

Writing with Style: Basic Tips

Note: This document should only be used as a reference and should not replace assignment guidelines.

Effective writing captures and keeps the reader's interest. Paying attention to word choice, punctuation, and sentence structure can clarify your writing. Reading aloud to yourself is one of the best ways to get a sense of how your writing sounds to the reader. Another reader or listener can also point out areas that could be revised.

Word Choice

Select Strong Verbs

Use strong verbs that keep adjectives to a minimum and give exact meaning to your words.

WEAK: He got out of bed **quickly** and **agilely**.

STRONG: He **sprang** out of bed.

WEAK: He **went** to the lake.

STRONG: He **hiked** to the lake.

WEAK: My parents **have an expectation** that I will graduate in four years.

STRONG: My parents **expect** me to graduate in four years.

Avoid Overusing Pronouns

Consolidate your writing by cutting down strings of pronouns.

WEAK: **He** looked sad and lonely, and **he** knew **his** expression reflected **his** feelings.

STRONG: Doug knew **his** sad and lonely expression reflected depression.

Keep It Concise

Avoid unnecessary detail and relative clauses that begin with *who*, *that*, or *which*.

WEAK: 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.)

STRONG: The doctor rushed out the door.

Avoid Clichés

Overused expressions prevent your writing from sounding original.

WEAK: A picture is worth a thousand words.

STRONG: A range of emotions welled up inside me when I saw the photograph, an experience language can't describe.

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.

TELLING: She started to become extremely afraid.

SHOWING: Her heart began to pound and her legs trembled as she tried to dry her sticky palms by wiping them on her pants.

Know When to Use "I"

Some instructors encourage the use of "I" in formal papers and some prefer that you never use it.

- Generally, you might choose to use "I" to differentiate your argument from that of your sources.
- Some disciplines use "the writer" or "the researcher" to avoid first person.
- To assert a third-person viewpoint, use "one" or "many" instead of "I," "you," or "a person."
- Don't overuse phrases such as "I think" and "I believe" because it may reduce your credibility.

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Punctuation

Appropriate punctuation emphasizes and clarifies your ideas. Generally, a series of sentences of the same length creates a repetitive rhythm; punctuation can add variety to your sentence structure.

Semicolon

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 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

Exclamation points are rarely used in academic writing and are generally reserved for exclamations, demands, or shouting in quoted dialogue.

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

STRONG: Monet was the most influential painter of his time.

Sentence Structure

Your sentence organization determines emphasis and readability.

Choose Active Voice

In most cases, active voice engages the reader more than passive voice.

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

ACTIVE: The baseball player **strikes** the ball.

Keep Items Parallel

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

NOT PARALLEL: Sarah does not like **hot milk** or **water that is cold**.

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

NOT PARALLEL: The author discusses the need **for closer supervision, for additional training,** and **employees should feel comfortable** approaching supervisors.

PARALLEL: The author discusses the need **for closer supervision, for additional training,** and **for supervisors to make** their employees comfortable in approaching them.

Transitions

Transitions are words or phrases that connect one sentence or paragraph to the next. You can transition by introducing the next paragraph's idea at the end of the first, beginning a new paragraph with a connection to the last, or by using words such as *next*, *also*, *additionally*, *in contrast*, *however*, and *first*, *second*, *third*. (See the Transitions handout for further information.)