

How to Write Clear, Concise, and Direct Sentences

1. **Unless you have a reason not to, use the active voice.**

At the heart of every good sentence is a strong, precise verb; the converse is true as well--at the core of most confusing, awkward, or wordy sentences lies a weak verb.

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

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

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

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

There are sometimes good reasons to use the passive voice:

- To emphasize the action rather than the actor.

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

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

Example: The data processing department recently presented what proved to be a controversial proposal to expand its staff. After long debate, the proposal was endorsed by . . .

- To be tactful by not naming the actor.

Example: The procedures were somehow misinterpreted.

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

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

- To create an authoritative tone.

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

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

Incorrect: An evaluation **tion** of the procedures needs to be done.

Correct: The procedures need to be evaluated.

Correct: We need to evaluate the procedures.

Incorrect: The stability and quality of our financial performance will be developed through the profitable execution **tion** of our existing business, as well as the acquisition **tion** or development **ment** of new businesses.

Correct: We will improve our financial performance not only by executing our existing business more profitably but by acquiring or developing new businesses.

3. Reduce wordy verbs.

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

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

Incorrect: It was her last argument that finally persuaded me.
Correct: Her last argument finally persuaded me.

Incorrect: There are likely to be many researchers raising questions about this methodological approach.
Correct: Many researchers are likely to raise questions about this methodological approach.

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

--*factor, aspect, area, situation, consideration, degree, case . . .*
Incorrect: Consumer demand is rising in the area of services.
Correct: Consumer demand for services is rising.
Correct: Consumers are demanding more services.

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

- 1: patient program satisfaction
- 2: student-professor relationship factors
- 3: processing step change
- 4: competitive cotto salami performance test
- 5: program implementation process evaluation

- 6: MHS has a hospital employee relations improvement program.
- 7: MHS has a program to improve employee relations.
- 8: MHS has a program to improve relations among employees.

7. Eliminate unnecessary prepositional phrases.

Incorrect: The opinion of the working group.
Correct: The working group's opinion.

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

8. Avoid unnecessarily inflated words.

Instead of
cognizant of
facilitate

Use
aware of, know
help

impact on
implement
subsequent to
utilize

affect
start, create, carry out, begin
after
use

9. Put wordy phrases on a diet.*

Instead of

the reason for
for the reason that
due to the fact that
owing to the fact that
considering the fact that
on the grounds that
this is why

despite the fact that
regardless of the fact that

in the event that
if it should transpire/happen that
under circumstances in which

on the occasion of
in a situation in which
under circumstances in which

as regards
in reference to
with regard to
concerning the matter of
where . . . is concerned

it is crucial that
it is necessary that
there is a need/necessity
it is important that
it is incumbent upon
cannot be avoided

is able to
has the opportunity to
is in a position to
has the capacity for
has the ability to

it is possible that
there is a chance that
it could happen that
the possibility exists for

Use

because, since, why

although, even though

if

when

about

must, should

can

may, might, can, could

prior to
in anticipation of
subsequent to
following on
at the same time as
simultaneously with

before, after, as

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