Most people struggle with writing, even professional writers! When each paragraph has a key sentence, your writing flows. By providing focus for each paragraph, key sentences make decisions about what to include or what to exclude much easier. Key sentences also help you to make smoother transitions because they make it clearer when your paper is shifting focus and what kinds of bridges between ideas your audience needs.

In fact, identifying key sentences can tell you a lot about your paper’s readability. Recall that the goal of writing is to communicate. As a writer, then, you are always hunting for tools that can help you estimate how readers are likely to respond to your writing. If you can’t identify the key sentences in your writing, chances are good that readers will struggle as well. If you find that one of your paragraphs has two or more competing ideas, readers are probably going to find that passage confusing and difficult to follow.

When you’re editing, then, pull out all of your key sentences, arranging them in order. This may sound needlessly tedious. However, it doesn’t take long, and it can be incredibly helpful. It forces you to consciously look at each paragraph’s structure. It’s one thing to say you’ve considered paragraph structure throughout your essay. It’s quite another to actually do it. Listing all of your key sentences, then, is a good way to check yourself systematically.

Of course, there’s another huge advantage to listing your key sentences. When you have solid paragraph structure, a list of the key sentences provides an outline that reveals the underlying structure of your paper. This makes sense. If you’ve done your job, each paragraph should address one key idea and that key idea is embedded in the key sentence. It stands to reason, then, that such a key sentence outline should reflect the general flow of ideas in the paper as a whole.

Note how powerful this is as a troubleshooting device! If the order of key ideas doesn’t make sense in isolation, it’s nearly certain the paper will be confusing. If your key sentences show that you’re moving from idea A to idea C, back to idea B, and then jumping somewhere down the alphabet to idea J, no amount of additional information, elaborations, or embellishments thrown on top are going to make your paper easy for your audience to follow.