



Improving Sentence Clarity

Strategy 1: Use Active Voice.

Sentences in active voice are usually easier to understand than those in passive voice because active-voice constructions clearly indicate who performs the action expressed by the verb. In addition, changing from passive to active voice often results in a more concise sentence.

- **Passive (more wordy):** My car *is borrowed* every Saturday by Gina.
- **Active (clear and direct):** Gina borrows my car every Saturday.

Strategy 2: Use Parallel Constructions.

When you have a series of words, phrases, or clauses, put them in parallel form (similar grammatical construction) so the reader can easily identify the linking relationship between the items in the series.

- **Not Parallel (awkward):** In areas threatened by hurricanes, it is important to become aware of the warning signs, there are precautions to take, and deciding when to take shelter is important.
- **Parallel (clear):** In areas threatened by hurricanes, it is important *to become* aware of the warning signs, *to know* what precautions to take, and *to decide* when to seek shelter.

In the first sentence, notice how the series of advice regarding hurricanes does not create a parallel structure. Also, notice how much more difficult it is for a reader to follow the meaning of the first sentence compared to the second one.

Strategy 3: Choose Action Verbs Over Forms of *Be*.

When possible, avoid using forms of *be* as the main verbs in your sentences and clauses. Instead of using *be* verbs, choose descriptive verbs that convey the specific actions you wish to express.

For the same reasons, avoid overuse of other nonspecific verbs like, *do*, *make*, and *have*.

- **Overuse of *be* verbs (wordy):** One difference between television news reporting and the coverage provided by newspapers *is* the time factor between the actual happening of an event and the time it takes to be reported. The problem *is* that instantaneous coverage *is* physically impossible for newspapers.
- **Use of action verbs (concise):** Television news reporting *differs* from that of newspapers in that television, unlike newspapers, *provides* instantaneous coverage of events as they happen.

Strategy 4: Avoid Unclear Pronoun References.

Be sure the pronouns you use clearly refer to a noun in the current or previous sentence. If the pronoun refers to a noun that has been implied but not stated, you can clarify the reference by explicitly using that noun.

- **Unclear pronoun reference:** American universities are tightening budgets by hiring temporary contract employees as teachers instead of hiring new, full-time faculty. This has prompted them to join unions as a way of protecting job security and benefits.
- **Clear pronoun reference:** American universities are tightening budgets by hiring temporary contract employees as teachers instead of hiring new, full-time faculty. This trend has prompted many full-time faculty members to join

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(continued) unions as a way of protecting job security and benefits.

Strategy 5: **Avoid Shifts in Person.**

An unintentional shift in person is a common flaw in student writing and should be avoided. To avoid shifts in person, decide whom you will be referencing in your paper, whether it is first person (I, we), second person (you), or third person (he/she, they, a student, the government, etc.) and stay consistent.

- **Awkward (shift of person):** *Students* who come to college as freshmen must make many new choices, and sometimes *you* get confused.
- **Clearer (consistent use of person):** *Students* who come to college as freshmen must make many new choices, and sometimes *they* get confused.

Strategy 6: **Be Careful about Placement of Interrupting Material.**

Avoid interrupting the main clause with additional information if the interruption will cause confusion.

- **Awkward (additional information embedded in the middle):** Industrial spying, *because of the growing use of computers to store and process corporate information,* is increasing rapidly.
- **Clearer (additional information at the end):** Industrial spying is increasing rapidly *because of the growing use of computers to store and process corporate information.*
- **Clearer (additional information at the beginning):** *Because of the growing use of computers to store and process corporate information,* industrial spying is increasing rapidly.

Strategy 7: **Avoid Noun Strings.**

Nouns that are strung one after the other often make sentences difficult to understand. One way to revise a string of nouns is to change one noun to a verb.

- **Awkward (string of nouns):** This report explains our *investment growth stimulation projects.*
- **Clearer:** This report explains our *projects to stimulate growth in investments.*

Strategy 8: **Avoid Multiple Negatives.**

Use affirmative forms rather than several negatives because multiple negatives are difficult to understand.

- **Unclear (multiple negatives, passive):** *Less* attention is paid to commercials that *lack* human-interest stories than to other kinds of commercials.
- **Clearer:** People pay *more* attention to commercials with human-interest stories than to other kinds of commercials.

Strategy 9: **Avoid Overusing Noun Forms of Verbs.**

Use verbs when possible rather than the noun forms of those verbs.

- **Unclear:** The *implementation* of the plan was successful.
- **Clearer:** The plan was *implemented* successfully. Or: We *implemented* the plan successfully.

*This handout was adapted with permission from a similar one used by Columbia College's Academic Achievement Center.