

How to Write Clear, Concise, and Direct Sentences

1. *Unless you have a reason not to, 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.

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

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

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

Active d. Brown earlier showed that high stress can cause heart attacks.

There are sometimes good reasons to use the passive voice:

* To emphasize the action rather than the actor.

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

* To keep the subject and focus consistent throughout a passage.

f. 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.

g. The procedures were somehow misinterpreted.

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

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

* To create an authoritative tone.

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

2. Put the action of the sentence in the verb.

Don't bury it in a noun or blur it across the entire sentence. Watch out especially for nominalizations (verbs that have been made into nouns by the addition of *-tion*).

- a. An evaluation of the procedures needs to be done.
- b. The procedures need to be evaluated.
- c. We need to evaluate the procedures.
- d. The stability and quality of our financial performance will be developed through the profitable execu**tion** of our existing business, as well as the acquisi**tion** or develop**ment** of new businesses.
- e. We will improve our financial performance not only by executing our existing business more profitably but by acquiring or developing new businesses.

3. Reduce wordy verbs.

- a. is aware, has knowledge of -----> knows
- b. is taking -----> takes
- c. are indications -----> indicate
- d. are suggestive -----> suggests

4. Use expletive constructions ("It is," "There is," "There are") sparingly.

- a. It was her last argument that finally persuaded me.
- b. Her last argument finally persuaded me.

- c. There are likely to be many researchers raising questions about this methodological approach.
- d. Many researchers are likely to raise questions about this methodological approach.

5. Try to avoid using vague, all-purpose nouns, which often lead to wordiness.

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

- a. Consumer demand is rising in the area of services.
- b. Consumer demand for services is rising.
- c. Consumers are demanding more services.

6. Unless your readers are familiar with your terminology, avoid writing strings of nouns (or noun strings!).

- a. patient program satisfaction
- b. student-professor relationship factors
- c. processing step change
- d. competitive cotto salami performance test
- e. program implementation process evaluation

- f. MHS has a hospital employee relations improvement program.
- g. MHS has a program to improve employee relations.
- h. MHS has a program to improve relations among employees.

7. Eliminate unnecessary prepositional phrases.

- a. The opinion of the working group.
- b. The working group's opinion.

- c. The obvious effect of such a range of reference is to assure the audience of the author's range of learning and intellect.

8. Avoid unnecessarily inflated words.

<i>Instead of</i>	<i>Use</i>
cognizant of	aware of, know
facilitate	help
impact on	affect
implement	start, create, carry out, begin
subsequent to	after
utilize	use

9. Put wordy phrases on a diet.*

Instead of

Use

the reason for

for the reason that

due to the fact that

owing to 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

although, even though

in the event that

if it should transpire/happen that

under circumstances in which

if

Instead of

Use

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

it is important that

it is incumbent upon

cannot be avoided

must, should

Instead of

Use

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

*This list comes from Joseph Williams, *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*. 3rd ed. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1989.

Also take a look at:

<http://www.writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/ClearConciseSentences.html>

- The Writing Center, The University of Wisconsin – Madison