A Guide to Clear, Concise Writing

Are your papers dotted with "wordy" or "awkward" throughout their margins? Don't despair. Here are a few tips to tighten up your prose.

**AVOID OBSCURE LANGUAGE AND JARGON.**

Choosing to use words because they sound more academic can result in confusing sentences. Also, the only legitimate occasion to use jargon comes when you are compiling a lab or field report that may require technical terminology. To be most clear, stick to plain English.

- She sprinkled salt on her pasta. … instead of … She sprinkled sodium chloride on her pasta.
- I checked the meaning of the word in my dictionary. … instead of … I checked the meaning of the locution in my reference tome.

**OMIT NEEDLESS WORDS.**

Avoid those words that add nothing to your writing, such as nature in "a suspicious nature," fact in "the fact that" (just state what the fact is), and character as "of a mean character."

- Now… or Currently… … instead of … Nowadays… or At this point in time …
- (just state the fact) … instead of … Owing to the fact that …
- I say this because… … instead of … The reason why I say this is because. . .
- He has many talents. … instead of … He is a man who has many talents.
- He fled. … instead of … He left in a hasty fashion.

**AVOID POORLY ORGANIZED OR RUN-ON SENTENCES.**

Avoid run-on, long or loose sentences that consist of two (or more!) clauses. Instead, organize your thought process or story-line into multiple logical, descriptive, ordered sentences.

See how long this passage holds your attention:

After my first day of college classes, I spent the afternoon at Kathrine’s house pretending to study for the test we have coming up, but we really spent the whole time talking about people in our classes and who we know from other classes we are taking, who might want to come to the party Katherine is having at the beach next weekend for her birthday.

Try this instead:

After my first day of college classes, I spent the afternoon at my friend Katherine’s house. We had the textbooks from our Spanish language class open on the kitchen table, but we spent most of the time sitting in the sun on her porch. We talked about who from our Spanish language class might come to her birthday party at the beach next Saturday.
**Put statements in positive form.**

Avoid using negative forms because this betrays uncertainty and hesitancy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original</th>
<th>Change</th>
<th>Revised</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>He was always late.</td>
<td>... instead of ...</td>
<td>He was often not on time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She thought studying in Urdu a waste of time.</td>
<td>... instead of ...</td>
<td>She thought studying Urdu was not an effective use of one's time.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Use definite, concrete language.**

Use the specific instead of the general, the concrete instead of the abstract.

- Brittney is generous with her time, and is a good listener. (Instead of: Brittney is a nice person.)
- The downpour began Sunday evening and the grey skies did not break until the following Sunday. (Instead of: It rained for a week.)

**Use the active voice.**

If you know who is doing the action, then use the active voice.

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<th>Revised</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I will always remember my trip to New York.</td>
<td>... instead of ...</td>
<td>My trip to New York will always be remembered by me.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Use the passive only if the focus is on the action instead of the actor or the actor is unknown.

- The apartment was burglarized.  (Instead of: Someone broke into the apartment.)

Use the passive if you don’t want to specify who is doing the action, for example, to avoid direct accusation:

- Mistakes were made and someone will be punished.

**Keep related words together.**

In English, the position of words in a sentence is the main way of showing their relationship. Don’t put related words at a distance.

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A dog will become a household pest unless disciplined.</td>
<td>... instead of ...</td>
<td>A dog, if you fail to discipline it, will become a household pest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I finished the whole bowl of strawberries, which were fresh and delicious.</td>
<td>... instead of ...</td>
<td>Being fresh and delicious, I finished the whole bowl of strawberries.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For more about writing clearly and concisely, and for more examples of superfluous (unnecessary) words, see Strunk and White’s *Elements of Style*. Special thanks to Writing Center tutor Paul McDowell for his involvement in the creation of this handout.