Where Did Your Reader Get Lost?

A three-level diagnosis for documents that aren't landing

Before you hire an editor, send a draft to your team, or revise for the third time, run this check. Most document problems fall into one of three levels. Each level requires a different fix. Hiring for the wrong level wastes time and money.

Level 1: Surface Problems

Your reader can follow the document. The argument is clear. But the writing feels rough.

Signs this is your problem:

- Typos, inconsistent capitalization, or punctuation errors
- Formatting inconsistencies (spacing, fonts, heading styles)
- Minor grammar or word-choice issues that don't affect meaning
- The document reads clearly when someone reads it aloud

What you need: A copyeditor. Surface-level cleanup. This is the most predictable scope and the lowest cost.

Level 2: Structure Problems

Your reader understands each sentence. But they lose the thread, or can't find the point.

Signs this is your problem:

- Readers say "I'm not sure what you're asking me to do"
- The recommendation or main point is buried in the middle or at the end
- Sections feel disconnected from each other
- The document could be read in almost any order and still "work"

What you need: Structural editing. An editor who can reorder, reframe, and rebuild the logic. Copyediting alone will not fix this.

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Level 3: Message Problems

Your reader stops engaging before they reach the point. Or they read it and don't act.

Signs this is your problem:

- People skim it and walk away without a clear takeaway
- You can't say in one sentence what the document is asking the reader to believe or do
- The document exists to inform, but it doesn't move anyone
- You've revised it multiple times and it still doesn't feel right

What you need: Clarity editing or developmental work. The problem is upstream of structure. The document's job hasn't been fully defined yet.

The One-Sentence Test

Before you send your document to anyone, try to complete this sentence:
"After reading this, my reader will _____ and do _____."

If you can't fill in both blanks clearly, you have a message problem, not a grammar problem. Start there before you hire anyone.

Not sure which level you're dealing with?

The Editing Cost Calculator at futureperfectservices.com can help you scope the right kind of help before you commit to anything.