

Style

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Learning Outcomes

Students will master strategies to

- write in a correct, clear, and graceful prose style
- write coherent and unified texts with a distinct voice

5.1 What Is Style? Why Does It Matter?

On the first day of class, I ask my students what good writing is. Once a student called out, “Not boring!” I appreciated the bluntness because it’s true: good writing is interesting—or to use a less boring word—good writing is *vivacious*.

This chapter will help you improve your writing style. What is style and why should you care about it? Style is the sum of a writer’s choices in vocabulary, sentence length, sentence structure, and more. Developing strong style turns a sufficient writer into a superb one. I love teaching style because most of my students are sufficient writers when I meet them. They already know how to find information and craft an argument (substance), they can organize their thoughts (structure), but the wording itself (style) is often thick and clunky. If you think that sounds like you—no worries! Your writing *should* be thick and clunky—in the first draft, anyway. Style is revision. Just as mastering style comes later in our writing education, it comes later in a paper’s progress.

Before we talk about how to apply that high-gloss finish to your masterpiece, here’s a bonus reason to love style—I bet you’re majoring in the social sciences because you want to help people. In your classes you’ve studied how to solve problems like preventing teen suicide, improving parenting skills, and reducing athletic injuries. Maybe you’ve wished these teens, parents, or athletes could learn what you have. Unfortunately though, these people aren’t likely to read

textbooks or academic journal articles because they're . . . not exactly not boring. How can you get these solutions into the hands of the people who need them? The answer is style. A scholar who can transform stacks of dense research into a creation as clear as oxygen and as gripping as a mystery novel can change the course of history. My proof? We'll meet her at the end of this chapter.

5.2 How to Use This Chapter

This note is more for your instructor than for you, but reading this chapter in one sitting or covering the material in one class period would be a mistake. First, style is a broad concept that concerns everything you are writing this semester. Second, this chapter requires the mastery of skills, not just knowledge. If you do the exercises, you will rewrite sentences, and sometimes paragraphs, so plan for extra time if necessary.

This chapter will focus on two principles of style, clarity and vivacity, with several strategies to achieve each. One way to divide the material is to teach clarity early in the semester, or during lessons about writing for an academic audience, and to teach vivacity later in the semester, or during lessons about writing for a general audience.

5.3 Clarity



Can you find the teddy bear? The golf ball? The chili pepper? (Photo by [levelord](#))

Lately I've enjoyed hidden picture puzzles. At first I thought they would be child's play—I mean, I've known what a banana looks like for some time now. But many are challenging (at least for a word nerd with no spatial skills). As I searched, I realized the three qualities that make a hidden picture puzzle hard to crack (which is good) also make a piece of writing hard to read (which is bad). A hidden picture disrupts clarity for the amusement of the viewer, but as writers, we don't want our meaning to be hidden. We want to give our readers a clear picture.

Concision

So what ingredients create a tough hidden picture, and conversely, what strategies create clear writing? First, the puzzle requires you to find about ten objects, but the picture is a total junk heap—it might depict fifty objects or more. All the clutter makes it difficult to spot the object you need. Clutter is the opposite of the first component of clarity: concision. Unlike a hidden picture puzzle, we don't want unneeded or wordy material to confuse, distract, or slow down the reader.

Coherence

Second, the objects aren't where you expect them to be. If I'm looking for a shoe, I may instinctively look at the ground first because that's where my shoes usually are. Of course, the picture is not real life and tricks me by dangling the shoe from a chandelier. Can't say I've ever put my shoes there. By contrast, we want ideas to be where readers expect them. We want coherence, meaning logical order. For example, research articles often use the IMRAD format (Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion). I suppose scientists could try a "MARDI" format or describe their studies in rap lyrics, but those genres wouldn't best help us understand their findings. Furthermore, publishers and readers would wonder why the writers don't seem to grasp the expectations of a research article (Are they not intelligent?) and question their credibility. So save any poetic chaos for creative writing class and keep your social science papers shipshape.

Cohesion

Third, hidden picture puzzles blend and camouflage an object, so even if you see it, you don't recognize it. For example, a blonde's ponytail can look a lot like a banana. We don't want our ideas to have the blurry haze of a hidden picture. Cohesion is all about forging links: you want to glance backward and forward, showing how your second idea connects to your first idea and how the second will connect to the third. Sometimes we're so happy to be done writing the meat of a paragraph we neglect to cap it with a transition. But it's our job, not the reader's, to put the pieces of our paper together. Make sure your writing comes "no assembly required."

To sum up, clarity consists of concision, coherence, and cohesion. To preview the other half of this chapter, vivacity vies for variety and voice. I'm sorry, but alliteration is alluring—which brings me to my final point about clarity. "Clarity trumps everything" (Harrison, 2012, p. 164). It doesn't matter how beautiful or clever (or alliterative) a sentence sounds if your audience doesn't know what it means. Our chief goal as we revise is to make the phrasing clearer. If we can also make it more interesting, so much the better. Clarity is for the brain; vivacity is for the ear—and the heart.

5.4 Concision

Concision means getting the most power from the fewest words (Harrison, 2012). It *doesn't* mean being brief at all costs or neglecting detail (Strunk, 2004). It means every word must be doing work. Here's a comparison.

Imagine an Apple engineer hands you the latest iPhone. You are intrigued because it seems to have a home button like the models of yesteryear. You press it, but nothing happens. "What does this button do?" you ask. "Oh," the engineer mumbles. "It doesn't do anything. We had some plans for it, but they didn't work out. I guess we should have removed it." You probably feel embarrassed for Apple and use your new iPhone to join the internet's mockery of its design flub. The inspiration for this example came from *The Elements of Style*, a writing guide *Time* named one of the best and most influential books. It compares writing to design this way: "A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a

machine no unnecessary parts” (p. 23). The goal here is mindful *composition*, a word that can mean both design and writing.

So take pride in your writing—aspire to the same standards of artisanship as when you bake a cake, build a robot, or shoot free throws. Now that we’ve defined concision, let’s address some qualms students may have about writing concisely.

Complicated ≠ Intelligent

Many students believe “the more words we use, or the more elaborate our language, the more intelligent we sound” (Fiske, 2006, p. 43). In fact, the opposite is true, as this [Stanford University study](#) found. People who understand their topic can communicate it simply. Remember—“clarity trumps everything” (Harrison, 2012, p. 164). So don’t let the desire to sound professional (which is good) end up making you sound dull or murky. Convoluting language became such a problem in government publications that Congress passed the Plain Writing Act in 2010. Our government even maintains a [website](#) about good style. Employees have won the No Gobbledygook Award with fantastic revisions [like this one](#) (scroll down), which cut 191 words to 45! So concision isn’t just wise; it’s the law.

Don’t Inhale the Wordiness Surrounding You

Once a student doubted concision could be so important when his textbooks, he pointed out, were not concise. Unfortunately that’s true—many things we read are models of information more than models of writing. And we tend to imitate what we read, so beware of poor models. Always read critically, whether that’s questioning information or the presentation of it.

Thoughts Count, Not Word Counts

Finally, students may inflate their wording because they’re thin on material and need to fill a page count. Verbose writing “makes a little thought go a long way” (Lanham, 1981, 21:41). Here we can see how higher-level writing skills (like research and process) can influence sentence-level skills like concision. Students who have solid substance don’t need to be wordy. Students who plan well have time to revise.

Some students hope the teacher won’t notice a little padding here, a little padding there. I notice. Your English teacher notices. Your teachers in other disciplines notice too, if only subconsciously. The word “concision” may not enter their minds, but if they breeze through your paper (when they must trudge through so many in their grading pile) their supreme gratitude will likely boost your grade.

Now that we’ve discussed the value of concision, let’s look at some wordy sentence patterns and learn how to fix them.

Wordy Sentence Patterns

Near Synonyms

The first type (and the one people are most familiar with) is simple redundancy. The writer uses words that are similar or very much the same. See what I did there? I didn’t need to say “similar” and “very much the same.” Try revising this sample on your own:

Many of the concepts and principles of early psychology have not withstood later research and study.

[Show Answer](#)

Many of the concepts of early psychology have not withstood later study.

Your revision may vary, but I hope you caught both pairs of near synonyms. Now, is there a shade of difference between “concepts” and “principles”? Yes, “concept” sounds like a pure idea while “principle” sounds more like a guideline or even a moral belief. The question is, are these terms different enough to justify asking the reader to process more words? Will the reader sense something is missing if I don’t use one? Often the answer depends on context. As for “research” and “study,” they can be synonyms if I mean consuming information. Perhaps “research” is a subset of “study.” “Research” implies “study” but “study” doesn’t necessarily imply “research.” If my only meaning is scientific experimentation, I would keep “research” and cut “study.” When faced with near synonyms, pick the one that best fulfills your purpose.

Students often use synonyms to round the sentence out by ear. They’re afraid of short sentences. Don’t be. You’ll have plenty of opportunities to write in a variety of sentence lengths. Some wonder if an extra word or two can truly damage a sentence much. One instance often goes unnoticed; the danger is creating gabby *habits*. An unneeded word in each sentence will soon bloat a paper drastically.

Circumlocution

The next type is circumlocution, which means “to talk around.” Circumlocuting uses a phrase for which we already have a word. Often, that phrase defines the word itself. My mind once tripped over this sentence (see if you can find the circumlocution):

The researchers quickly identified the problem and what the desired result of fixing it would be.

Why does that last part sound so funny? The “desired result of fixing a problem” sounds like a solution to me. In fact, if we looked up “solution” in a dictionary, that’s roughly what it would say. Now revise this sentence:

In the event that the foundation does not renew our grant, we will not add any new staff next year.

Show Answer

If the foundation does not renew our grant, we will not hire anyone next year.

So don’t dance around your meaning. Locute; don’t circumlocute.

Words Implied by Other Words

In the case of words implied by other words, the writer has found the right term but tacked on unneeded specifiers. Look at this example:

Laurel, one of my fellow classmates, combined the hydrogen peroxide and potassium iodide together (Fiske, 2006, p. 107).

Can we combine the materials separately? No, by definition “combine” means together, so we can cut “together.” We can also use the singular “classmate” to imply “one of.” Is it possible to have an “unfellow” classmate? Well, that sends

my sarcastic imagination spiraling in all sorts of directions, but that's probably not the writer's intention. So here's the revision:

My classmate Laurel combined the hydrogen peroxide and potassium iodide (Fiske, 2006, p. 107).

Some students even cut "My classmate." Again, context should dictate that decision. Does the reader need to know Laurel is a classmate? That will depend on if we're writing a lab report (then probably not) or a blog post to interest parents in trying chemistry experiments with their children (then why not?). Now remove the implied words in this sentence:

My friends and I decided that a local Italian restaurant is where we would dine on one particular night.

Show Answer

My friends and I dined at an Italian restaurant one night.

("Restaurant" is by definition a "where." "Particular" is covered by "one." "Decided" and "local" aren't needed unless you want to emphasize the decision or the location. One student even pointed out that "dine" implies "night," but you can keep "one night" if the sentence is opening a story.)

You may have noticed the original sentence wasn't long or unclear. If spoken, it wouldn't strike you as rambling. Since conversations are impromptu but writing can be revised, the standard of concision in print is much higher.

The first three strategies treated the word level. The next three eliminate weak sentence structures. Doing so will automatically make them more vivacious.

Smothered Verbs

"Smothered verbs" is a friendlier term for "nominalization," which means "to turn into a noun." Most words can take several parts of speech:

The crew *completed* the building four days early. (verb)

The building was *completely* finished four days early. (adverb)

The *completed* building was four days early. (adjective)

The building was brought to *completion* four days early. (noun)

Each example stresses a different component. The first highlights the crew's action while the second emphasizes completeness with the doubled (and somewhat redundant) "completely finished." As is usually the case, our verb form here is probably the best while the noun form is probably the worst. Other considerations being equal, use the verb form.

I see a lot of nominalized verbs in this sentence:

Colleges now have an understanding that yearly tuition increases are impossible because of strong parental resistance to the soaring cost of higher education (Williams, 2010, p. 40).

Smothered verbs get ridiculous quickly. For some reason, we're not allowed to "understand"—we have to "have an understanding." "Resist" isn't good enough either, but "resistance of" is. These phrases are more pompous and

pointless than professional. How about this instead—

Colleges understand they cannot increase tuition yearly because parents resist (Williams, 2010, p. 40).

You can keep “the soaring cost of higher education” if you want, but I resisted it. In this sentence, turn as many nouns as you can into verbs:

With the reintroduction of wolves to Yellowstone, a restoration of the natural ecosystem has occurred, including a reduction of the elk population, an expansion of the beaver population, and the revitalization of willow trees.

Show Answer

Reintroducing wolves to Yellowstone restored the natural ecosystem by reducing the elk population, expanding the beaver population, and revitalizing willow trees.

That sentence became shorter and snappier by using verbs. This student’s paper originally used the nominalizations of many generic verbs: “Wolves *had an impact on* the elk population.” “The elk *made a change in* the health of the willow trees.” Beware of non-specific verbs like “affect,” “change,” “impact,” “influence,” and their nominalized forms. We are so accustomed to seeing them in academic writing, we don’t realize how lame they are. Imagine recounting your day to a friend using one of these verbs: “Let’s see, after class I walked home, had a snack, and affected my roommate.” Your friend might tell you to talk like a human and get to the point by saying “I cheered up my roommate” or “I complained to my roommate.” Thus, the following sentence probably doesn’t sound stupid, even if it should:

Excessive media consumption affects language development.

Um, affects how? Not good, I’m guessing? Understandably, studies often use “affect” because researchers don’t yet know how their variables interact. Whenever you know the conclusion, however, use a dynamic verb. “Plus and minus” verbs work well, such as “increases,” “decreases,” “helps” or “harms.” We could rephrase to—

Excessive media consumption slows language development.

Without such a verb, we’ll need another sentence:

Excessive media consumption affects language development. Children do not progress as quickly.

Speed up tentative momentum with precise verbs. Now watch this video to solidify your anti-smothering skills:

Grammar Guidelines

Verb: consider

Nominalization: consideration



[Watch on YouTube](https://youtu.be/82MHOBvovmo)

<https://youtu.be/82MHOBvovmo>

Too Many “To Be” Verbs

First, I need to give props to my colleague Julie Haupt for contributing this section. One trap that can slow the pace of writing or weaken sentences can be the overuse of the pesky “to be” verbs. Though these words have a place in your writing, overusing them can stifle your writing and leave it flat or unclear. To be verbs include any form of the word be. Here’s a list of all the to be verbs:

Be Was

Is Were

Am Been

Are Being

Think about it: When you say that your subject “is” something, all you’re really telling your audience is that the subject exists. It simply is. That’s a pretty obvious and unnecessary statement most of the time. Using be verbs isn’t a crime, but replacing be verbs with stronger, more specific verbs will add depth and variety to your writing.

You’ll solve half of your to be verb problems by fixing any weak subjects that you have, which we have just discussed. Spotting other to be verbs that you can replace with a more vibrant choice may be harder, but with a little practice, you’ll start noticing these to be verbs all over the place!

Let’s look at an example.

No: Budgeting is an important way to be financially responsible.

Now, you’ve probably already noticed that this sentence doesn’t have a weak there or it subject. However, we’ve still tied our subject to a weak to be verb, “is,” that only states a simple, obvious fact. Not only that, but another to be verb, “be,”

comes later on in the sentence.

We can improve this sentence to make it a little more lively in a few different ways depending on what we want to emphasize. Look at the more descriptive use of the verbs (highlighted in blue) in these sentences:

Yes: You **can become** more financially responsible by budgeting.

Yes: Budgeting **allows** couples and families to **remain** financially responsible.

Yes: When families **budget** consistently, they **learn** to **take** responsibility for their finances.

Each of these solutions has a slightly different emphasis, but they all convey the same general message without using any to be verbs. Notice as well how all of these sentences encourage a deeper thought than the original sentence. Rather than just stating an obvious fact, these three other sentences make a connection between a specific action and a desirable outcome.

Here's another example with some potential solutions:

No: Exercising is the best antidepressant, so many health professionals say.

Yes: Many health professionals **advocate** for exercise as an effective antidepressant.

Yes: Many health professionals **agree** that exercise can **alleviate** some depressive symptoms more effectively than some antidepressant medication.

Again, these potential solutions emphasize different parts of the original ideas, but that's the beauty of using strong, vibrant verbs; your meaning can instantly become clearer and gain more depth. You'll find that you start saying a lot more with fewer words as you pair strong subjects with strong verbs. To see some ideas of more vibrant verbs that can better articulate your ideas, check out this [list](#) provided by BYU Career Services.

Indoor plumbing is a commodity that many of us take for granted and is still spreading to third-world countries in places like Africa and Asia.

[Show Answer](#)

Many of us take indoor plumbing for granted, but many third-world countries in places like Africa and Asia still lack access to this commodity.

Verbs Too Far from Subjects

Again, thanks to Julie Haupt for this section. Strong subjects and verbs might not do very much for you if you don't place them where they can work together. Subjects and verbs communicate clearest when they sit close together in a sentence, and leaving interruptions between them can add confusion and introduce clumsy wording.

When possible, avoid letting long phrases interrupt the flow of your sentence by placing them between your main subject and your main verb. These interruptions between your subject and verb usually appear after helping words like

if, because, and while. You might remember that these helping words are also known as **subordinate conjunctions**. Here's an example of this kind of an unnecessary interruption in the vicinity of the verb and its subject:

No: Some families, because they gather each night for family dinner, grow closer together.

In essence, these interrupting phrases make your readers mentally hold their breath until they finally get to the verb, "grow." Simply moving this detour before or after the subject-verb pairing can help your readers get to the point of your sentence faster as in this revised sentence:

Yes: Some families grow closer together because they gather each night for family dinner.

When you rearrange your sentences like this, take extra care that you haven't accidentally created a misplaced modifier (see [chapter 4](#)). You may also need to reword a sentence somewhat if you're having trouble moving the interrupter elsewhere in the sentence.

Although keeping your subject and verb close will usually strengthen your writing, it is not a hard and fast rule. In fact, on occasion, you might find that an interruption between your subject and verb is the best way to write your sentence to add some important emphasis. Even then, keep these interruptions as short as possible so your readers can process your sentence easily.

Yes: Kind actions, when motivated by charity, bless others lives.

In this example, the interrupting phrase was short and helps to emphasize a key element of the meaning of the sentence. As you might imagine, the principle of keeping subjects and verbs close is particularly important when sentences get long and sometimes complicated. Let's look at a final example.

No: Competition, although it can be very motivating and invigorating for many individuals, can also bring contention among even the closest of friends.

Here, we see an interruption that can easily be moved elsewhere in the sentence and will help the reader to process the sentence faster.

Yes: Although competition can be very motivating and invigorating for many individuals, it can also bring contention among even the closest of friends.

Yes: Competition can bring contention among even the closest of friends, although it can also be very motivating and invigorating for many individuals.

You can review the principle of keeping subjects and verbs close with this short video:

Grammar Guidelines *We like simple, direct writing.*

To prepare for the make-or-break project review with managing partner, **Josh** practices his power stance in the men's room.



[Watch on YouTube](#)

<https://youtu.be/oHA7hu9WeXs>

Staying organized, which is not always an easy task considering the demanding nature of the principle, is not my cousin's best attribute.

[Show Answer](#)

Staying organized is not my cousin's best attribute, although it is not always an easy task considering the demanding nature of the principle.

Passive Voice

Passive voice sentences tend to be longer, dryer, and harder to understand. The most typical sentence structure is subject/verb/object:

Dean kicked the ball.

This is active voice. Passive voice arranges it object/verb/subject:

The ball was kicked by Dean.

That's a formula for recognizing passive voice:

"To be" verb + past tense verb + "by" subject.

Use active voice as much as possible. To change passive voice into active voice, set the subject where it belongs—in the driver's seat since it's driving the sentence.

Original: Since one of the best libraries in the country is owned by our university, a library science program should be started.

Revision: Since our university owns one of the best libraries in the country, it should start a library science program.

Try improving this sentence:

Many violations of this policy have been committed by these employees.

[Show Answer](#)

These employees have violated this policy many times. (Bonus points if you un-smothered violation into violated.)

Sometimes fixing passive voice is trickier because the subject of the sentence is missing; it's implied instead. To fix these, ask *Who is doing the action of the sentence? Who is using the verb?*

Original: The woman was questioned for two hours before being arrested.

Revision: Police questioned the woman for two hours before arresting her.

The first sentence would be okay if the writer wants to focus on the woman (we'll discuss this more soon). Rephrase the following sentence on your own. It explains campus meal plans but hides the true subject. Can you find it?

The money to be used must be spent by the end of the semester or the remaining amount will be forfeited.

[Show Answer](#)

If students don't spend the money by the end of the semester, they forfeit it.

To review active vs. passive voice, watch this video:

Grammar Guidelines *Passive voice*

The cupcakes will be delivered by Fenton.



[Watch on YouTube](#)

https://youtu.be/yLclIV31_eU

Sometimes the passive voice is appropriate when the subject is unknown or less important than the object. Let's say I'm a 1960s journalist reporting on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. My first headline might say *Three Gunshots Fired at JFK*. It's passive, but perhaps I don't yet have the shooter's name. Even if I did, the president is arguably more important. By the same principle, *JFK Pronounced Dead* would be better than *Dr. Clark Pronounces JFK Dead*.

In years past, studies have used this form of the passive voice to describe methods: *Pairs of five-year-olds were observed*. However, APA Style now [permits and even encourages authors to refer to themselves](#) as *I* or *We*: *We observed pairs of five-year-olds* or *From the data I have concluded . . .*

Here's a great video to explain how to decide if passive voice is appropriate:

Grammar Guidelines *Sometimes passive voice is the best choice.*

Actor



Action

[Watch on YouTube](https://youtu.be/WzHHYpq0aYs)

<https://youtu.be/WzHHYpq0aYs>

So for the most part, stay active! And don't allow yourself to be weighed down by the passive voice. Or rather, don't let the passive voice weigh you down.

False Starts

A false start is the opposite of making a good first impression. The opening phrase of the sentence says nothing, creating what scholar Richard Lanham calls a slow wind-up. (He made a brilliant concision video called [Revising Prose](#). Perhaps your teacher would let you view it in class). One kind of false start is the “blah blah is that” opening (also Lanham's term). Here's a sample:

It is clear that only a huge tax increase will make the program feasible.

This snarky guy calls this saying you're saying something.



[Watch on YouTube](#)

<https://youtu.be/cqRhnl5y4I>

The technical term for saying you're saying something is *metadiscourse*. You can use metadiscourse occasionally to draw special attention to your most important points, but that means a few times per paper, not per paragraph. These sentences are easy to revise—just chop off the beginning:

Only a huge tax increase will make the program feasible.

The other type of false start usually begins with the phrases *It is*, *There is*, or *There are*. Can you identify the subject and verb of this sentence?

There was a fight between Curtis and Miles at the basketball game last Saturday.

Many students guess the subject is *Curtis and Miles* and the verb is *fight*. That's not correct, but it should be. The answer is actually *There was*. Wow—that's about the least specific, least vivacious subject-verb combo possible. Some call these openers dummy subjects and verbs since they shunt the true subject and verb later in the sentence. To revise, pull the true subject and verb up:

Curtis and Miles fought at the basketball game last Saturday.

Now reword this sentence:

There are a lot of articles for the committee to read before the budget review.

[Show Answer](#)

The committee must read many articles before the budget review.

As with the passive voice, sometimes the subject of a false start is missing. Who is doing the action in this sentence?

There has been a change in the graduation requirements for Exercise Science majors.

Well, the administration or department probably did the actual changing:

The department has changed the graduation requirements for Exercise Science majors.

If you wanted to emphasize the change itself, perhaps the original sentence is okay. If you wanted to emphasize the consequences for students, you could say this:

Exercise Science majors have new graduation requirements.

Infer a subject for this sentence and adjust it accordingly:

There can be considerable controversy about the appropriate amount of homework for middle schoolers.

Show Answer

Experts disagree about the appropriate amount of homework for middle schoolers.

Parents and teachers sometimes argue about the appropriate amount of homework for middle schoolers.

(The best subject—or compound subject—would most accurately reflect the student's research, of course.)

I'm guessing we use false starts as a formula to get drafting. Don't know how to start a sentence? *There is* is there for you. False starts are fine in a first draft, but be sure to clean them up for the final. If false starts are a habit for you, use the search function (Control + F) to locate instances of *There are*, *There was*, *There can*, *There would*, etc. Try this trick for finding any phrase you overuse. These constructions can also begin a phrase, so don't let them slip by in the middle of a sentence:

Even if we finish manufacturing the product this month, there is a lot of testing to complete before we can release it.

Watch this video to learn how to get rid of "There is" false starts:

Grammar Guidelines *Who or what is “there”?*



[Watch on YouTube](https://youtu.be/eWBohA7uiBA)

<https://youtu.be/eWBohA7uiBA>

You made it—you now have many tools to condense a sentence. I hope you’re not overwhelmed because, ironically, concision is the largest section in this chapter. I think that’s because it’s the most basic principle of style, and as I mentioned earlier, some of the strategies incidentally energize sentences (we could have discussed them in the vivacity section too) as they shorten them. While concise writing does conserve the reader’s time, more importantly, it conserves the reader’s energy. This is crucial in a long piece (such as a literature review) or a piece aimed at a general audience (such as a social media post). The more energy your sentences have, the less energy the reader depletes in processing them.

5.5 Coherence

The next strategy for creating clarity is coherence. Broadly speaking, *coherent* means logical. In writing, it usually means logically organized. The best order to put your writing in is the one your audience expects. For most genres, that’s an introduction that presents the main idea, supporting paragraphs that substantiate it, and a conclusion that reiterates it.

Most college students have mastered this macrostructure (I rarely ask students to move entire sections or paragraphs) but need practice with microstructure: ordering within a paragraph. Often students build their microstructures by ear—does it sound good? That’s an accurate principle, but remember it’s secondary: first clarity, then vivacity. Order your sentences by function instead. For academic papers, I use the acronym A BEAST to remember the elements my paragraph needs. After all, you want your paper to be a beast—tough to reckon with.

A BEAST

Argument

Background

Evidence
Analysis
Summary
Transition

Argument

A is for argument. Your previous teachers may have called this a topic sentence, but I prefer argument because your first sentence should do more than mention a subject—it should state what the paragraph will prove. Even in an informative (rather than persuasive) paper, you must give evidence that verifies the facts you want your readers to know.

The best argument sentences encapsulate the *entire* paragraph: remember—no slow wind-ups. Based on the argument sentence, a reader should know exactly what to expect from the paragraph. Let's look at an opening sentence that *doesn't* do that. What do you predict the next sentences will be about?

Every person on this planet is unique.

Hmm . . . I think the paragraph might be about DNA since that's what makes us unique. Maybe the paragraph will encourage readers to identify and use their strengths. I hope the paragraph isn't about self-esteem—by second grade I was tired of hearing about that. So what is this paragraph really about? In this case, the answer comes in the last sentence of the paragraph (six sentences later):

What if we implemented a literacy program that challenged children while they could still read books that interested them?

Oh, so the writer mentioned uniqueness to lead up to the idea of a more customized reading curriculum. I understand the intention now, but I want to understand from the beginning. In Western culture, we expect point-first writing: we want authors to disclose their objective upfront. So make sure your argument sentence doesn't merely warm up to your point. Nail it. If you notice you're a point-last writer, you can often find a later sentence that captures the whole paragraph better. For this example, I asked the student to make the last sentence the first and phrase it as a statement:

I propose we implement a literacy program that challenges children yet allows them to read books that interest them.

And the former first sentence isn't wasted effort—it may be usable elsewhere.

Some students are tempted to lead with background information or their best piece of evidence. This buries the argument in sentence three or four. Don't do it—we can wait just a moment for background and we'll process your information better if we understand why you're telling it.

Background

After argument comes background: this is nonargumentative (or less argumentative) material that prepares the reader for your research. Sometimes the introduction provides sufficient background and you can move straight to E: evidence.

Evidence

Your reader is now ready to hear all the specific statistics, experiments, case studies, interviews, etc. you've gathered. The key word is specific. As a reader, I want to experience your research journey. I want to become as much of an

expert as you are. Describing the methods behind your most important findings will convince me more than glossing over conclusion after conclusion. But we can't let evidence do all the work—we need to add our own analysis.

Analysis

Analysis is your commentary on the evidence. You further explain how your research bolsters your argument. I find many students tend to favor one or the other—either evidence or analysis. The first group sticks closely to their articles, letting the scholars say everything. The second group prefers to skim over the studies in their own words, but this doesn't permit the reader to experience the evidence firsthand. Balance evidence and analysis as much as you can. You can also alternate between evidence and analysis as many times as you need. That means a paragraph might actually look like this: ABEAEAEAST.

Summary

S is for summary—I wish it were P for Point, but that doesn't spell anything. I say that because it's much more important to echo your argument than rehash every bit of the paragraph. Often, the summary can state your point even more strongly and specifically than the argument sentence because your reader now knows all the details.

Transition

The final element is T for transition. Although a single word is often sufficient (note *final* from the last sentence), I prefer conceptual transitions, meaning you show how the previous paragraph and the next relate. I could write this instead: *Just as a summary sentence gives readers closure, a transition sentence primes them for the next.*

Now you know the entire A BEAST model. My goal isn't to lock you into a formula (for example, it's okay if your argument needs two sentences) but to help you remember to order sentences by function first. The following paragraph is a good first draft: the student has included all the needed elements and made the wording flow. We can improve it, however, by identifying the function of each sentence and revising accordingly.

Child-directed speech has features like simplified structure, exaggerated intonation, and slower pacing. A 2003 study found children in low-income homes are exposed to far less child-directed speech than children in higher-income homes; two recent studies corroborate these results. Child-directed speech strongly correlates with socioeconomic status and language delays. Furthermore, low vocabulary has also been tied to long-term struggles in reading and writing. To prevent such problems, parents must be trained to use child-directed speech often. In other words, the more toddlers talk with their parents, the less likely they are to have vocabulary deficits.

SHOW ANSWER

The original version orders the sentences as background, evidence, argument, transition, summary, analysis. Here is a possible revision:

Child-directed speech strongly correlates with socioeconomic status and language delays. This type of talking has features like simplified structure, exaggerated intonation, and slower pacing. A 2003 study found children in low-income homes are exposed to far less child-directed speech than children in higher-income homes; two recent studies corroborate these results. In other words, the more toddlers talk with their parents, the less likely they are to have vocabulary deficits. Thus, parents must be trained to use child-directed speech often. Furthermore, low vocabulary has also been tied to long-term struggles in reading and writing.

Guideposts

Along with smart sequencing, guidepost words, which are transitional words anywhere in the paragraph, can help the reader know where you're going. Perhaps you've gone hiking, wondered if you were still on the right trail, and a signpost reassured you that you were. We can use words like *for example*, *however*, and *consequently* to signal our intentions to the reader (Harrison, 2012). This is where brief metadiscourse is not only appropriate but very helpful. Try reading the following paragraphs. The first offers no guideposts:

Jazz bands began to split into two main categories: black and white. Black bands (bands made up entirely of African-Americans) were known as "big bands." Solos were encouraged among all of the band members, not just the leader of the band. These bands played mostly for the poorer, lower class blacks of the era. These big bands began writing their own music. The music performed by jazz bands had been made up entirely of arrangements of the day's popular music. Music was written specifically for a band (Harrison, 2012, pp. 166-167).

This revision gives us several trail marks (set in blue):

Jazz bands began to split into two main categories: black and white. Black bands (bands made up entirely of African-Americans) were known as "big bands" **and were characterized by a number of things. First**, solos were encouraged among all of the band members, not just the leader of the band. **Second**, these bands played mostly for the poorer, lower class blacks of the era. **And third**, these big bands began writing their own music. **Up until this time**, the music performed by jazz bands had been made up entirely of arrangements of the day's popular music. **It wasn't until this time** that music was written specifically for a band (Harrison, 2012, p. 167).

The first paragraph feels a bit fragmented—almost more like a list of facts than a paragraph. In the second, the writer's expressions direct our attention. We mentally place the first pieces of information under *characteristics*. The next phrases tell us we're moving into historical development. Like a GPS, signal phrases save readers energy and worry by alerting them to turns in advance.

Old to New Information

Another tactic for creating coherence is starting with information the reader is likely to know then moving to less commonly known information. This gives the reader a foundation to build on. For example, I'm guessing most of you have heard of *The Wizard of Oz* story. I bet many of you have also seen the film. Very few, though, would be familiar with the literacy criticism it's prompted. Thus, my audience will feel most comfortable beginning with old information, like the characters, and then progressing to new information, like the story's possible symbolism. Rewrite the following paragraph based on that principle:

The Wizard of Oz may be a political allegory, which many fans of this beloved book and film do not know. For example, the scarecrow represented farmers, who didn't have a brain because farmers of the era weren't looking after their political interests. Industry was represented by the tinman. The Industrial Revolution was making humanity heartless, so the tinman didn't have one. Finally, the drought in the western United States was embodied by the Wicked Witch, who could only be killed by water (Taylor, 2005).

Show Answer

Sample revision: Many fans of the beloved book and film, *The Wizard of Oz*, do not know that it may be a political allegory. For example, the scarecrow has no brain since farmers of the era weren't looking after their political interests. The tinman has no heart because the Industrial Revolution was making humanity heartless. Finally,

Dorothy kills the Wicked Witch of the West by throwing water on her. The Witch embodies the western United States, which was experiencing drought (Taylor, 2005).

(Some students have also previewed the paragraph by first listing out the characters. Others have described all the characters before mentioning any of the symbolism.)

As with concision, don't worry about coherence as you're drafting. Your first version need only be a brain dump. Write the way you played as a child. If I handed a group of adults an enormous box of Legos and asked them to make something, they would probably pick through the first layer of pieces, fretting about what to do first. A group of kids would turn that box upside down. They instinctively know it's easier to sort the parts when they're all on the table.

5.6 Cohesion

Some use *coherence* and *cohesion* interchangeably, but I see coherence as putting ideas in a logical order whereas cohesion is linking (or sticking—as in *adhesive*) ideas smoothly. For example, the following paragraph is completely cohesive yet completely incoherent:

On my fridge I keep a collection of magnets. Magnet rhymes with *Dragnet*. *Dragnet*, a true crime television series, took place in Los Angeles. Los Angeles is the second most populous city in the United States.

You can see how I moved from one idea to the next, but the paragraph says nothing significant (although I highly recommend *Dragnet*).

Sentence Linking

The best paragraphs are both coherent and cohesive. The following sentences are in a good order, but I think I can make the links between sentences more graceful. The writer introduces the problem with a story then advocates for change:

Many ducks roam around my neighborhood. When they have new ducklings, I love to watch them. The mother leads the ducklings, and sometimes she walks over the storm drains. The ducklings fall right through the slats of the drain because their feet aren't big even though their mother's are. Then residents or city personnel must get into the drain, catch the ducklings, and lift them out. We should put mesh nets over the storm drains so they don't fall in.

The paragraph makes sense, but notice how it flows better when I make a phrase near the end of one sentence connect to a phrase early in the next sentence. The pairings are in matching colors:

Many ducks roam around my **neighborhood**. My **neighbors** and I enjoy watching them, especially when they have new **ducklings**. **They** are adorable as they waddle behind their mother so faithfully. But sometimes the mother walks over a storm drain and the **ducklings** fall right in! **Their** tiny feet just aren't big enough to span the **drain's** slats. These **drains** wouldn't trap the ducklings if the city **spread** mesh nets over them. If we **don't**, residents or city personnel must continue to get into the drains, catch the ducklings, and lift them out.

Now make this coherent paragraph more cohesive with sentence linking:

Salt Lake City should build a new theatre for two reasons. Broadway producers know the Salt Lake area is a good market because we have many singers and dancers. Recent shows from New York will really attract this crowd. Furthermore, many seats at Capitol Theatre don't have a decent view of the stage. In 1903, the principles of good sight

lines weren't as well known, which is when the theatre opened. However, the city hesitates to rebuild Capitol Theatre because it's a historic structure.

[Show Answer](#)

Sample revision: Salt Lake City should build a new theatre for two reasons. First, Broadway producers know Salt Lake City is a good market because it has many singers and dancers. Many of these performers will swarm to buy tickets to recent shows from New York. Second, many seats at Capitol Theatre don't have a decent view of the stage. The theatre, built in 1903, doesn't use the most recent principles of good sight lines. Unfortunately, these sight lines cannot be improved unless the city is willing to rebuild this historic structure.

Side note—these sentences came true. Salt Lake City built a new theatre, the Eccles, in 2016. Capitol Theatre renovated its seating in 2019.

Subject Aligning

Another method of creating cohesion is subject aligning. This means keeping the main idea of the paragraph at the beginning of sentences as much as possible. This reworking of the duckling paragraph is also cohesive:

Many ducks roam around my neighborhood. They are fun to watch, especially when they have new ducklings. They are adorable as they waddle behind their mother so faithfully. But sometimes the ducklings follow their mother over a storm drain and fall right in! Their tiny feet just aren't big enough to span the drain's slats. The ducklings then have to be rescued by residents or city personnel who get into the drains, catch them, and lift them out. The poor creatures could be spared if the city spread mesh nets over the drains.

For the sake of example, I aligned the subject of *every* sentence, but that isn't necessary. A little variation is refreshing and won't disrupt the cohesion. I also had to use the passive voice in the last two sentences, which could be okay if I want to focus on the ducklings.

Try subject aligning this paragraph. Use the passive voice as little as possible.

Body image is usually decreased by viewing advertisements. When presented with ideals that are difficult or impossible to achieve and maintain, people become less secure. This spurs the growth of profits as consumers buy product after product to improve appearance. Over the last few decades, research has confirmed the harm ads wield over female body image. Whether this harm is equal on males, however, is a more recent question.

[Show Answer](#)

Sample Revisions

Advertisements usually decrease body image. They present ideals that are difficult or impossible to achieve and maintain, reducing viewers' security. Advertisers and their client companies profit as consumers buy product after product to improve appearance. Over the last few decades, advertisements' harm on female body image has been confirmed by research. Whether ads harm male body image equally, however, is a more recent question.

We often let advertisements decrease our body image. When we see ideals that are difficult or impossible to achieve and maintain, we become less secure. We spur the profits of advertisers and their client companies as we

buy product after product to improve appearance. Over the last few decades, the harm women feel from advertisements has been confirmed by research. Whether males experience equal harm, however, is a more recent question.

(In the second example, you could substitute something like “people” or “consumers” for “we.”)

If cohesion seems nitpicky—you’re right. But in another sense it’s the crowning achievement of clear writing. If you take time to be cohesive, don’t be surprised if people ask you how you write so well. Your audience will be pleasantly surprised when reading your work feels as frictionless as ice skating. Sadly, we’re used to reading being as “frictionless” as say—wrestling an alligator. Level every obstacle for your reader. Use cohesion to lull them into a lovely rhythm.

Excellent work—you’re now equipped to make your sentences clearer. If you do, they’ll also become more interesting. In the next section you’ll acquire even more tools to animate your writing.

5.7 Vivacity

Permit me to have a hipster moment—I liked Harry Potter before it was cool. Nobody I knew was hep to the series until the release of book four. Once at lunch a friend complained she didn’t like how the storyline was unfolding. I realized I almost didn’t care about the plot. I read because I loved simply being in J. K. Rowling’s magical world. Reading felt like *living* there. The characters felt *alive* to me. Even today, all I want to know is, will I go to Hogwarts when I die?

That’s the power of lifelike—or vivacious—writing (the Latin root *viv* means *life* as in *revive* or *survive*). Vivacious writing transforms reading from the Dementor-like torture of passing eyes over print to extract information to conversing with a real *live* human being (as pleasant as a bite of Professor Lupin’s chocolate). The first requires great patience and gives little satisfaction in return. The second feels a lot like listening to a story.

Although your teachers won’t let you write a novel instead of a literature review, you can use the techniques of creative writing in any genre much more than you would expect. We will learn about two: voice and variety.

5.8 Voice

Voice refers to the writer’s attitude or personality. Some use *voice* to include choices like vocabulary, sentence length, and sentence structure although I feel those belong to the broader term *style*. However, style certainly influences voice: describing the babbling of a brook as *mellifluous* would establish an elevated, elegant tone. Using a fragment like “No way!” would create a playful, conversational voice.

The appropriate voice for a text depends on its genre and audience. For example, we expect a lot of voice in a poem and very little in a health history. This semester you’ll write for both academic and general audiences in assignments like the literature review and magazine spread. Both will have a similar goal, such as reducing television viewing for children under two, but the audience will determine the content you include.

In an academic paper, you might address a government agency, citing studies that prove frequent television viewing reduces the parent-child interaction necessary to build language skills. You might ask the government agency to make a

brochure about child media guidelines for pediatricians to give to parents. In a magazine article, you might address parents directly with a bulleted list of activities they can enjoy with their children besides watching TV.

Regardless of the genre, two strategies, story framing and sentence-as-action, will help you enhance your voice.

Story Framing

Humans think in stories. You know that when a presenter begins telling a story, your attention perks up. I definitely recommend using stories in your pieces for a general audience. Should we use stories in an academic paper? Possibly—some research includes interviews or case studies. Even if we don't *tell* a story, we can *frame* anything as a story. The audience probably won't know you're doing this, but they will be more engaged.

Let's start by framing this semester as a story. What do we need to tell a story? I give my creative writing students the acronym COOT to remember.

- Character
- Objective
- Obstacle
- Tactic

This Semester: Your Story

A story needs a character who has an objective, encounters obstacles, and uses tactics to overcome them. So who is our hero this semester? It's you! Your objective for this class is probably to get a good grade. Your obstacles might be procrastination, wanting to spend more time with friends, or meeting family obligations. Your tactics might include setting a schedule, studying with friends, or video chatting with your little sister instead of driving the hour home. That's not a bad story—most importantly, I hope you now think of yourself as a hero—but I think we can go bigger.

As an example, we'll discuss the work of McCall Booth, the student who wrote the paper about reducing television viewing in children under two. McCall is a Human Development major. Let's go bigger—McCall wants to help people (objective). She wants to overcome the obstacle of speech disorders so children can communicate well. McCall's choosing to study this problem this semester because she wants to face the enemy—what prevents children from developing language? One answer is excessive television. Now McCall knows her nemesis. What tactics will she use to defeat it? McCall realizes parents have the power to direct their child's behavior. She wants to write to them. But how will parents get the message? McCall may need another tactic. In her research, she learns that behavior interventions with medical professionals work best—people believe and follow the advice of their doctor. So McCall's strategy is to get pediatricians to tell parents about media guidelines for children. McCall's everyday school drudgery is now a story.

I hope you'll frame your semester this way more than the first way. You are the hero of this project. You're here to destroy your archenemy: a social problem. Your sidekicks are ready to help—your teacher, your review group, even the scholars whose material you cite. Your superpowers are your research, your persuasion, and your writing skills. What you write could help eradicate the problem. What you say could convince those in power to implement your recommendations. (Remember I promised to tell you about a scientist who did just that? She's still coming.)

Research as a Story: Make a Movie for Your Readers

You can frame the problem you're studying this semester the same way for your audience. When I was studying for a college entrance exam, my teacher told me, "Whenever you read, make a movie in your mind." Watch how McCall makes a movie for her reader in the introduction of an article she geared to *Parents* magazine:

Alex sighs in frustration as he enters the living room. Toys scattered on the floor, books yanked from shelves, and his kids pay no mind to the chaos they've created. He needs to help cook dinner, but first he needs a way to distract the children from their havoc-wreaking. The instant Alex turns on the television the kids gravitate toward the bright screen, and he can work in peace. But he can't stop the little voice in his head that asks when was the last time he played with his children rather than letting a screen babysit them.

Who is our hero now? Alex, or more broadly, parents. What is the objective? To help cook dinner—more generally, to accomplish tasks at home. What is the obstacle? The children are asking for attention too. What is the tactic? Television—it will absorb the children's attention instead. McCall then hints this tactic may have serious consequences. In the rest of the article she will explain these consequences and suggest better tactics.

Framing the social problem as a story accomplishes two things: first, the audience is more interested. Of course, McCall could have started the article this way: "Too much television delays language development." That sounds like a sentence straight from her research paper, and we expect more pizzazz when we read a magazine. We pick up a magazine for a break, not a lecture. Second, she relates to her audience. In a magazine, her research paper sentence could sound like an accusation. Subtext: *Why are you such a bad parent? You're making your kid dumb. Never watch TV again!* Instead, her story sympathizes with parents by showing she understands the stressful choices they face.

How could McCall frame the story for an academic paper? Her audience will be other experts who care about the problem, with scholars and speech pathologists as the primary audience. Educators and social workers could be a secondary audience. Inevitably, peers in the class and the teacher will "overhear" her paper. Others who can help fix the problem, like medical professionals and government employees, might be a tertiary audience. You should use your voice in an academic paper, but it will be subdued. The trick is to be spirited enough to interest your reader and not so spirited you lose your credibility (Harrison, 2012). Perhaps it's like wearing your best suit to a job interview but throwing in a stylish necktie or necklace.

To sound professional, students often use abstract nouns as the subjects of their sentences. In McCall's case those might be *language development*, *interaction*, *speech delay*, and *screen media consumption*. Unfortunately, when it comes to making a movie in the mind, inanimate concepts aren't very lively actors. If you can make the subject of your sentence a person, do it. You won't sound less professional, and the audience will pay attention and understand you better. McCall can use subjects like *parents*, *children*, *speech pathologists*, and *pediatricians* throughout her paper. Here is a sample introduction for an academic paper:

Speech pathologists and other professionals who work with children know the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children under two do not use screen media. In treating clients, many of us have probably seen a parent hand an underage child a smartphone or tablet while they wait for the older child's appointment to finish. Should we say something? Yes. We know premature and excessive media consumption can contribute to many problems, including language delay. Since parents need to hear this message early and regularly, I advise speech pathologists to partner with pediatricians, who meet with a family about nine times during a child's pre-toddler years.

This paragraph features action, not concepts, by using story framing: We have characters (speech pathologists) who have an objective (sharing media guidelines to avoid language delay). To overcome the obstacle (usually treating children already two years old) they develop a tactic (teaming with pediatricians).

Show Your Hero Succeeding

Especially in texts for a general audience, be sure to finish the story. You've painted a "before" picture that illustrates the problem. Now paint an "after" picture that shows the benefits of implementing the solution. Show your hero (the audience) succeeding. This could be McCall's conclusion of her magazine spread:

When Alex enters the living room tonight, things are much the same: toys scattered on the floor, books yanked from shelves, and his kids pay no mind to the chaos they've created. He needs to help cook dinner, but now television isn't his first strategy for engaging the children. Instead, he scoops up an armful of play food among the toys and leads his children to the kitchen. He puts a pot on the floor for his three-year-old, hands her some play food, and asks her to cook something. He sends his five-year-old son to get salt from the pantry. He knows chatting about cooking (real or pretend) with his children contributes much more to their development than watching television, and he feels good about spending time with them.

Here's a prewriting exercise to experiment with story framing on your own:

Think about the next assignment you will write for this class. How can you use story framing to make the piece more interesting? Either jot down some plans here or try writing the introduction itself.

Story framing is Mary Poppins's spoonful of sugar that helps the medicine go down. After all, many of us can breeze through fifty pages of a novel in the time it takes to decode five pages of a research article. Well here's the irony: a spoonful of sugar was only in the film, not the book. See—those filmmakers know what they're doing. Make a movie for your reader.

Sentence as Action

Sometimes I've asked myself, *Can I shortcut all this revision by writing a solid sentence in the first place?* I think the answer is yes and no. No, we rarely write a sentence the best way the first way. And yes, a few tricks can help us know if we're on the right track during drafting. First, we need to shift the way we think about a sentence. When you were younger, you probably learned that a sentence is a complete thought. As a college student, you likely read many sentences that are overloaded units of information. I define a sentence as a unit of action: A subject verbed an object. Something happened—that's a story. And remember, we can frame anything as a story.

From the sentence-as-action paradigm, I've created a formula for a good sentence. I hesitate to say *formula*—writing is a fascinating blend of art and science and thus never formulaic—but I hope it can be a handy yardstick on the go. For contrast, let's look at the bad formula first. I've included pictures so you can see what a bad sentence feels like.

Bad Sentence Formula



Vague subject +

Photo by [WandererCreative](#)



Weak verb or
Passive verb or
Unnecessary “to be” verb +

Photo by [Spoba](#)



Everything else you need to say but didn't because you wasted your
subject and verb

Photo by [Ben Kerckx](#)

Here's a bad formula sentence to muck through. Can you tell what it means? Hint: It's the plot of a well-known movie. I've formatted it as a “question” below, just so you can click the answer when you're ready.

A difference of opinion was undertaken by two opposing parties in which the surprising fact of one party's paternity was revealed by the other party.

[Show Answer](#)

Star Wars: Episode V—The Empire Strikes Back

Revision: Darth Vader dueled Luke Skywalker and declared, “I am your father.”

Naturally, the opposite is the good sentence formula:

Good Sentence Formula

Concrete subject (human if possible) + forceful verb + the result (what happened when the subject verbed the object?).

Take this bad formula sentence about McCall’s topic and give it a concrete subject and a forceful verb.

A meeting should take place in which media guidelines are gone over at pediatric offices so harmful exposure does not occur.

Show Answer

Pediatricians should explain media guidelines to parents to protect children from harmful media exposure.

A thesaurus is your best friend when it comes to pinpointing the powerful verb you need. I used one myself to write that last sentence—instead of *pinpointing* I had *finding*. This is a perfect case to illustrate what a thesaurus can do: often our working memory can’t promptly retrieve all the vocabulary we know. Searching for the right synonym can trigger that “on the tip of the tongue” feeling. A thesaurus can bring the ideal word to mind much more quickly. Many word processors have a built-in thesaurus—try right-clicking the word.

A final tip—only use words you already know from the thesaurus. Choosing a scholarly-sounding word you have only a vague notion of can be tempting, but it may not fit your context or have connotations you didn’t anticipate. Now that you have the framework for a compelling sentence, let’s look at some troubleshooting.

Smoothing Sentences with Parallelism

In oral presentations, we worry about stumbling over our words. In writing we can’t literally stutter, but sentences sometimes sound awkward. The culprit is often problems with parallelism (for more on parallelism, see [chapter 4](#), section 5A under STRUCTURE). The following sentence is not parallel:

Kara’s hobbies include reading, sewing, and dance.

Maybe your ear gagged on that last bit. Why not say *dancing* so it matches the others? Parallelism means keeping equal parts of a sentence in the same form: for example, all verbs or all nouns—not a mix.

Fix the parallelism mistake in this sentence:

Our college helps students land careers in computer programming, software development, service technicians, and IT managers.

Show Answer

Our college helps students land careers as computer programmers, software developers, service technicians, and IT managers.

(The first two items on the list are fields. The last two items on the list are positions. You wouldn’t say, “Our college helps students land careers in service technicians.”)

Parallelism also means making sure the first part of the sentence tallies with the last. Look at this sentence:

The English teacher said Alicia needed to improve her grammar and coming to class late.

The verb *improve* has two nouns phrases attached to it: *grammar* and *coming to class late*. Let's separate the parts of the sentence to check if each works on its own:

The English teacher said Alicia needed to improve her grammar.

Okay, that sounds normal. What about the second part?

The English teacher said Alicia needed to improve her coming to class late.

That sounds funny. We can fix it by using a different noun phrase that gels better with *improve*:

The English teacher said Alicia needed to improve her grammar and punctuality.

Or we could add a verb that fits with *class*:

The English teacher said Alicia needed to improve her grammar and come to class on time.

Make the following sentence parallel:

Crooning saxophones and trumpets that blare can be heard at Jack's Jazz Joint, which also sells sheet music and tuning.

Show Answer

Crooning saxophones and blaring trumpets can be heard at Jack's Jazz Joint, which also sells sheet music and tunes instruments.

Saxophones that croon and trumpets that blare can be heard at Jack's Jazz Joint, which also offers sheet music and instrument tuning.

(I hope you caught both brands of faulty parallelism.)

The best way to find clumsy sentences is to read your paper out loud. That probably sounds like nerdy overachieving. Do it anyway. If it sounds good reading aloud, it will sound good to the reader.

A vibrant voice pops the topic right off the page. Help your readers visualize your research journey by framing it as a story and packing your sentences with action.

5.9 Variety

Just as we can spice up our writing with voice, we can use the spice of life—variety. This section will specifically discuss sentence length and sentence structure.

Varying Sentence Length

Have you ever driven from Provo to St. George? This trip has the perfect conditions for highway hypnosis. With not much to see (unless you're a sagebrush expert), a constant speed limit, and very few traffic maneuvers to vary the pace, drivers can suddenly realize they've been zoned out for ten or twenty minutes—they've been driving without conscious effort.

I hope my readers are pretty conscious when I'm with them, so I vary the pace by varying sentence length. For the most part, our sentences are too long and too similar (Lanham, 1981). How can you determine a good length? Sometimes content influences the pace: I may use some staccato sentences for my hard-hitting statistics, then stroll leisurely through a touching story. Here are other factors to consider:

Short sentences (1–10 words) keep the reader's attention and are easy to understand. However, they may sound choppy or immature if overused. Long sentences (20–30 words) have plenty of room to show connections between ideas, but they risk boring or confusing the reader. Medium sentences (10–20 words) combine the benefits of both: they're short enough to be readable but long enough to develop ideas. And we've already discussed the drawback of too many medium sentences—highway hypnosis.

Every sentence in the following paragraph is of medium length (13–16 words). Revise for more variety. Be as creative as you wish (keep the meaning but change anything else):

Good writers and good boxers are alike because they try to vary their moves. A boxer who always gave two quick jabs then one uppercut would be laughed at. The opponent would probably win the fight because the rhythm is too predictable. Writers try to create sentences of different lengths so they keep the attention of their audience.

Show Answer

Sample revision: Good writers write the way good boxers box. If a boxer always gave two quick jabs then one uppercut, his opponent would thrash him soundly because his rhythm is predictable. Similarly, writers must vary their sentence lengths unless they want to bore their readers. Sentence lengths: 8, 22, 14

One way to control length is to coordinate (combine) sentences well. First we must learn to combine them logically, then we can learn to switch up our habitual sentence patterns. (In case we have any editing minors in the house, some examples will technically subordinate rather than coordinate, but for simplicity's sake I'm putting both under the category *sentence combining*.)

Combining Sentences Logically

Often, writers don't combine sentences with much variety. *And* becomes the default coordinating word. Writers merge many short sentences with *and* for no reason except to get that medium length the ear likes. Remember—not every sentence needs to be round; use many lengths so the paper feels on average round.

Here are two strategies for coordinating sentences better. First, coordinate only when you need to. Don't combine sentences unless they have a direct relationship. Second, use a coordinator more specific than *and* if possible. The following sentence uses illogical coordination:

Every Christmas I open a new pair of pajamas, and my grandpa's birthday is the next day.

The relationship between the parts is tenuous (Which are we going to talk about—pajamas or Grandpa?) so the writing sounds juvenile—more like impromptu speech. These ideas belong in separate sentences, possibly separate paragraphs. When you write, if you determine the ideas do belong in the same sentence, then make sure you're using a suitable coordinator.

A good coordinator accurately defines the relationship between the two parts. The relationship may be contrast (*but, although*), cause and effect (*because, consequently*), or order (*after, third*). Notice how these sentences sound more logical with proper coordination:

Original: Cassie stayed up late to study the night before the test, and Colin gave his brain plenty of sleep.

Revision: Cassie stayed up late to study the night before the test, but Colin gave his brain plenty of sleep.

Original: She brought a toy to school, and her parents had to talk to the teacher.

Revision: Because she brought a toy to school, her parents had to talk to the teacher.

Original: To make macaroni and cheese, boil and drain the noodles and add butter, sauce, and milk.

Revision: To make macaroni and cheese, first boil the noodles. When they are tender, drain the water. Finally, add butter, sauce, and milk.

Improve this paragraph with more appropriate coordination. Be sure to separate sentence parts that don't have a direct relationship.

My family has many Christmas Eve traditions. We watch a movie and we usually disagree about it. My brother Reid likes comedies like *Elf*, and my brother Ryker prefers classics like *It's a Wonderful Life*. We also make treats. Caramel popcorn is our favorite, and we play card games. We eat the popcorn and the cards get sticky.

Show Answer

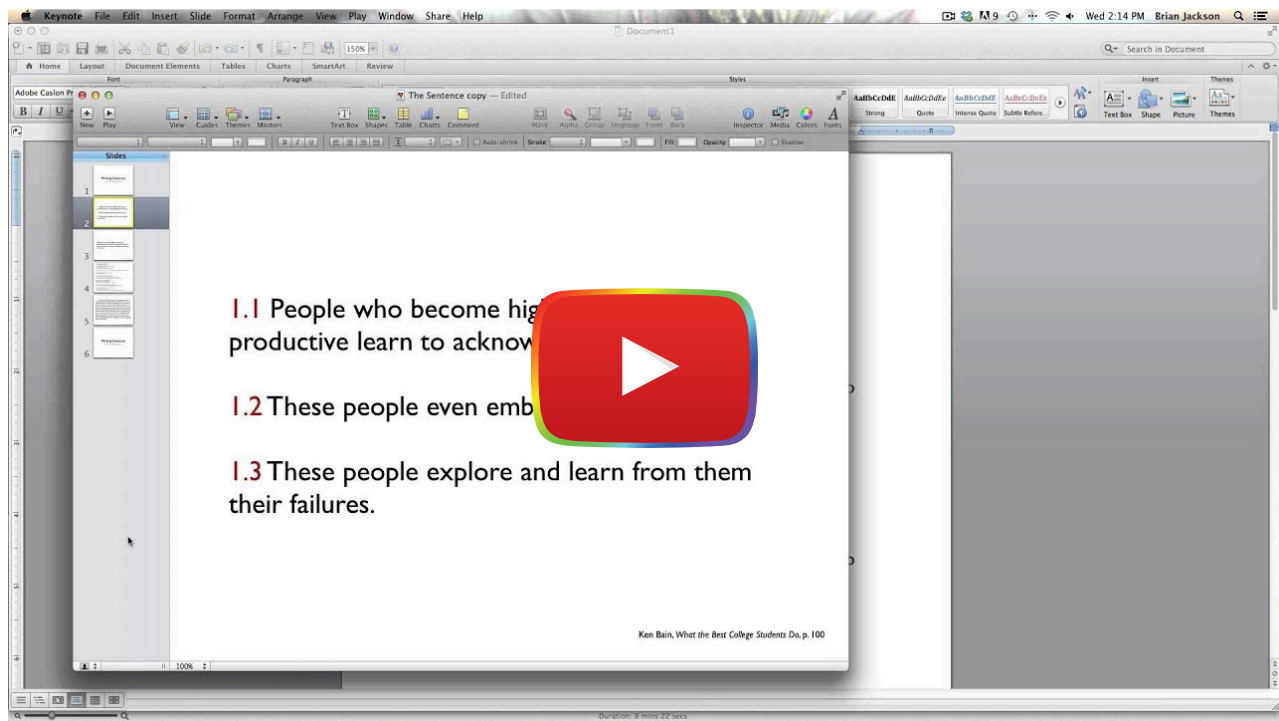
Sample revision: My family has many Christmas Eve traditions. First, we watch a movie. My brother Reid likes comedies like *Elf*, but my brother Ryker prefers classics like *It's a Wonderful Life*. Then we make treats—caramel popcorn is our favorite. After that, we play card games. Sometimes the cards get sticky because we can't stop eating the popcorn!

Now that you know how to fix faulty coordination, let's try combining sentences in more interesting ways.

Combining Sentences Creatively

We tend to default to the most common English sentence structure: subject, verb, object. And that's okay—we want plenty of those because the reader expects them and understands them easily. Writers also have their unique sentence pattern habits. For example, I love introductory phrases—and I can't resist finishing with a dashy punch (or parenthetical phrase). You should embrace your quirks too, but how do we expand our stylistic repertoire?

Research has proven that practicing combining sentences and imitating the way master writers do so reliably improves your writing style (Graham & Perin, 2007). BYU professors Brian Jackson and Jon Ostenson created [Style Academy](#), which is packed with sentence combining and sentence imitating exercises. In the video, Professor Jackson will show you how to combine sentences. At 5:45, you can try your own paragraph. (I've included the sentences you'll need so you can copy and paste them into your own document).



[Watch on YouTube](#)

<https://youtu.be/C46WGj85ix8>

1.1 This happened in the late 1990s. 1.2 I could no longer see my feet. 1.3 I made an appointment with a Paris eye doctor. 1.4 The doctor ran some tests. 1.5 The doctor sent me off to buy some glasses.

2.1 I'd like to blame my choice of frames on the fact that I couldn't see them clearly.

3.1 I'd like to say they were forced upon me. 3.2 Neither excuse is true.

4.1 I made the selection of my own free will. 4.2 I chose them because I thought they made me look smart. 4.3 I chose them because I thought they made me look international.

5.1 The frames were made of dark plastic. 5.2 The frames had rectangular lenses. 5.3 The lenses were not much larger than my eyes.

6.1 There was something vaguely familiar about them. 6.2 I could not put my finger on what was vaguely familiar about them.

7.1 I spent a great deal of time in front of the mirror. 7.2 This was after I picked them up. 7.3 I pretended to share intelligent comments regarding the state of Europe.

[Show Answer](#)

Answers will vary. Finish the video to see how David Sedaris wrote his paragraph.

You probably noticed you've been combining sentences all your life (that's what revision is). Now you can combine them more mindfully. Imitating an author's sentence structure is more challenging. Professor Jackson will provide a few examples in the video. At 6:00, you can try it yourself. (Again, I've included the models you'll need so you can copy and paste them into your own document).

Once in a while, whenever the mood strikes him, my younger brother Kevin, who isn't the world's most graceful man, and who feels more comfortable either playing violent video games or punching people in the face at the martial arts gym, will get dressed up and go dancing, ballroom dancing in fact, which suggests to me that he's quite comfortable with who he is.

[Watch on YouTube](#)

<https://youtu.be/6wGdmlZg1vM>

If you need content for your sentence, consider writing about your research for this class.

Option 1: Sometimes, according to Edwin Teale, a gall gnat larva, which does not resemble the adult in the least, and which has certainly not mated, nevertheless produces within its body eggs, live eggs, which then hatch within its soft tissue.

Option 2: There is nothing better that students can take home over summer vacation than a sense that what they have learned the previous year has meant they were able, with the help of lots of other people, including that alienated girl with the green hair and that kid who counts on his fingers, and lots and lots of people beyond the walls of the school, to make something important happen, to meet a challenge.

[Show Answer](#)

Answers will vary.

Have you ever noticed how rearranging the furniture can make a room feel completely new? The same goes for sentences, but sometimes we don't rearrange them because revision, like furniture, can be heavy. With practice, the task becomes lighter—maybe more like rearranging flowers.

5.10 Grammar & Mechanics

As a side note before we conclude, things like spelling, grammar, and punctuation (I'll lump them under the terms grammar and mechanics) are also components of style (see [Chapter 4 Grammar and Mechanics](#)). Grammar and mechanics are the lowest level concern, but that doesn't mean you should neglect them. I know they can be annoying—some rules of English make sense; many don't. But anytime we make an error, the reader's attention may be drawn away from the message and dwell on the mistake.

As a comparison, imagine you attend a Hollywood party where celebrities are wearing couture like Armani tuxedos and Dior gowns. You're very impressed with your conversation partner's ensemble—and then you notice a zipper that's not quite, well, zipped. It's hard to ignore. Even though the outfit comes from one of the most prestigious designers on the planet, something's just a little off, a little embarrassing. Don't let that happen to your paper.

Here are two tips for proofreading. First, read the paper aloud. The brain often autocorrects typos when reading silently. You'll also be more accurate if you use a hard copy. Second, read the paper backwards—not directly backwards, but read the last sentence first, then the next-to-last sentence, etc. Reading forward, the mind concentrates on the text's overall meaning and may overlook technicalities like mechanics. As a teacher I really appreciate (and reward!) papers that contain few to no errors, especially in citation. Usually this means the student has managed time well to refine the paper so thoroughly.

5.11 Help Them Hear You

Let's get back to where we started: not boring. Does a 350-page book about pesticides sound not boring to you? Me neither, but that book, *Silent Spring*, has sold more than six million copies in the United States alone since 1962 (Palacio, 2012).

The video below tells the story of the author, or if you prefer the short version, I'll list out her story frame too:



[Watch on YouTube](https://youtu.be/lpbc-6lvMQI)

<https://youtu.be/lpbc-6lvMQI>

Character: Rachel Carson, marine biologist.

Objective: Establish the responsible use of pesticides.

Obstacle: The public doesn't know how dangerous pesticides can be. Many only know the pesticide DDT saved millions of lives during World War II by eradicating malaria-carrying mosquitoes. Apparently, pesticides are the greatest liquid since H₂O (hardly an exaggeration—see 4:56).

Tactic: Inform the public by writing a book.

Of course, many books don't succeed. What made *Silent Spring* different? First, Rachel Carson had the goods. Her book's reference list was fifty pages long (and you thought your bibliography was a pain). One pesticide manufacturer feared Carson's research so much it threatened to sue the *New Yorker* (which published *Silent Spring* serially) for libel unless the final installment of the book was cancelled. The magazine's legal counsel replied, "Everything in those articles has been checked and is true. Go ahead and sue" (Sherman, 2001, p. 53). Do you have that kind of confidence in the quality and quantity of your research? I know it's a high standard for a college paper, but it's a standard that can mobilize the public to solve a problem.

Carson's second success secret was style, of course. She could have started her book with this sentence: *Pesticides are chemicals that kill or repel unwanted organisms*. But she didn't. In fact, I bet you can guess how she did start it.

Read the next paragraph to check your answer:

There was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings. The town lay in the midst of a checkerboard of prosperous farms, with fields of grain and hillsides of orchards where, in spring, white clouds of bloom drifted above the green fields. In autumn, oak and maple and birch set up a blaze of color that flamed and flickered across a backdrop of pines. Then foxes barked in the hills and deer silently crossed the fields, half hidden in the mists of the fall mornings (1).

Yes, she started with a story—woven with gorgeous language, as I’m sure you noticed. The first chapter is even called “A Fable for Tomorrow.” Carson goes on to describe how the town changes: suddenly livestock die off, crops won’t grow, and even humans fall ill. She explains that while this town is fictional, each individual disaster has actually occurred in a community.

While subsequent chapters slide from this literary style to a more general style peppered with academia, the wording stays sharp. Plus, the stories—true ones—stick around (you can read one from the [New Yorker](#)). Carson knew case studies not only hook the reader, they evidence an argument: come for the story; stay for the social change.

The style of *Silent Spring* enchanted me so much, by the time I finished the book, Carson had me easily remembering that endrin is more toxic than dieldrin, that the recommended application of DDT is one pound per acre, and that 100 parts per million of DDD in body tissue is enough to kill birds and fish. And I was a teenage English major.

In response to *Silent Spring*, John F. Kennedy assigned the Presidential Science Advisory Committee to conduct its own studies on pesticides (Michaels, 2003). Twelve of the pesticides Carson deemed most harmful were either more carefully regulated or completely outlawed (“The Powerboat and the Planet,” 1999). Many people credit her as the catalyst of the modern environmental movement.

Like Rachel Carson, you as a scholar have knowledge that would alleviate many of the world’s ills. Make us hear you. Well, I guess we can’t *make* people listen, but a strong style can make it easier—even fun. Even pesticides.

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