

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

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

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

Active d. 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.
 - e. After long debate, the proposal was endorsed by the long-range planning committee.
- To keep the subject and focus consistent throughout a passage.
 - f. 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.
 - g. The procedures were somehow misinterpreted.
- To describe a condition in which the actor is unknown or unimportant.
 - h. Every year, thousands of people are diagnosed as having cancer.
- To create an authoritative tone.
 - i. 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*).

- a. An evaluation of the procedures needs to be done.
- b. The procedures need to be evaluated.
- c. We need to evaluate the procedures.
- d. The stability and quality of our financial performance will be developed through the profitable execution of our existing business, as well as the acquisition or development of new businesses.
- e. 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.

- a. It was her last argument that finally persuaded me.
- b. Her last argument finally persuaded me.
- c. There are likely to be many researchers raising questions about this methodological approach.
- d. 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 . . .

- a. Consumer demand is rising in the area of services.
- b. Consumer demand for services is rising.
- c. Consumers are demanding more services.

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

- a. patient program satisfaction
- b. student-professor relationship factors
- c. processing step change
- d. competitive cotto salami performance test
- e. program implementation process evaluation

- f. MHS has a hospital employee relations improvement program.
- g. MHS has a program to improve employee relations.
- h. MHS has a program to improve relations among employees.

7. Eliminate unnecessary prepositional phrases.

- a. The opinion of the working group.
- b. The working group's opinion.

- c. 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	Use
cognizant of	aware of, know
facilitate	help
impact on	affect
implement	start, create, carry out, begin
subsequent to	after
utilize	use

9. Put wordy phrases on a diet.*

Instead of	Use
the reason for	
for the reason that	
due to the fact that	
owing to the fact that	because, since, why
considering the fact that	
on the grounds that	
this is why	
despite the fact that	
regardless of the fact that	although, even though
in the event that	
if it should transpire/happen that	if
under circumstances in which	

<i>Instead of</i>	<i>Use</i>
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 it is important that it is incumbent upon cannot be avoided	must, should
is able to has the opportunity to is in a position 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 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.