

Ten Principles for Writing Clearly

1. Distinguish real grammatical rules from folklore.
2. Use subjects to name the characters in your story.
3. Use verbs to name their important actions.
4. Open your sentences with familiar units of information.
5. Begin sentences constituting a passage with consistent topic/subjects.
6. Get to the main verb quickly:
 - Avoid long introductory phrases and clauses.
 - Avoid long abstract subjects.
 - Avoid interrupting the subject-verb connection.
7. Push new, complex units of information to the end of the sentence.
8. Be concise:
 - Cut meaningless and repeated words and obvious implications.
 - Put the meaning of phrases into one or two words.
 - Prefer affirmative sentences to negative ones.
9. Control sprawl.
 - Don't tack more than one subordinate clause onto another.
 - Extend a sentence with resumptive, summative, and free modifiers.
 - Extend a sentence with coordinate structures after verbs.
10. Above all, write to others as you would have others write to you.

STYLE

The Basics of Clarity and Grace

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more reliable tests focusing on genetic clues. The accuracy of these new tests could psychologically devastate an apparently healthy person.

If the point of that paragraph is how an early diagnosis of Alzheimer's could damage an otherwise healthy person, we are misled by the opening sentence. It sounds as if we are going to read nothing but good in early and better diagnosis, but that turns out not to be the case.

A last suggestion: When you write a title for your piece, use words that state the key themes. Those words should also be in your point sentence. Do the same thing if your paper is long enough to have section headings: Create them out of the words you use in the point sentence for each section.

Here's the point: Every paragraph, section, and whole in a piece of writing has to have a point that the rest supports, explains, or develops. State it at the end of a short segment introducing that paragraph, section, or whole.

Concision

To a Snail: If "compression is the first grace of style," you have it.

—MARIANNE MOORE

CLARITY, GRACE, AND CONCISION

You are close to clarity when you match characters and actions to subjects and verbs, and closer yet when you get the right characters into topics and the right words under stress. But your readers may still think your prose is a long way from graceful if it looks like this:

In my personal opinion, it is necessary that we should not ignore the opportunity to think over each and every suggestion offered.

That writer matched characters with subjects, and actions with verbs, but in too many words: Opinion is personal, so we don't need *personal*, and since this whole statement is opinion, we don't need *in my opinion*. *Think over* means *consider*. *Each and every* is redundant. A suggestion is by definition offered, and *not ignore* means *consider*. In other, fewer, words,

✓ We should consider each suggestion.

Though not elegant, that sentence has at least style's first grace—that of compression, or as we'll call it, concision. Concision, though, is only a good beginning. We must still make our

sentences shapely. In this lesson, we focus on concision; in the next, on shape.

FIVE PRINCIPLES OF CONCISION

When I edited that sentence about suggestions, I applied five principles:

1. Delete words that mean little or nothing.
2. Delete words that repeat the meaning of other words.
3. Delete words implied by other words.
4. Replace a phrase with a word.
5. Change negatives to affirmatives.

These principles are easy to state but hard to follow, because you have to inch your way through every sentence you write, cutting here, compressing there, and that's labor-intensive. Those five principles, though, can guide you in that work.

1. Delete Meaningless Words

Some words are verbal tics that we use as unconsciously as we clear our throats:

kind of actually particular really certain various
virtually individual basically generally given practically

Productivity **actually** depends on **certain** factors that **basically** involve psychology more than **any particular** technology.

✓ Productivity depends on psychology more than on technology.

2. Delete Doubled Words

Early in the history of English, writers paired a French or Latin word with a native English one, because foreign words sounded more learned. Now they are just redundant. Among the common pairs:

full and complete	hope and trust	any and all
true and accurate	each and every	basic and fundamental
hopes and desires	first and foremost	various and sundry

3. Delete What Readers Can Infer

This is a common redundancy but hard to identify, because it comes in so many forms.

Redundant Modifiers Often, the meaning of a word implies its modifier:

Do not try to *predict* those **future** events that will **completely revolutionize** society because **past history** shows that it is the **final outcome** of minor events that **unexpectedly surprises** us more.

✓ Do not try to predict revolutionary events because history shows that the outcome of minor events surprises us more.

Some common redundancies:

terrible tragedy	various different	free gift
basic fundamentals	future plans	each individual
final outcome	true facts	consensus of opinion

Redundant Categories Every word implies its general category, so you can usually cut a word that names it. Compare:

During that *period of time*, the *membrane area* became *pink in color* and *shiny in appearance*.

✓ During that *period*, the *membrane* became *pink* and *shiny*.

When you do that, you may have to change an adjective into an adverb:

The holes must be aligned in an *accurate manner*.

✓ The holes must be aligned *accurately*.

Sometimes you change an adjective into a noun:

The county is responsible for the *educational* **system** and *public recreational* **activities**.

✓ The county is responsible for *education* and *public recreation*.

Here are some general nouns (boldfaced) often used redundantly:

large in size	round in shape	honest in character
unusual in nature	of a strange type	area of mathematics
of a bright color	at an early time	in a confused state

General Implications This kind of wordiness is even harder to spot because it can be so diffuse:

Imagine someone trying to learn the rules for playing the game of chess.

Learning implies *someone trying*, *playing the game* implies *rules*, *chess* is a kind of *game*. So, more concisely,

Imagine learning the rules of chess.

4. Replace a Phrase with a Word

This redundancy is especially difficult to fix, because you need a big vocabulary and the wit to use it. For example:

As you carefully read what you have written to improve wording and catch errors of spelling and punctuation, the thing to do before anything else is to see whether you could use sequences of subjects and verbs instead of the same ideas expressed in nouns.

That is,

✓ As you edit, first replace nominalizations with clauses.

I compressed five phrases into five words:

carefully read what you have written	→	edit
the thing to do before anything else	→	first

use X instead of Y	→	replace
nouns instead of verbs	→	nominalizations
sequences of subjects and verbs	→	clauses

I can offer no principle to tell you when to replace a phrase with a word, much less give you the word. I can point out only that you often can, and that you should be alert for opportunities to do so—which is to say, try.

Here are some common phrases (boldfaced) to watch for. Note that some of these let you revise a nominalization into a verb (both italicized):

We must explain **the reason for** the *delay* in the meeting.

✓ We must explain **why** the meeting is *delayed*.

Despite the fact that the data were checked, errors occurred.

✓ **Even though** the data were checked, errors occurred.

In the event that the information is ready early, contact this office.

✓ **If** the information is ready early, contact this office.

In a situation in which a class is closed, you may petition for admission.

✓ **When** a class is closed, you may petition for admission.

I should now like to say a few words **concerning the matter of** money.

✓ I should now like to say a few words **about** money.

There is a need for more careful *inspection* of all welds.

✓ You **must** *inspect* all welds more carefully.

We **are in a position** to make you a firm offer.

✓ We **can** make you a firm offer.

It is possible that nothing will come of these preparations.

✓ **Nothing may** come of these preparations.

- Prior to the end** of the training, you should apply for your license.
 ✓ **Before** your training *ends*, you should apply for your license.

- We have noted a **decrease/increase in** the number of errors.
 ✓ We have noted *fewer/more* errors.

5. Change Negatives to Affirmatives

When you express an idea in its negative form, not only do you have to use an extra word: *same* → *not different*, but you also force readers to do a kind of algebraic factoring. These two sentences, for example, mean much the same thing, but the affirmative is more direct:

Do not write in the negative. → Write in the affirmative.

Do not translate a negative into an affirmative if you want to emphasize the negative. (Is that such a sentence? I could have written, *Keep a negative sentence when . . .*) But you can rewrite most negatives, some formulaically:

not different	→	similar	not many	→	few
not the same	→	different	not often	→	rarely
not allow	→	prevent	not stop	→	continue
not notice	→	overlook	not include	→	omit

Some verbs, conjunctions, and prepositions are implicitly negative:

Verbs	<i>preclude, prevent, lack, fail, doubt, reject, avoid, deny, refuse, contradict, prohibit, bar</i>
Conjunctions	<i>except, unless</i>
Prepositions	<i>without, against, lacking, but for</i>

You can baffle readers if you combine *not* with these negative words. Compare these:

Except when applicants have **failed** to submit applications **without** complete documentation, benefits will **not** be **denied**.

- ✓ You will receive benefits only if you submit all your documents.
- ✓ To receive benefits, submit all your documents.

And you baffle readers thoroughly when you combine explicitly and implicitly negative words with passives and nominalizations:

There should be **no** submission of payments **without** notification of this office, **unless** the payment does **not** exceed \$100.

Do not **submit** payments if you have not **notified** this office, unless you are **paying** less than \$100.

Now revise the negatives into affirmatives:

- ✓ If you pay more than \$100, notify this office first.

Here's the point: Readers think you write clearly when you use no more words than necessary to say what you mean.

1. Delete words that mean little or nothing.
2. Delete words that repeat the meaning of other words.
3. Delete words implied by other words.
4. Replace a phrase with a word.
5. Change negatives to affirmatives.

A PARTICULAR KIND OF REDUNDANCY: METADISCOURSE

In Lesson 4, I described metadiscourse as language referring to

- our intentions: *to sum up, candidly, I believe*
- the reader's responses: *note that, consider now, as you see*
- the structure of our text: *first, finally, therefore, however*

You need metadiscourse in everything you write, but you can bury your ideas under it:

The last point I would like to make is that in regard to men-women relationships, it is important to keep in mind that the greatest changes have occurred in the way they now work with one another.

Only a few words in that sentence address relationships:

men-women relationships . . . greatest changes . . . the way they work with one another.

The rest is metadiscourse:

The last point I would like to make is that in regard to . . . it is important to keep in mind that . . .

If we prune that, we can tighten the sentence:

The greatest changes in men-women relationships have occurred in the way that they work with one another.

Now that we see what the sentence says, we can make it yet more direct:

- ✓ Men and women have changed their relationships mainly in the way they work with one another.

Some teachers and editors urge us to cut all metadiscourse, but everything we write needs some. You have to read with an eye to how it is used in your field by writers who you think are clear and concise, then do likewise. There are, however, some types that you can usually cut.

Metadiscourse That Attributes Your Ideas to a Source

You announce that something has been anonymously *observed* or found to *exist*, or *seen*, *noticed*, *noted*, and so on; it is more direct just to state the fact:

High divorce rates **have been observed** to occur in areas that **have been determined to have** low population density.

- ✓ High divorce rates occur in areas with low population density.

Metadiscourse That Announces Your Topic

The boldface phrases tell readers what a sentence is “about”:

This section introduces another problem, that of noise pollution. **The first thing to say about it is** that noise pollution exists not only . . .

You help readers see topics more easily if you cut metadiscourse:

- ✓ Another problem is noise pollution. First, it exists not only . . .

You can use two other constructions to call attention to a word or phrase, usually mentioned at least once before:

In regard to a vigorous style, the most important feature is a short, concrete subject followed by a forceful verb.

So far as China’s industrial development **is concerned**, it will take decades to equal that of Japan.

But you can usually get those topics into a subject:

- ✓ The most important feature of a vigorous style is a short, concrete subject followed by a forceful verb.
- ✓ China will take decades to equal Japan’s industrial development.

Excessive Hedging and Intensifying

This kind of metadiscourse can not only be redundant, but influence what your readers infer about your character, because it signals your confidence and caution. Between hedging and intensifying, you have to find the middle way.

Hedges Here are some common hedges:

Adverbs	<i>usually, often, sometimes, almost, virtually, possibly, perhaps, apparently, in some ways, to a certain extent, somewhat, in some/certain respects</i>
Adjectives	<i>most, many, some, a certain number of</i>
Verbs	<i>may, can, seem, appear, suggest, indicate</i>

Some readers think all hedging is not just redundant, but mealymouthed:

There **seems to be** some evidence that **may suggest** that **certain** differences between Japanese and Western rhetoric **could** derive from historical influences **possibly** traceable to Japan's long cultural isolation and Europe's equally long history of cross-cultural contacts.

On the other hand, only a fool or someone with massive historical evidence would make an assertion as flatly confident as this:

This evidence **proves** that Japanese and Western rhetorics differ because of Japan's long cultural isolation and Europe's equally long history of cross-cultural contacts.

In thoughtful academic writing, we more often state claims closer to this (and look at what you just read for my own hedging):

✓ This evidence **suggests** that **aspects** of Japanese and Western rhetoric differ because of Japan's long cultural isolation and Europe's equally long history of cross-cultural contacts.

This next paragraph introduced the article announcing the most significant breakthrough in the history of genetics, the discovery of the double helix of DNA. If anyone was entitled to be assertive, it was Crick and Watson. But they chose diffidence (note, too, the first person *we*; hedges are boldfaced):

We **wish to suggest** a [note: not *the*] structure for the salt of deoxyribose nucleic acid (D.N.A.) . . . A structure for nucleic acid has

already been proposed by Pauling and Corey . . . **In our opinion**, this structure is unsatisfactory for two reasons: (1) **We believe** that the material which gives the X-ray diagrams is the salt, not the free acid . . . (2) **Some** of the van der Waals distances **appear** to be too small.

—J. D. Watson and F. H. C. Crick,
"Molecular Structure of Nucleic Acids"

Without the hedges, their claim would be more concise, but more aggressive. Compare this (I boldface my stronger words, but most of the more aggressive tone comes from the absence of hedges):

We **announce** here **the** structure for the salt of deoxyribose nucleic acid (D.N.A.) . . . A structure for nucleic acid has already been proposed by Pauling and Corey . . . Their structure is unsatisfactory for two reasons: (1) The material which gives their X-ray diagrams is the salt, not the free acid . . . (2) Their van der Waals distances **are** too small.

You can use the verbs *suggest* and *indicate* instead of *prove* or *show* to make a claim about which you are less than 100 percent certain, but confident enough to propose:

✓ The evidence **indicates** that some of these questions remain unresolved.

✓ These data **suggest** that further studies are necessary.

Intensifiers Some common intensifiers:

Adverbs	<i>very, quite, rather, clearly, obviously, certainly, of course, indeed, inevitably, invariably, always</i>
Adjectives	<i>key, central, crucial, basic, fundamental, major, principal, essential</i>
Verbs	<i>show, prove, establish, as you/we/everyone knows/can see, it is clear/obvious that</i>

Confident writers use intensifiers less often than hedges because they do not want to sound this smug:

For a century now, **all** liberals have argued against **any** censorship of art, and **every** court has found their arguments so persuasive that **not a person any** longer remembers how they were countered. As a result, today, censorship is **totally** a thing of the past.

Some inexperienced writers think that kind of aggressive style is persuasive. Quite the opposite: If we state claims moderately, our readers are more likely to consider them thoughtfully:

For **about** a century now, **many** liberals have argued against censorship of art, and **most** courts have found their arguments persuasive **enough** that **few** people **may** remember **exactly** how they were countered. As a result, today, censorship is **virtually** a thing of the past.

Some will claim that a sentence hedged that much is weak. Perhaps. But it does not come at us like a bulldozer. It leaves room to imagine a reasoned and equally moderate response. In fact, in some academic areas, readers assume that if you begin with *It is obvious . . .*, what you then say is not.

The most common intensifier is the absence of a hedge. In this case, less is more. The first sentence below has no intensifiers where the blank lines appear, but neither does it have any hedges there, and so it seems like a strong claim:

_____ Americans believe that the federal government is
_____ intrusive and _____ authoritarian.

Many Americans believe that **certain branches** of the federal government are **often** intrusive and **increasingly** authoritarian.

Here's the point: You need some metadiscourse in everything you write, especially metadiscourse that guides readers through your whole text, words such as *first, second, therefore, on the other hand*, and so on. You also need some metadiscourse that hedges your certainty, words such as *perhaps, seems, could*, and so on. The problem is that you can too easily use too many.

Shape

Sentences in their variety run from simplicity to complexity, a progression not necessarily reflected in length: a long sentence may be extremely simple in construction—indeed must be simple if it is to convey its sense easily.

—SIR HERBERT READ

CLEAR COMPLEXITY

If you can write clear and concise sentences, you have achieved a good deal, and much more if you can assemble them into flowing, coherent passages. But if you can't write a clear sentence longer than twenty words or so, you'd be like a composer who could write only jingles. Despite those who tell us not to write long sentences, you cannot communicate every complex idea in a short one, so you have to know how to assemble a sentence that is both long and clear.

Consider, for example, (1a):

- 1a. In addition to differences in ethnicity or religion that have for centuries plagued Bosnians, Serbs, and Croats, explanations seeking causes of their hatred must include all of the other social, economic, and cultural conflicts that have plagued them that are rooted in a troubled history that extends 1000 years into the past.