

# Writing with Style Basic Tips

Effective writing captures and keeps the reader's interest. Paying attention to stylistic elements like word choice, punctuation, sentence structure, and coherence can bring polish and clarity to your writing.

## WORD CHOICE

Word choice is important to clear and effective writing. The following techniques strengthen word choice:

### SELECT STRONG NOUNS AND VERBS

- ◀ Use strong nouns and verbs that keep adjectives to a minimum and give more exact meaning to your words.
  - LESS EFFECTIVE: He got out of bed **quickly** and **agilely**.
  - MORE EFFECTIVE: He **sprung** out of bed.
- ◀ Avoid noun and verb strings.
  - LESS EFFECTIVE: She had a **childhood respiration inflammation condition**.
  - MORE EFFECTIVE: As a child, she had **respiratory inflammation**.
- ◀ Avoid overusing pronouns.
  - LESS EFFECTIVE: **He** looked sad and lonely, and **he** knew **his** face reflected **his** feelings.
  - MORE EFFECTIVE: **He** looked sad and lonely, and Doug knew **his** face reflected depression.
- ◀ Avoid vague verbs. Instead, use descriptive verbs.
  - LESS EFFECTIVE: He **went** to the lake.
  - MORE EFFECTIVE: He **hiked** to the lake.

### KEEP IT CONCISE

Wordy and redundant writing makes it easy for your reader to get lost and miss your point.

- ◀ Avoid unnecessary detail and relative clauses that begin with *who*, *that*, or *which*.
  - EXAMPLE: The doctor, **who was in a hurry**, rushed out the door. (*Rushed* tells us he was in a hurry, so the relative clause is unnecessary.)

### AVOID NOMINALIZATION

Nominalization transforms verbs and adjectives into nouns. Give the action back to the verb.

- LESS EFFECTIVE: My parents **have an expectation** that I will attend Harvard.
- MORE EFFECTIVE: My parents **expect** me to attend Harvard

### AVOID CLICHÉS

A cliché is an overused phrase or expression that makes your writing feel unimaginative.

- EXAMPLE: The paper assignment really **separated the men from the boys**.

### SHOW; DON'T TELL

Effective writing *shows* the reader essential information using description, active voice, and concrete word choice. Less effective writing *tells* readers what they need to know.

- LESS EFFECTIVE: She started to become extremely afraid. (telling)
- MORE EFFECTIVE: Her heart began to pound, and her legs trembled as she wiped her sticky palms back and forth on her pants. (showing)

### KNOW WHEN TO USE "I"

"I" is not traditionally used in formal papers; however, there are certain guidelines to determine when it is appropriate.

- ◀ To refer to yourself, use "I" instead of "the writer" or "this author."
- ◀ To maintain a third-person viewpoint, use "one" instead of "I" or "you" or "a person."

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## PUNCTUATION

Appropriate punctuation emphasizes important ideas and helps your sentences flow. As a general rule, a series of sentences the same length gives your paper a repetitive rhythm, so use the following punctuation to add variety to your sentence structure.

### SEMICOLON

Use a semicolon to join two complete sentences that are closely related. Semicolons signal to your reader that the information in both sentences should be taken together.

EXAMPLE: I go to the movies often; it gives me something to do on the weekends.

### COLON

A colon at the end of an independent clause introduces an example or expansion of what you have said.

EXAMPLE: Education prepares you for the future: it provides the knowledge you need to succeed.

### DASHES

Dashes isolate phrases for emphasis, humorous effect, or a break in thought.

EXAMPLE: My dad sleeps in – or hibernates – every Saturday.

### EXCLAMATION POINT

Only use an exclamation point after true exclamations, demands, or shouting. Overuse will make them ineffective, and make your sentences difficult to read.

LESS EFFECTIVE: Monet was the most influential painter of his time! (*Most emphasizes influential painter; therefore, an exclamation point is not needed.*)

MORE EFFECTIVE: Monet was the most influential painter of his time.

## SENTENCE STRUCTURE

The way you organize sentence elements determines emphasis and aids readability.

### CHOOSE ACTIVE VERSUS PASSIVE VOICE

In most cases, active voice engages the reader better than passive voice. It is more concise and forceful.

ACTIVE: The baseball player **strikes** the ball with his bat.

PASSIVE: The ball **is struck** by the baseball player with his bat.

### KEEP ITEMS PARALLEL

List items (two or more) in the same grammatical form.

LESS EFFECTIVE: Sarah does not like **hot milk** or **water that is cold**.

MORE EFFECTIVE: Sarah does not like **hot milk** or **cold water**.

## COHERENCE

### USE EFFECTIVE TRANSITIONS

Transitions are words, phrases, or sentences that connect each paragraph to the next. This can be accomplished by introducing the next paragraph's idea at the end of the first, or by using words such as *next*, *also*, and *first*, *second*, *third*. Repeating keywords throughout the paper also provides cohesion to your prose.

### READ IT ALOUD

Reading aloud to yourself, or having someone read aloud for you, helps you to get a feel for how your writing sounds to the reader. An additional reader can also identify areas needing further explanation.