



TEN TIPS FOR WRITING WITH STYLE

Tip 1: Prefer active voice verbs to passive voice verbs.

In active voice sentences the subject of the sentence performs the action of the verb. “*The car (subject) hit (active voice verb) the dog.*” In the passive voice, the subject instead receives another’s action. “*The dog (now the subject) was hit (passive voice verb)*”; the phrase “*by the car*” may be expressed explicitly or just implied.

Although the conventions of prose style change, American academic readers usually prefer active voice verbs. Readers like to know who did what to whom. When you write, use active voice verbs to increase the clarity of sentences. However, in certain instances the use of passive voice verbs is perfectly appropriate: when you don’t know (or don’t want to reveal) who or what took an action, or in science lab reports in which what matters is not *who* took an action, but *what* action was taken.

Use vigorous transitive verbs instead of weaker linking ones. Rather than writing, “*She is the representative of the insurance company,*” you might instead write, “*She represents the insurance company.*”

Tip 2: Pay attention to tense.

Don’t change verb tenses arbitrarily or illogically. Use past tense to narrate past events, especially in history papers. Use present tense to state general truths or habitual actions. Also use present to write about the themes, plot events, or authorial intentions of literary works.

Tip 3: Avoid the unidentified flying “this.”

Don’t begin sentences with a pronoun that has no clear referent. “*The plant fell off the window ledge. This meant the aliens had finally arrived*” would be clearer if you wrote “*this occurrence meant the aliens had finally arrived.*” You can clarify what *this* refers to by looking at your previous sentence (see tip #7). Similarly, don’t use *there are* or *it is* as your subject at the beginnings of sentences; these constructions conceal the real subject of the sentence and can confuse the reader. Instead of writing “*There are many students involved in campus government,*” you could write “*Many students work in campus government.*”

Tip 4: Write concisely.

Avoid wordiness, redundancy, and unnecessary qualifiers in your writing. Instead of writing, “*The reason that Wilson’s opposition to the proposed Republican amendments to the treaty was so stalwart and resolute was the fact that he realized that if these amendments were passed, a good number of the significantly important provisions of the treaty would be fundamentally null and void,*” it might be better to write, “*Wilson resolutely opposed the Republican amendments to the treaty because he realized their passage would vitiate a number of its important provisions.*”

Tip 5: Vitalize your sentences with careful choice of words.

You’ll increase your reader’s interest by using specific nouns and modifiers. Choose words that evoke a picture in the mind’s eye: *a frosty March morning* as opposed to *a cold spring day*, for example.

Make abstract nouns more meaningful by supplying a concrete example of what you mean. “*Grinnell College has always been in the vanguard of social protest*” might better read “*Students at Grinnell College have protested everything from slavery in the 1860’s to women’s inequality in the 1970’s to the decimation of rain forests in the 1990’s.*”

Avoid colloquial, conversational or slang terms such as *hugely, fantastic, incredible, awesome*, and clichéd phrases, such as “*Last but not least,*” “*When all is said and done,*” “*It is worth mentioning that. . .*” Such phrases make your prose sound tired and are not appropriate in academic writing.

Tip 6: Vary sentence structure.

Too many simple sentences can sound choppy and immature. You can combine two or more logically related thoughts into a single sentence by using a coordinating conjunction (*for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*). For example, “*Henry VIII wanted Thomas More’s endorsement, for More was the most well-respected man in town.*” Or you could use a semicolon to connect thoughts in an elegantly simple way. “*Henry brutalized More; still More refused to give in.*” The choice is often a matter of taste.

You can also combine sentences by subordinating a less important idea to the main one, which helps to emphasize the main point. “*Although the students studied until the wee hours of the morning, they could not understand quantum theory.*” Other subordinating conjunctions include *but* and are not limited to *after, as, because, if, unless, while*. Another way to subordinate is to put less important information in a relative clause (introduced by a relative pronoun *that, which, who, whom, whose*). “*Charles Lindbergh, whose baby was kidnapped in 1927, was a Nazi party sympathizer.*”

Try mixing up sentence constructions, by inverting the natural order of a sentence or by following a relatively complex phrase with a short pithy one.

Tip 7: Use transitions to ease your reader's way.

Syntactic (wording) and lexical (structural) clues help to clarify the relationships among ideas in your writing.

Syntactic signals include words indicating time (*before, subsequently, as soon as*); space (*above, nearby, beyond*); number (*first, less powerful, equally significant*); cause/effect (*because, as a result, accordingly*); comparison/contrast (*in addition, similarly, rather*); general/specific (*such as, to illustrate, that is*).

Lexical signals include the repetition of words or related words, the repetition of grammatical structures, or the use of pronouns that link back to nouns.

Tip 8: “Tag” your quotations.

Make quotes part of a larger sentence of your own. That is, make the point yourself and have the quoted source support it. For example: “*In The Media Lab, Stewart Brand describes the control exerted by watchdog agencies over modern telecommunications: “The human communication environment has...activists monitoring it.”*”

Tip 9: Prefer to keep subjects and verbs close.

Sometimes the verb is so far from the subject that by the time the reader has gotten to it, she has forgotten what the sentence is about. A sentence like “*The genetic variation in plants and animals that grow on the south side of Grinnell between Arbor Lake and East Street reveals interference by extraterrestrial beings*” might better read “*Interference by extraterrestrial beings accounts for the genetic variation...*”

Tip 10: Have fun!

Free write; keep a journal; turn off your inner editor; take a break; doodle; visualize a reader as a warm, furry teddy bear; write every day; laugh at yourself; find a writing partner; take one sentence and write it in six different styles; create wacky metaphors; muck about with words; experiment, get excited! Writing can be great fun!