

THE WRITER'S HANDBOOK

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Writing Clear, Concise Sentences

Follow the principles below to write sentences that are clear, to the point, and easier to read.

1. [Use the active voice](#)
2. [Put the action in the verb](#)
3. [Put wordy phrases on a diet](#)
4. [Reduce wordy verbs](#)
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In this section, you will find many instructional materials we've developed for our Writing Center teaching.

However, there are limitations to these materials. Assignments vary, and different instructors want different things from student writers. Therefore, the advice here may or may not apply to your writing situation.

Finally, handouts can give only a fraction of the customized guidance that an **individual conference** with a Writing Center instructor can provide. If you have questions about the information in our handouts, please make an appointment to see a Writing Center instructor.

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Use the active voice

At the heart of every good sentence is a strong, precise verb; the converse is true as well--at the core of most confusing, awkward, or wordy sentences lies a weak verb.

Try to use the active voice whenever possible.

Active vs. passive voice

In a sentence written in the *active voice*, the subject of sentence performs the action. In a sentence written in the *passive voice* the subject receives the action.

Active: The candidate *believes* that Congress *must place* a ceiling on the budget.

Passive: *It is believed* by the candidate that a ceiling *must be placed* on the budget by Congress.

Active: Researchers earlier *showed* that high stress *can cause* heart attacks.


Passive: *It was earlier demonstrated* that heart attacks *can be caused* by high stress.

Active: The dog *bite* the man.

Passive: The man *was bitten* by the dog.

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Converting sentences to active voice

Here are some tips and strategies for converting sentences from the passive to the active voice.

- Look for a "by" phrase (e.g., "by the dog" in the last example above). If you find one, the sentence may be in the passive voice. Rewrite the sentence so that the subject buried in the "by" clause is closer to the beginning of the sentence.
- If the subject of the sentence is somewhat anonymous, see if you can use a general term, such as "researchers," or "the study," or "experts in this field."

When to use passive voice

There are sometimes good reasons to use the passive voice.

To emphasize the action rather than the actor

After long debate, the proposal *was endorsed* by the long-range planning committee.

To keep the subject and focus consistent throughout a passage

The data processing department recently presented what proved to be a controversial proposal

to expand its staff. After long debate, the proposal *was endorsed by*

To be tactful by not naming the actor

The procedures *were* somehow *misinterpreted*.

To describe a condition in which the actor is unknown or unimportant

Every year, thousands of people *are diagnosed* as having cancer.

To create an authoritative tone

Visitors *are not allowed* after 9:00 p.m.

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Put the action in the verb

Put all the action of a sentence into the verb. Don't bury the action in a noun or blur it across the entire sentence.

Good: The committee has to approach it differently.

Bad: The establishment of a different approach on the part of the committee has become a necessity.

(Williams, 1985, p. 11)

Beware of nominalizations

Watch out especially for nominalizations (verbs that have been made into nouns by the addition of -tion).


Nominalization: An *evaluation* of the procedures *needs to be done*.
How to fix it: We *need to evaluate* the procedures.

Nominalization: The procedures *need to be evaluated*.
How to fix it: We *need to evaluate* the procedures.

Nominalization: The stability and quality of our financial performance *will be developed* through the profitable *execution* of our existing business, as well as the *acquisition* or *development* of new businesses.
How to fix it: We *will improve* our financial performance not only by *executing* our existing business more profitably but by *acquiring* or *developing* new businesses.

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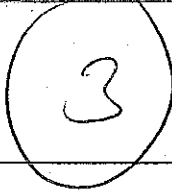
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Put wordy phrases on a diet

Make sentences concise by eliminating wordy phrases.

<p>Wordy: <i>In a situation in which</i> a class is overenrolled, you may request that the instructor force-add you.</p> <p>Concise: <i>When</i> a class is overenrolled, you may ask the instructor to force-add you.</p>
<p>Wordy: I will now make a few observations <i>concerning the matter of</i> contingency funds.</p> <p>Concise: I will now make a few observations <i>about</i> contingency funds.</p>
<p>Wordy: <i>There is a need for</i> more careful inspection of all welds.</p> <p>Concise: You <i>must</i> inspect all welds more carefully.</p> <p><i>Inspect</i> all welds more carefully.</p>

(Williams, 1985, p. 79)

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Words to use

Here are some words you can use to trim the fat off of wordy phrases:

Instead of . . .

Use . . .

- the reason for
- for the reason that
- due to the fact that
- owing to the fact that
- in light of the fact that
- considering the fact that
- on the grounds that
- this is why

because, since, why

- despite the fact that
- regardless of the fact that
- notwithstanding the fact that

although, even, though

-
- in the event that
 - if it should transpire/happen that
 - under circumstances in which
- if**

-
- on the occasion of
 - in a situation in which
 - under circumstances in which
- when**

-
- as regards
 - in reference to
 - with regard to
 - concerning the matter of
 - where . . . is concerned
- about**

-
- it is crucial that
 - it is necessary that
 - there is a need/necessity for
 - it is important that
 - it is incumbent upon
 - cannot be avoided
- must, should**

-
- is able to
 - has the opportunity to
 - is in a position to
 - has the capacity for
 - has the ability to
- can**

-
- it is possible that
 - there is a chance that
 - it could happen that
 - the possibility exists for
- may, might, can, could**
-

- prior to
- in anticipation of
- subsequent to
- following on
- at the same time as
- simultaneously with

before, after, as

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Reduce wordy verbs

Try to keep the action of a sentence clear by using concise, direct verbs.

Words to use

Here's how to revise some common wordy verb phrases:

Instead of . . .

Use . . .

- is aware of
- has knowledge of

knows

- is taking

takes

- are indications of


indicates

- are suggestive of

suggest

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Reduce unnecessary prepositional phrases

Sometimes prepositional phrases aren't really necessary, especially when you use them (instead of an **apostrophe + s**) to denote possession of an object.

Also, try to avoid using too many prepositional phrases in a single sentence, since they can obscure the main subject and action of a sentence.

Examples

Unnecessary phrase: The opinion *of the manager*
Correction: The *manager's* opinion


Unnecessary phrase: The obvious effect *of* such a range *of* reference is to assure the audience *of* the author's range *of* learning and intellect.
Correction: The wide-ranging references in this talk assure the audience that the author is intelligent and well-read.

Unnecessary phrase: It is a matter *of* the gravest possible importance *to* the health *of* anyone *with* a history *of* a problem *with* disease *of* the heart that he or she should avoid the sort *of* foods *with* a high percentage *of* saturated fats.
Correction: Anyone with a history of heart disease should avoid saturated fats.

(Heffernan and Lincoln, 1996, p. 55)

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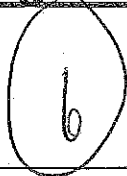
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Reduce expletive constructions

Expletive constructions are phrases such as:

- it is
- there is
- there are

Try to avoid using them, since these constructions merely obscure the main subject and action of a sentence.

Examples

Expletive: *It was* her last argument *that* finally persuaded me.
 Correction: Her last argument finally persuaded me.

Expletive: *There are* likely to be many researchers raising questions about *this* methodological approach.
 Correction: Many researchers are likely to raise questions about this methodological approach.

Expletive: *It is* inevitable *that* oil prices will rise.
 Correction: Oil prices will inevitably rise.

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Avoid using vague nouns

Try to avoid using the following vague, all-purpose nouns, which sometimes lead to wordiness, especially when used in prepositional phrases.

- factor
- aspect
- area
- situation
- consideration
- degree
- case

Examples

Vague: Consumer demand is rising *in the area of* services.
 Precise: Consumers are demanding more services.

Vague: Strong reading skills are *an important factor* in students' success in college.
 Precise: Students' success in college depends on their reading skills.

Vague: Photography took on new *aspects* during the Civil War.
 Precise: The Civil War saw the advent of graphic battlefield photography.

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Avoid unnecessarily inflated words

While a large vocabulary is useful, you should try to avoid using inflated diction if a simpler phrase works equally well.

Examples

Inflated: cognizant of
Simple: aware of, knows

Inflated: facilitate
Simple: help

Inflated: impact on
Simple: affect

Inflated: implement
Simple: start, create, carry out, begin

Inflated: subsequent to
Simple: after

Inflated: utilize
Simple: use

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Avoid noun strings

Unless readers are familiar with your terminology (or jargon), avoid using phrases with many consecutive nouns (noun strings).

Examples

Noun string: MHS has a *hospital employee relations improvement program*.
Correction: MHS has a program to improve relations among employees.

Noun string: NASA continues to work on the *International Space Station astronaut living-quarters module development project*.
Correction: NASA is still developing the module that will provide living quarters for the astronauts aboard the International Space Station.

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