

Sentence Clarity: Transcript

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Thank you for watching the Purdue OWL's vidcast on sentence clarity. Sentence clarity depends on choices a writer makes about the language used in the sentence. In this vidcast, we'll think about some of the choices available to a writer for clearer writing.

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There are numerous strategies for writing clearer sentences. Some strategies depend on sentence arrangement; for example, going from old to new information in a sentence, using transition words and phrases, being purposeful about dependent clause placement, employing active voice when appropriate, monitoring parallel construction, and avoiding weak verbs and unclear pronoun references, and more. All of these things impact the clarity of writing.

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Going from old to new information is a strategy that helps readers follow connections between ideas. To ensure readers see these connections, you might begin a sentence with information that has already been presented to the reader.

For example, you might begin a paragraph with the following sentence: "Every semester after final exams are over, I'm faced with the problem of what to do with books of lecture notes."

Lecture notes brings new information to the sentence. So, you might begin your next sentence like this: "They might be useful some day... "

"They" refers to old information already presented to the reader; that is, "they" represents those books of lecture notes. Now, you might finish this sentence by presenting some new information: "They might be useful someday, but they just keep piling up on my bookcase."

At the end of this sentence, new information is introduced: that is, the fact that these notes continue to pile up on a bookcase.

This pattern can then continue: New information will become old information that can then be linked to new information, and so on and so forth. Arranging your sentences in this way may help clarify how information links together for your readers.

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Another useful strategy for sentence clarity is incorporating transitional words; that is, words that indicate relationships between sentences or otherwise link sentences to one another.

Transition words serve different purposes: Some, like “therefore,” show causal relationships between ideas; others, like “furthermore” help the writer expand on information that has already been presented. Other purposes include: comparing information, proving ideas, repeating or emphasizing information, showing a sequence or the passage of time, providing examples, and summarizing information or concluding a section.

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The arrangement of clauses is another way to ensure your ideas are clearly represented. As a reminder, an independent clause can be a standalone, simple sentence, whereas dependent clauses cannot be their own, complete sentences and are embedded within complex sentences.

Interrupting an independent clause with a dependent clause will interrupt your idea. Instead, consider placing your dependent clauses at the beginning or end of a sentence. For example: In the sentence, “Our professor made us read all about industrial spying when she taught this class last semester,” the independent clause is “Our professor made us read all about industrial spying;” the dependent clause is “when she taught this class last semester.” This sentence is clear because the dependent clause is placed at the end.

However, the sentence becomes less clear if we embed the dependent clause within the independent clause. For example: “Our professor, when she taught this class last semester, made us read all about industrial spying.” See how the dependent clause interrupts the main idea? In other words, it takes more time for the reader to get the main idea; that is, that our professor made us read all about industrial spying.

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Active voice presents the subject of a sentence as the one who does the action. In other words, the noun of the sentence is clearly stated and framed as the one who performs the verb.

Consider these two sentences. The first, in active voice, reads: “The committee decided to postpone the vote.”

The second, in passive voice, reads: “A decision was reached to postpone the vote.”

In these two sentences, the primary difference is that there is no clear doer in the passive voice construction. Using active voice keeps the doers and their actions clear for the reader. That said, some disciplines may prefer passive to active construction. When appropriate, default to the conventions of your field. You might also think about the affordances of passive voice. For example, passive voice can be useful in sentences where you want to hide or do not know the subject. It can also emphasize the object receiving an action rather than the subject performing it. In other cases, it can create more concise sentences.

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Parallel structure relies on similar grammatical construction so the reader can identify links between information more clearly. Let’s consider these sentences. The first uses parallel construction because it uses similar verb structures at the end of the sentence.

“In Florida, where the threat of hurricanes is an annual event, we learned that it is important to become aware of the warning signs, to know what precautions to take, and to decide when to seek shelter.”

This second sentence does not use parallel construction; instead, it relies on the creation of a new sentence to continue expressing ideas.

“In Florida, where the threat of hurricanes is an annual event, we learned that it is important to become aware of the warning signs. There are precautions to take, and deciding when to take shelter is important.”

In these examples, the sentence with parallel structure is clearer because it relies on parallel structure to clearly convey important information through similar verb construction.

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Nominalizations, or the noun form of verbs, can also make writing less clear. Writing is often clearer and more direct when verbs are left to carry the action of the sentence. For example, consider the difference in impact between these two sentences:

“The implementation of the plan was successful.”

“The plan was implemented successfully.”

In the second sentence, the subject of the sentence—the plan—is clearer, as is the action—its implementation. In general, expressing actions through strong, powerful verbs can lead to clearer writing.

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Finally, another helpful strategy for clearer writing is avoiding unclear pronoun references. Pronouns—words like this, that, these, those, he, she, it, they, and we—are useful, but only when the noun they are referring to is clear. If the noun is implied but not stated, you can clarify the reference by explicitly using the noun.

For example, consider this pair of sentences: “Mark called Ralph into his office. Suddenly, he started yelling.” In the second sentence, it’s unclear who “he” is. Is Mark yelling? Or is Ralph? To make it clearer, you could rewrite the sentence to include the correct subject: “Suddenly, Mark started yelling.”

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Be sure to check out the rest of our videos which include information on concision strategies, sentence structure, and more.

You can also find more information about graduate writing on the Purdue OWL website.

Thanks for watching!