

Quick Tips for Clearer Writing

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Word Choice

- Use the active voice.
Less clear: It *is believed* by the candidate that that this law must *be passed* by Congress.
Clearer: The candidate believes that Congress must pass this law.
- Avoid unnecessary and excessive use of forms of the verb “to be” by using more active verbs.
Less clear: 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 until it *is* reported. The problem *is* that instantaneous coverage *is* physically impossible for newspapers.
Clearer: Television news reporting differs from that of newspapers in that television, unlike newspapers, can provide instantaneous coverage of events as they happen.
- Use words that are familiar to your audience. For example, you should generally avoid professional jargon when addressing readers who may not work in your field. You will rarely benefit from using a “fancy” word if there is a more straightforward alternative. Even if your audience is familiar with the rarer word, they will more quickly and easily comprehend its simpler, more commonly used counterpart.
- Use words that are familiar to you. If you absolutely *must* use a word and aren’t completely sure what it means or how to use it, look it up in a dictionary or ask a trusted source (for example, a tutor at the Reading and Writing Center or a librarian) so you can be confident that your writing accurately conveys your meaning.
- Be specific and descriptive. Use the words that most precisely convey your meaning.
Less clear: One of the plants doesn’t need sun.
Clearer: *Chlorophytum comosum* thrives in indirect sunlight.
- When possible, use verbs instead of their noun forms (aka “nominalizations”).
Less clear: The *implementation* of the plan was successful.
Clearer: We implemented the plan successfully.

Clear Sentences

- Be as concise as possible. Avoid repetition.
Less clear: When originally built in *the year 1912*, the building was *round in shape*.
Clearer: When originally built in 1912, the building was round.
- Pay close attention to commas, because they can easily change the meaning of a sentence.
Less clear: Most of the time travelers carry their own luggage.
Clearer: Most of the time, travelers carry their own luggage.
- Subordinate clauses placed in the middle of a sentence can make the sentence less clear. When possible, use subordinate clauses at the beginning or end of a sentence.
Less clear: Industrial spying, because of the growing use of computers to store and process corporate information, is increasing rapidly.
Clearer: Because of the growing use of computers to store and process corporate information, industrial spying is increasing rapidly.

- Make sure any pronouns refer clearly to a noun in the current or previous sentence. The antecedent should be explicitly stated rather than implied.

Less clear: When the cat gave birth, the family chose one to keep.

Clearer: When the cat gave birth to her kittens, the family chose one to keep.

Less clear: When I hit the door with my arm, I broke it.

Clearer: I broke my arm when I hit the door with it. **or** I broke the door when I hit it with my arm.

- If possible, avoid using multiple negatives.

Less clear: Your audience will not appreciate details that lack relevance.

Clearer: Your audience will appreciate only relevant details.

- Break up long strings of nouns. Changing one of the nouns to a verb can make your meaning clearer.

Less clear: This report explains our **investment growth stimulation projects**.

Clearer: This report explains our projects to stimulate growth in investments.

Cohesive Paragraphs

- Every paragraph should contain a topic sentence that clearly explains the purpose of the paragraph. Other sentences in the paragraph should explain, describe, or justify the claim made in the topic sentence. Outlining your essay before you write can help you adhere to this “one paragraph, one idea” rule of thumb.

- Use transition words at the beginning of a sentence to help your reader understand how one idea connects to the next.

Example Transitions: Before, After, During, While, Until, Above, Below, Inside, As a result, Because, Since, As, Likewise, Similarly, Although, However, On the other hand

- Move from old ideas to new ideas to create a logical flow of information.

Less clear: Library Science 101 is a valuable course for college students. Focusing a research question, selecting appropriate keywords, finding and evaluating sources, and formatting citations (**new**) are some of the skills students learn in this course (**old**). Future success in college (**new**) is dependent upon these skills (**old**).

Clearer: Library Science 101 is a valuable course for college students. In this course (**old**), students learn how to focus a research question, select appropriate keywords, find and evaluate sources, and format citations (**new**). These skills (**old**) are necessary for future success in college (**new**).

- Paragraphs should be fully developed. A paragraph of only 2 or 3 sentences rarely gives enough information to persuade your audience or adequately explain your point. Add examples, statistics, definitions, comparisons, and quotes from credible sources to make your paragraph more persuasive or descriptive.

Organized Essays

- Know your purpose. If you aren't sure of your goal, your reader won't be either.
- Outlining your essay before you write can help ensure that your ideas are sufficiently developed and arranged logically throughout your paper. Pick up our “**Outlining an Essay**” **handout** for more details.
- Leave plenty of time for revisions. Thorough revision takes much more time than writing a first draft.
- Use images, charts, or diagrams when you need to present large quantities of data concisely.
- For one on one help with writing and revision, visit the **Reading and Writing Center** online at <https://elacreadingwritingcenter.org/> or in person at **E3-220**.