

Advanced Writing—Handout 10

Style

What do we mean by style?

Have you ever wondered what your instructors mean when they write "wordy" or "passive voice" or "awkward" in the margins of your paper? Do you sometimes sense that your sentences could be stronger, clearer, shorter, and more effective? Do you often feel that you know what you mean but do not know how to say it? If you often get feedback from your instructors that you need to "tighten your prose" or "look at your word choice," you may need to work on your writing *style*. When you read your writing it may seem perfectly clear, but other people may not be getting your point. If you have checked your grammar, punctuation, and even that handy thesaurus on your word processor and still find a ton of circled words and question marks on your graded paper, you may need to work on your writing **style**--the *way* you put together a sentence or group of sentences.

Part of the problem with style is that it's subjective. Different readers have different ideas about what constitutes good writing style—so do different instructors and different academic departments. For example, passive voice is generally more acceptable in science fields than in the humanities. You may have an instructor who keeps circling items in your paper and noting "word choice" or "awkward" and another who only comments on content. Worse yet, some of what readers identify as writing problems are not technically grammatically incorrect. A sentence can be wordy and still pass all the rules in the grammar handbooks. This fact may make it harder for you to see what's wrong, and it may make you more likely to think that the instructor is picky or out to get you when you read her comments. In fact, the instructor probably just cares about your development as a writer. She wants you to see what she thinks interferes with your argument and learn to express your ideas more directly, elegantly, and persuasively.

Say What You Mean

First, remember that your goal in academic writing is not to *sound* intelligent, but to get your intelligent point across. You may be reading complicated textbooks and articles, and even when they don't make sense to you, they all *sound* smart. So when you have to write a paper, you may try to imitate this type of writing.

But sometimes when you imitate the style, you miss the most important goal--communicating and being understood. Your instructor isn't psychic, and if she can't understand what you are saying, she's going to have trouble giving you credit for it. Remember that the most important goal in every paper is to get your point across as straightforwardly as possible.

Say It in the Appropriate Tone

Beware too of the opposite problem: writing exactly like you speak to your friends over lunch at Lenoir. We've written this pamphlet in a chatty, friendly style, so that you'll read it and think "this isn't such a painful way to learn about style." Ours may not be the appropriate style for an academic paper. Some instructors may think it's okay to say "the Renaissance was a drag" or "the cool thing about the Balkans is..." but most won't. When in doubt, be conservative—and don't think that because a discipline is "arty" or "out there" that they want you to write like that.

This caution doesn't mean you should write all your sentences in a choppy, obvious, "see Jane run" style. It just means that you should make sure that your instructor isn't distracted from *what* you are trying to say by *how* you are saying it.

How to Improve

If you learn how to recognize matters of style in your writing, you will have more control over your writing—the way someone reads your paper will be a result of choices you have made. If those choices are deliberate, you'll have more control over how the reader reacts to your argument. So let's look at the what instructors often perceive as the biggest style "crimes." You probably don't have trouble with all of these, so focus your attention on those issues most relevant to your own writing. First we'll explain some common, style-related writing problems. Then we'll show you some handy tips for finding them, and finally we'll work on correcting them in your revision process. (That's right: at first you may have to include a revision devoted entirely to style in your writing process, at least until you get used to recognizing and correcting these issues as you write.)

Wordiness

This term is used to cover a couple of style problems that involve using more words than you absolutely need to say something. Especially when we talk, we use a lot of little filler words that don't actually have anything to add to the meaning of our sentences (this sentence has several examples--can you find them? Try to take out five words in the previous sentence.). In writing, these filler words and phrases become more obvious and act as delays in getting the reader to the point of your idea. If you have enough delays in your sentence, your readers might get frustrated. They might even start skimming your paper, which seems a shame after all of your efforts to communicate with them.

Your wordiness may derive from a potential problem unrelated to your writing style: uncertainty about your topic, lack of a developed argument, or lack of evidence. If you're not sure what you want or have to say, you may have trouble saying it. As you struggle to find what you mean or play with a vague idea or concept, you may write garbled or rambling sentences. If this happens to you, it doesn't mean that you are a "bad" writer or that you have a "bad" writing style or "bad" ideas. It simply indicates that you are using writing as a way to think--to discover your point. It's okay to let yourself think on the page and write to discover precisely what you mean. Taking thirty minutes (or more) to let yourself write and clarify your point *for yourself* may save you lots of time later. Write to yourself until you can quickly explain to a friend what you are writing about, why you believe it, and what evidence supports your position. Then, sit down to write your paper with your reader in mind. Note: Some writers, in an effort to make a page limit, will be wordy on purpose—this tactic will be obvious to the reader, and most instructors will be less than impressed.

Wordy constructions such as clichés, qualifiers, and redundant pairs are easy to fix, once you recognize your tendency to use them. Read several of your old papers and see if you can **locate** any of these tendencies or consider whether they have become a habit for you in your writing:

- **Clichés**

Although France bit off more than they could chew in Vietnam, America's intervention was too little, too late.

Correct: Clichés stand in for more precise descriptions of something. Slow down and write exactly, precisely what you mean. If you get stuck ask yourself why or how?

- **Lots of qualifiers** (very, often, hopefully, practically, basically, really, mostly)

Democracy is really good for practically everyone, mostly.

Correct: Eliminate these qualifiers and you will have a stronger, more direct point.

- **Two words that mean the same thing**

All our hopes and dreams were fulfilled when Adrian became first and foremost in the public eye after saving the entire planet.

Correct: Choose the most precise term and delete the extra one. Some "wordy" constructions take a little more practice locating and correcting:

- **Overuse of prepositional phrases** (prepositions are little words such as in, over, of, for, at, etc.)

The reason for the failure of the economic system of the island was the inability of Gilligan in finding adequate resources without incurring expenses at the hands of the headhunters on the other side of the island.

Locate this problem by circling all of the prepositional phrases in your paper. A few are okay, but several in a sentence (as demonstrated here) make the reader struggle to find and follow your subject and point. **Correct** this problem by reading the sentence, looking away from it, and writing or saying out loud what you meant when you wrote the sentence. Try asking yourself "Who did what to whom?" Replace the first sentence with your new sentence.

Gilligan hurt the economic system of the island because he couldn't find adequate resources without angering the headhunters on the other side of the island.

- **Stock phrases you can replace with one or two words.**

The fact that I did not like the aliens affected our working relationship.

The aliens must be addressed in a professional manner.

Locate this problem as you do clichés. Is this just something people say? What do the words actually mean? **Correct** this problem by looking for a single word that expresses your meaning.

These sentences make just as much sense if you write them as follows:

My dislike of the aliens affected our working relationship.

The aliens must be addressed professionally.

Here's a list of common or stock phrases to **locate** in your paper and **replace** with a single word (see Joseph M. Williams, *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, pp 93-97):

The reason for

For the reason that

Due to the fact that

Owing to the fact that

In light of the fact that

Considering the fact that

On the grounds that

because, since, why

Despite the fact that

Regardless of the fact that

although, even
though

In the event that

If it should happen that

Under circumstances in
which

if

On the occasion of

In a situation in which

Under circumstances in
which

when

As regards
In reference to
With regard to
Concerning the matter of
Where ___ is concerned

about

It is crucial that
It is necessary that
There is a need/necessity for
It is important that

must, should

Is able to
Is in a position to
Has the opportunity 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

before, when, as,
after

Simultaneously with

Not different	similar
Not many	few
Not have	lack
Not include	omit
Not consider	ignore
Not the same	different
Not often	rarely
Not allow	prevent
Not admit	deny
Not accept	reject

Verb Trouble

Nouns (person, place, thing, or concept) and verbs (words that describe an action or state of being) are the hearts and souls of all sentences. These become the essential elements--what your grammar teacher may have called the "subject" and the "predicate" or the "actor" and "action" of every sentence. The reader should be able to clearly locate the main subject and verb of your sentences and, ideally, the subject and verb should be close together in the sentence. Some style "crimes" are varied symptoms of one problem: the subjects and verbs or the actor and action of your sentence are hiding from the reader. Again, the reader has trouble following "who is doing what to whom." Instructors may write comments like "passive voice" or "weak verbs" in your paper's margins. While using passive voice or weak verbs is grammatically correct, they may make the reader work too hard to decipher your meaning. Use passive voice and weak verbs strategically once you get the hang of them. If you're still struggling to figure out what they are, you need to aim for "active voice" and "strong verbs" to improve your writing.

Passive Voice—when you hide the actor by putting it somewhere after the action (not in the usual subject part of the sentence) and add a "to be" verb you are using passive voice. Some general examples below:

The alien remains were lost by the government.

You may even get rid of the actor entirely:

The alien remains were lost.

The car was wrecked.

Locate passive voice in your papers by circling every "to be" verb (am, is, are, was, were, be, been, being) in your paper. Not all of these verbs will indicate a passive construction or one you want to change, but if the "to be" verb is sitting next to another verb, especially one that ends in "ed," ("was lost", "was wrecked") then you are probably using passive voice. If you have trouble finding "to be verbs," try finding the subject, verb, and object in each sentence. Can the reader tell who or what is doing the action in your sentence?

Correct passive constructions by putting that actor back in the subject of the sentence and getting rid of the "to be" verb. Note that you have to add information in the sentence; you have to specify *who* in your sentence and thereby keep the reader from guessing--that's good:

The government lost the alien remains.

My sister wrecked the car.

Nominalization—a fancy term for making verbs and adjectives into nouns. Again, sometimes you *want* to do this. But too much nominalization in a paper can *sound* abstract and make the reader work to decipher your meaning. (Professional academic writing often has a lot of nominalization--that's why you may struggle with some of your assigned reading in your courses!)

The discovery of the aliens was made by the government.

The car wreck was a result of a lack of visual focus.

Locate nominalization in your papers by circling all of the nouns. Do you have several in a single sentence? You might be hiding the action (the verb) of your sentence inside of a noun. **Correct** nominalization by returning the abstract noun to

its function as verb or adjective. This will take practice—focus on making the sentence simpler in structure (actor □ action):

The government discovered the aliens.

My sister wrecked the car when she forgot to wear her glasses.

Also, look for sentences that begin with the following phrases: there is/this is/that is. Sometimes you need these phrases to refer to an immediately preceding sentence without repeating yourself, but they may be hiding nominalizations.

There is a need for further study of aliens.

Again, circle them in your paper and try omitting them from the sentence. Who is doing what to whom?

We need to study aliens further.

Weak verbs—if you have located and corrected passive voice and nominalization problems in your essay, but your sentences still seem to lack meaning or directness, look for "weak" verbs. Verbs such as "to be" verbs and "have" verbs can often be replaced by "strong" verbs, verbs that carry specific meaning. Concentrate on what the subject of your sentence *does* and make that the verb in the sentence.

The aliens have a positive effect on our ecosystem.

Locate weak verbs by circling all of the "to be" and "have" verbs in your paper. **Correct** weak verbs by omitting them and replacing them with a more meaningful verb. Notice that you will need to add information as you specify the nature of the action. Answer the question: "What does the subject really *do*?"

The aliens improve our ecosystem.

Ostentatious Erudition

You may be inclined to improve your style by sounding more "collegiate" or by using multi-syllabic words. Don't ever do so without looking up those words to make sure you know exactly what they mean. And don't accept the recommendations of your word processing program's thesaurus--these tools may be dangerous unless you double-check the meaning of the words *in a dictionary*. Many times, an inappropriate synonym will make you sound like you don't know what you are talking about or, worse yet, give the impression that you are plagiarizing from

a source you don't understand. Never use a word you can't clearly define. It's okay to use big words if you know them well and they fit your overall tone—just make sure your tone is consistent. In other words, don't say "That miscreant has a superlative aesthetic sense, but he's dopey."

You may use overly "erudite" words because you think it is wrong to use the same words over and over again in an essay. In fact, it's often okay to repeat the same word(s) in your paper, particularly when they are significant or central terms. For example, if your paper discusses the significance of memory represented by the scent of wisteria in William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom, you are going to write the words "memory" and "wisteria" a lot. Don't start saying "recollection", "reminiscence", "summoning up of past events", and "climbing woody vine" just to get a little variation in there. A thesaurus might even lead you to say that the significance of nostalgia is represented by the odiferous output of parasitic flowering vegetation. Such sentences may cloud rather than clarify your point.

Now You Are Ready to Edit

You are probably not guilty of every style "crime" in this pamphlet. If you consistently struggle with one of these issues, focus your attention on that one. If you struggle with two or more, work on one at a time. If you try to fix all of them at once, you may find your approach too scattered or the task just plain overwhelming. You may also find that you use different styles for different assignments, with different responses from instructors. Whatever the case, the next time you finish a paper, take that one issue and isolate it. Edit your paper using our "locate & correct" suggestions for that one issue. Ignore everything else (spelling, punctuation, content) and look for only that one issue. This strategy may sound time consuming, but by isolating your style problems, you will find them easier to locate and correct. As you become more proficient, you will include fewer and fewer examples in your initial draft writing, and therefore your draft will need less editing. In the end, you will be a better writer—so what are a few minutes now?