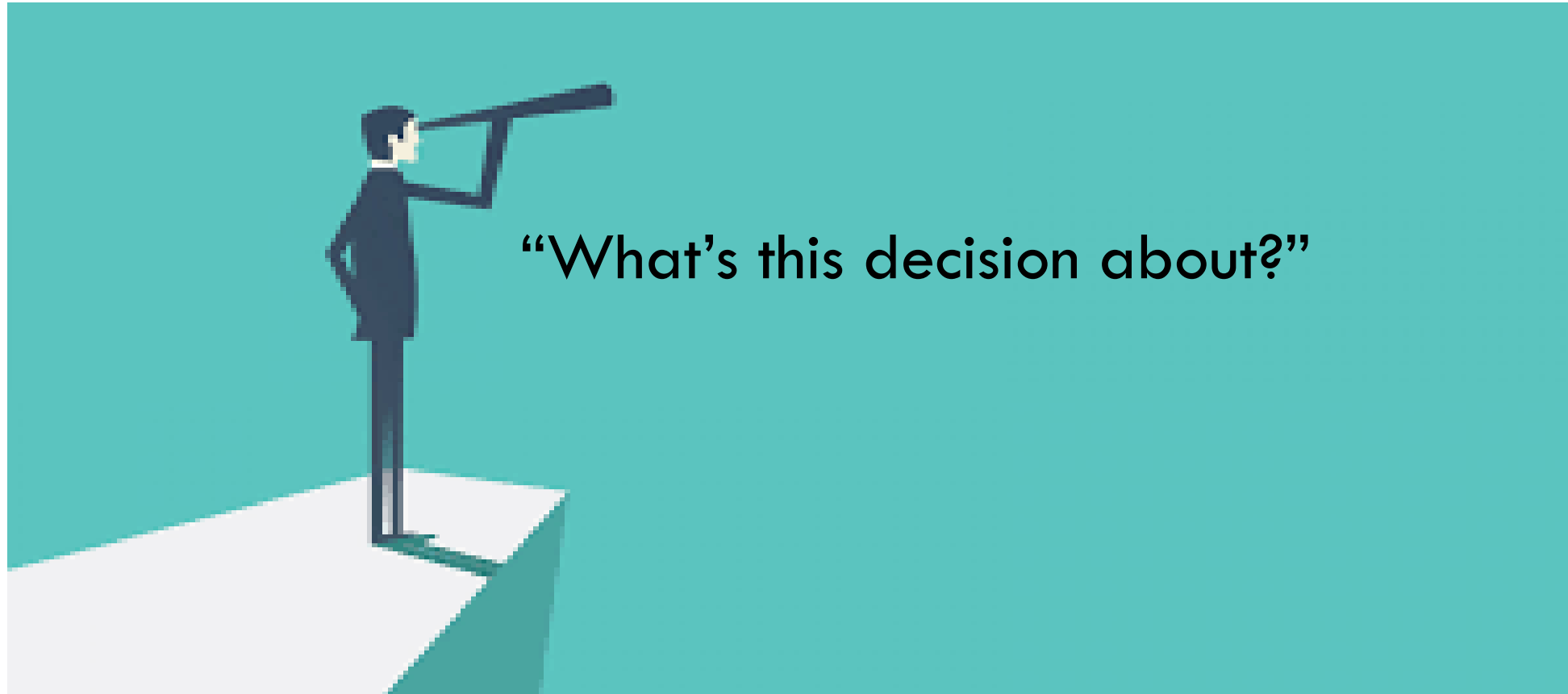
**what's coming**  
**what's important**  
**how it's relevant**

# Six ways to provide context in decisions

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1. Start with a contextual introduction
2. Include internal roadmaps
3. Add descriptive headings
4. Announce a paragraph's purpose in the opening sentence
5. Frame block quotations
6. Synthesize information with bullet points

# Starting with a contextual introduction



# Main elements of a contextual introduction

- Provides a concise overview of the nature of the proceeding
- Includes enough facts to provide context for the issues
  - Who wants what from whom
- States the specific questions (issues) to be addressed
  - Build decisions around the issues

## Does your decision start with a contextual introduction?

1. Read the opening section of your decision.
  2. Write out three reasons why you think the section is, or is not, a contextual introduction.
- Be prepared to discuss your reasons with the large group

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# Roadmaps set the stage for what follows



- Use a roadmap to
  - Tell readers where to focus their attention
  - Preview the order in which content will be presented
    - Steps of an upcoming analysis?
  - Help readers navigate through a section

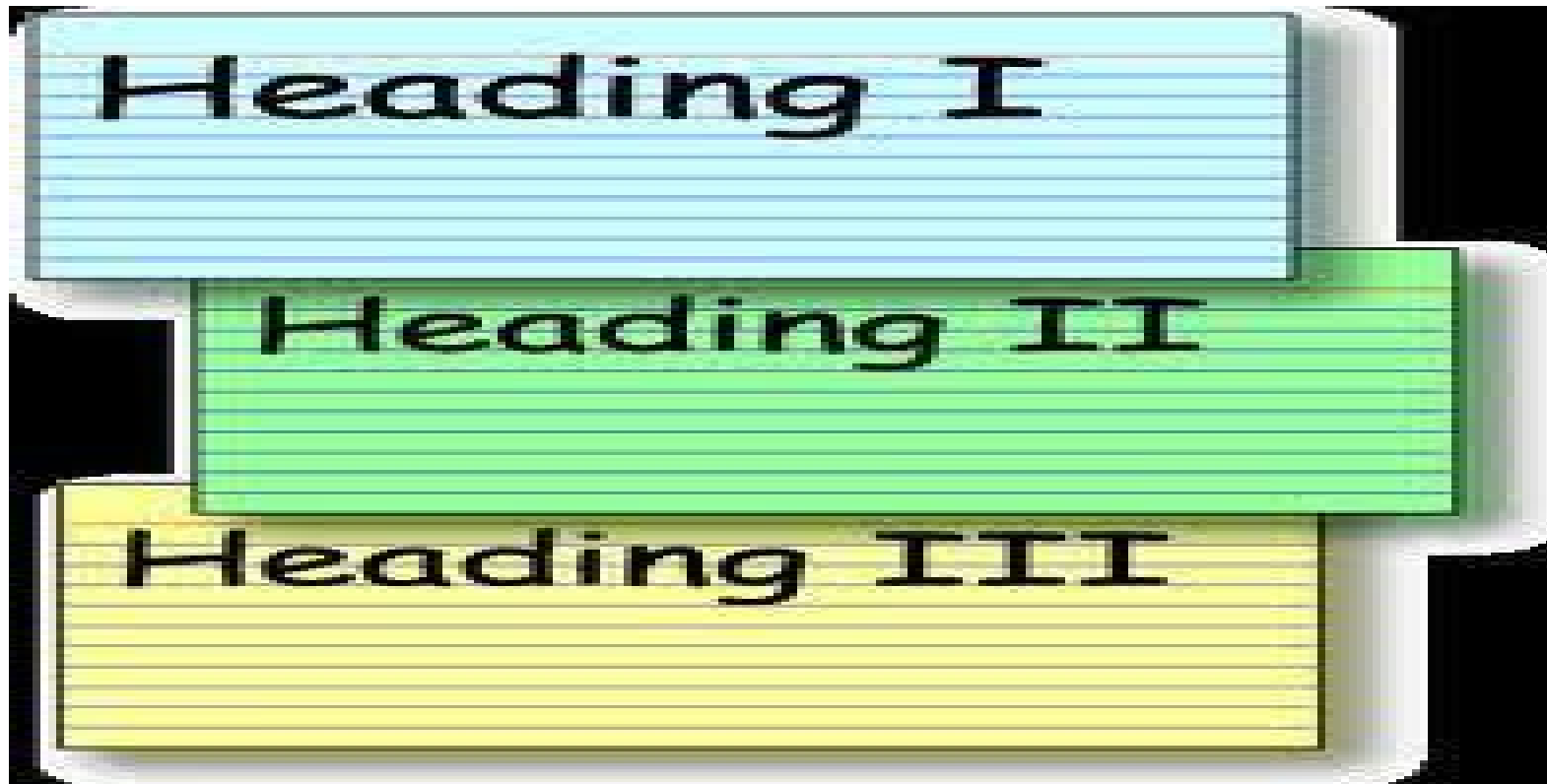
# Sample roadmap

## BCUC decision

The Panel identifies three overarching objectives that guide its decision: (1) maximize the recovery of program costs from RNG customers; (2) manage biomethane inventory; and (3) establish a BERC rate setting mechanism that is robust, effective and provides regulatory efficiency.

~

# Adding descriptive headings



# Headings are “readers’ little helpers” because they...

- Signal overall organization
- Offer a quick overview
- Help readers find what they need
- Give readers a break from blocks of text

# Drafting tips - descriptive headings

- Each heading should
  - Stand out
  - Say something about the section that follows by
    - Describing content, or
    - Asking a question the section answers
- Aim for no more than one line of text
- Never write just one subheading
- Don't overdo it

# Do your headings outline the structure?

1. Choose one substantive section of your decision.
  2. Highlight each heading.
  3. Does a clear structure emerge from the headings?
  4. If not, think about how you might structure the section more effectively.
- Be prepared to discuss your observations with the large group

# Announcing a paragraph's purpose in the opening sentence



# Opening sentences provide two types of context

- For the specific paragraph
  - Tells readers exactly why they're reading that paragraph
- For the whole document
  - Readers should be able to understand the gist of a document by reading only the opening sentences of each paragraph



# Drafting tips – opening sentences

- Answer the three questions most readers ask when starting to read a paragraph:
  - Why am I reading this?
  - How does this information connect to the previous paragraph?
  - How does this sentence move the discussion forward?

# Do your opening sentences tell the story?

1. Working with the same section of your decision as the previous exercise, highlight the first sentence of each paragraph.
  2. Do the opening sentences, taken sequentially, provide a coherent outline of the section?
  3. Does the sequence and logic of the headings & opening sentences make sense?
- Be prepared to discuss your observations with the large group

# Framing block quotations



- Introduce each block quotation with a framing sentence that paraphrases its key point
  - Enhances clarity
  - Imposes discipline on writers
  - Leads to shorter decisions that are easier to read

# Sample framing sentence

With thanks to John Laskin

The relevant provisions of the *Municipal Act* are in subsections 21.3(2) and (3), which authorize municipalities to pass by-laws regulating and prohibiting smoking in public places and workplaces:

[the statutory provisions]

# Synthesizing information with bullet points

- **bullet**
- **point**
- **lists**

## Drafting tips – bullet points

- Always introduce list items with a framing sentence followed by a colon
- Ensure the text before the colon & the bulleted part fit together grammatically
- Keep bullets simple, clean, & short

# How do you start your sentences?

1. Choose two or three pages inside the body of your decision.
  2. Highlight all sentences that start with “it”, “this”, and “there”.
  3. Can you identify what “it”, “this”, and “there” refer to in all cases?
  4. If not, replace each word with a concrete subject.
- Be prepared to discuss your observations with the large group tomorrow