

Attending to Style

INTRODUCTION

Most of us know good style when we see it. We also know when a sentence seems cumbersome to read. However, though we can easily spot beastly sentences, it is not as easy to say WHY a sentence - especially one that is grammatically correct - isn't working. We look at the sentence; we see that the commas are in the right places; we find no error to speak of. So why is the sentence so awful? What's gone wrong?

When thinking about what makes a good sentence, it's important to put yourself in the place of your reader. What is a reader hoping to find in your sentences? Information, yes. Eloquence, surely. But most important, a reader is looking for clarity. Your reader does not want to wrestle with your sentences. She wants to read with ease. She wants to see one idea build upon the other. She wants to experience, without struggling, the emphasis of your language and the importance of your idea. Above all, she wants to feel that you, the writer, are doing the bulk of the work, and not she, the reader. In short, she wants to read sentences that are forceful, straightforward, and clear.

How do you manage to write these kinds of sentences? We hope to instruct you. But before we begin, we'd like to recommend a book to you: Joseph Williams' *Style: The Basics of Clarity and Grace*. In this book, Williams outlines ten different ways to think about and to improve your sentences. If you are interested in becoming a better writer, consult this book. It informs much of what we say to you here.

THE BASIC PRINCIPLES OF THE SENTENCE

PRINCIPLE ONE: FOCUS ON ACTORS AND ACTIONS

To understand what makes a good sentence, it's important to understand one principle: a sentence, at its very basic level, is about actors and actions. As such, the subject of a sentence should point clearly to the actor, and the verb of the sentence should describe the important action.

This principle might seem so obvious to you that you don't think that it warrants further discussion. But think again. Look at the following sentence, and then try to determine, in a nutshell, what is wrong with it:

- *There was uncertainty in President Clinton's mind about the intention of the Russians to disarm their nuclear weapons.*

This sentence has no grammatical errors. But certainly it lumbers along, without any force. Now consider the following sentence:

- *President Clinton remained unconvinced that the Russians intended to disarm their nuclear weapons.*

What changes does this sentence make? We can point to the more obvious changes: omitting the "there is" phrase; replacing the wimpy "uncertainty" with the more powerful "remained unconvinced"; replacing the abstract noun "intention" with the stronger verb "intended." But what principle governs these many changes? Precisely the one mentioned earlier: that the **actor** in a sentence should serve as the sentence's subject, and the **action** should be illustrated forcefully in the sentence's verbs.

Courtesy the Odegaard Writing & Research Center
<http://www.depts.washington.edu/owrc>

Adapted from www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/materials/student/ac_paper/style.shtml

Whenever you feel that your prose is confusing or hard to follow, find the actors and the actions of your sentences. Is the actor the subject of your sentence? Is the action a verb? If not, rewrite your sentence accordingly.

PRINCIPLE TWO: BE CONCRETE

Student writers rely too heavily on abstract nouns: they use "expectation" when the verb "expect" is stronger; they write "evaluation" when "evaluate" is more vivid. But why use an abstract noun when a verb will do better? Many students believe that abstract nouns permit them to sound more "academic." But when you write with a lot of abstract nouns, you risk confusing your reader. You also end up putting yourself in a corner, syntactically. Consider the following:

1. **Nouns often require prepositions:** Too many prepositional phrases in a sentence are hard to follow. Verbs, on the other hand, can stand on their own. They are cleaner; they don't box you in. If you need some proof for this claim, consider the following sentence: *An evaluation of the tutors by the administrative staff is necessary in servicing our clients.* Notice all of the prepositional phrases that these nouns require. Now look at this sentence, which uses verbs: *The administrative staff evaluates the tutors so that we can better serve our clients.* This sentence is much easier to read.
2. **Abstract nouns often invite the "there is" construction:** Consider this sentence: *There is much discussion in the department about the upcoming tenure decision.* We might rewrite this sentence as follows: *The faculty discussed who might earn tenure.* The result, again, is a sentence that is more direct and easier to read.
3. **Abstract nouns are, well, abstract:** Using too many abstract nouns will leave your prose seeming un-rooted. Instead, use concrete nouns as well as strong verbs to convey your ideas.
4. **Abstract nouns can obscure your logic:** Note how hard it is to follow the line of reasoning in the following sentence. (I've bold-faced the nouns that might be rewritten as verbs, or as adjectives.) ***Decisions** with regard to **the dismissal** of tutors on the basis of **their inability** to detect grammar errors in the papers **of students** rest with the Director of Composition.* Now consider this sentence. *When a tutor fails to detect grammar errors in student papers, the Director of Composition must decide whether or not to dismiss her.*

Which sentence, in your opinion, is easier to follow?

(PS. You should note that abstract nouns often force you to use clumsy phrases like "on the basis of" or "in regard to." How much better the above sentence is when it relies on the simple word "when" to make its logical connection.)

Principle Two, The Exception: Abstract Nouns & When To Use Them.

Of course writers will find instances where the abstract noun is essential to the sentence. Sometimes, abstract nouns make references to a previous sentence ("these arguments," "this decision," etc.). In other instances, they allow you to be more concise ("her needs" vs. "what she needed"). In still other instances, the abstract noun is a concept important to your argument: freedom, love, revolution, and so on. Still, if you examine your prose, you will probably find that you overuse abstract nouns. Omitting from your writing those abstract nouns that aren't really necessary makes for leaner, "fitter" prose.

PRINCIPLE THREE: BE CONCISE

One of the most exasperating things about reading student texts is that students don't know how to write concisely. Students use phrases when a single word will do. Or they offer pairs of adjectives and verbs where one is enough. Or they over-write, saying the same thing two or three times with the hope that, one of these times, they'll get it the way they want it.

Stop the madness! It's easy to delete words and phrases from your prose once you've learned to be ruthless about it.

Do you really need words like "actually," "basically," "generally," and so on? If you don't need them, why are they there? Are you using two words where one will do? Isn't "first and foremost" redundant? What is the point of "future" in "future plans?" And why do you keep saying, "In my opinion?" Doesn't the reader understand that this is *your* paper, based on *your* point of view?

Sometimes you won't be able to fix a wordy sentence by simply deleting a few words or phrases. You'll have to rewrite the whole sentence. For example: *Plagiarism is a serious academic offense resulting in punishments that might include suspension or dismissal, profoundly affecting your academic career.* The idea here is simple: *Plagiarism is a serious offense with serious consequences.* Why not say so, simply?

PRINCIPLE FOUR: BE COHERENT

At this point in discussing style, we move from the sentence as a discrete unit to the way that sentences fit together. Coherence (or the lack of it) is a common problem in student papers. Sometimes a professor encounters a paper in which all the ideas seem to be there, but they are hard to follow. The prose seems jumbled. The line of reasoning is anything but linear. Couldn't the student have made this paper a bit more, well, readable?

While coherence is a complicated and difficult matter to address, we do have a couple of tricks for you that will help your sentences to "flow." Silly as it sounds, you should "dress" your sentences the way a bride might - wearing, as the saying goes, something old and something new. In other words, each sentence you write should begin with the old - that is, with something that looks back to the previous sentence. Then your sentence should move on to telling the reader something new. If you do this, your line of reasoning will be easier for your reader to follow.

While this advice sounds simple enough, it is in fact not always easy to follow. Let's take the practice apart, so that we can better understand how our sentences might be "well-dressed."

Consider, first, the beginning of your sentences. The coherence of your paper depends largely upon how well you begin your sentences. "Well begun is half done" - so says Mary Poppins, and in this case (as in all cases, really) she is right.

Beginning a sentence is hard work. When you begin a sentence, you have three important matters to consider:

1. **Is your topic also the subject of your sentence?** Usually, when a paper lacks coherence, it is because the writer has not been careful to ensure that the TOPIC of his sentence is also the grammatical SUBJECT of his sentence. If, for instance, I am writing a sentence whose topic is Hitler's skill as a speaker, then the grammatical

subject of my sentence should reflect this: *Hitler's skill as a speaker was far more crucial to the rise of the Nazi party than was his skill as a politician*. If, on the other hand, I bury my topic in a subordinate clause, look what happens: *Hitler's rise to power, an event which came about because of Hitler's skill as a speaker, was not due to any real political skill*. Note how, in this sentence, the real topic is obscured.

2. **Are the topics/subjects of your sentences consistent?** For a paragraph to be coherent, most of the sentence subjects should be the same. To check for consistency, pick out a paragraph and make a list of its sentence subjects. See if any of the subjects seem out of place. For example, if you are writing a paragraph about the sex lives of whales, do most of your sentence subjects reflect that topic? Or do some of your sentences have as their subjects *researchers? Sea World? Jacques Cousteau?* While Sea World may indeed have a place in your paper, you will confuse your reader if a paragraph's sentence subjects point to too many competing ideas. Revise your sentences (perhaps your entire paragraph) for coherence.
3. **Have you marked, when appropriate, the transitions between ideas?** Coherence depends upon how well you connect a sentence to the one that came before. You will want to make solid transitions between your sentences, using words such as, *however* or *therefore*. You will also want to signal to your reader whenever, for example, something important or disappointing comes up. In these cases, you will want to use expressions like *it is important to note that, unfortunately*, etc. You might also want to indicate time or place in your argument. If so, you will use transitions such as, *then, later, earlier, in my previous paragraph*, etc.

Be careful not to overuse transition phrases. Some writers think transition phrases can, all by themselves, direct a reader through an argument. Indeed, sometimes all a paragraph needs is a "however" in order for its argument suddenly to make sense. More often, though, the problem with coherence does not stem from a lack of transition phrases, but from the fact that the writer has not articulated, for himself, the connections between his ideas. Don't rely on transition phrases alone to bring sense to muddled prose.

PRINCIPLE FIVE: BE EMPHATIC

We have been talking about sentences and their beginnings. But what about sentences and how they end?

If the beginnings of your sentences must look over their shoulders at what came before, the ends of your sentences must forge ahead into new ground. It is the ends of your sentences, then, that must be courageous and emphatic. You must construct your sentences so that the ends pack the punch.

To write emphatically, follow these principles:

1. **As we've said, declare your important ideas at the end of your sentence.** Shift your less important ideas to the front.
2. **Trim the ends of your sentences.** Don't trail off into nonsense, don't repeat yourself, don't qualify what you've just said if you don't have to. Simply make your point and move on.

- 3. Use subordinate clauses to house subordinate ideas.** Put all the important ideas in main clauses, and the less important ideas in subordinate clauses. If you have two ideas of equal importance that you want to express in the same sentence, use parallel constructions or semi-colons. These two tricks of the trade are perhaps more useful than any others in suggesting a balanced significance between ideas.

PRINCIPLE SIX: BE IN CONTROL

Readers know when a writer has lost control of his sentences when these sentences run on and on. Take control of your sentences. When you read over your paper, look for sentences that never seem to end. Your first impulse might be to take these long sentences and divide them into two (or three, or four). This simple solution often works. But sometimes this strategy isn't the most desirable one: it might lead to short, choppy sentences. Moreover, if you always cut your sentences in two, you'll never learn how it is that a sentence might be long and complex without violating the boundaries of good prose.

So what do you do when you encounter an overly long sentence? First consider the point of your sentence: usually it will have more than one point, and sorting out the points helps to sort out the grammar. Consider carefully the points that you are trying to make and the connections between those points. Then try to determine which grammatical structure best serves your purpose.

1. **Are the points of equal importance?** Use a coordinating conjunction or a semi-colon to join the ideas together. Try to use parallel constructions when appropriate.
2. **Are the points of unequal importance?** Use subordinate clauses or relative clauses to join the ideas.
3. **Does one point make for an interesting aside?** Insert that point between commas, dashes, or even parentheses at the appropriate juncture in the sentence.
4. **Do these ideas belong in the same sentence?** If not, create two sentences.

PRINCIPLE SEVEN: WRITE BEAUTIFULLY

In your career as a writer you will sometimes produce a paper that is well written, but that might be written better. On this happy occasion, you might wish to turn your attention to such matters as **balance, symmetry, climactic emphasis, parallel structure, rhythm, metaphor, and language**. If you are interested in exploring these rhetorical tools, we refer you once again to Williams' book *Style: The Basics of Clarity and Grace*. You will find valuable advice there.

USEFUL LINKS

Please visit the OWRC website at www.depts.washington.edu/owrc/ for additional resources.