

Clarity



Adapted from *The Little, Brown Handbook*, 11th Edition, Contributors Dayne Sherman,

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Link sentences with known information

Use known or old information drawn from the previous sentence or paragraph to effectively incorporate and link new information. This helps the reader understand the connection between the new information being introduced and the known or old information that has already been presented.

Examples: *(weak)*

Clinton worked hard over the first six years of his administration to sustain a vibrant economy. The crisis in Afghanistan distracted our leaders' focus and resolve. Congress resisted the President's economic program at every step. A similar dilemma is presented by current tensions in the Middle East.

(stronger)

Clinton worked hard over the first six years of his administration to sustain a vibrant economy. His economic program was resisted by Congress at every step. Our leaders' focus and resolve was distracted by the crisis in Afghanistan. Current tensions in the Middle East present a similar dilemma.

Write in active voice instead of passive voice

Writing in the active voice results in clear, concise sentences. Active voice clearly identifies who is doing the action within the sentence. Passive voice emphasizes the action being done, not the doer of the action. As a result, passive voice can make the sentence wordy and awkward to read. Therefore, active voice should be used whenever possible.

Example: *(passive voice)*

The attendance problem **will be addressed** by the instructor. (The focus is on the attendance problem, not the instructor's actions.)

(active voice)

The instructor **will address** the attendance problem. (The focus is on the instructor's actions, not the attendance problem.)

Avoid excessive use of subordinate clauses

Excessive use of subordination can hide the main idea(s) of the sentence and confuse the reader. To eliminate excessive subordinate clauses and to clarify the sentence, break the long sentence into two or more sentences.

Example: *(unclear because of excessive subordination)*

Instead of attending the national conference, John, who was schedule to present an essay on the military tactics used in Roman battles, which provided great insight into the battle strategies of Hannibal, a Carthaginian commander considered to be one of the greatest military leaders and strategists in history, went on vacation with his friends because they were going to Cancun, which is his favorite vacation destination.

(clear)

John was scheduled to present an essay on the military tactics used in Roman battles. His essay provided great insight into the battle strategies of Hannibal, a Carthaginian commander considered to be one of the greatest military leaders and strategists in history. Instead of attending the national conference, John went with his friends to Cancun, which is his favorite vacation destination.

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Consider the placement of subordinate clauses

To avoid confusion, subordinate clauses should be placed at the beginning of the sentence or at the end of the sentence. Avoid placing subordinate clauses in the middle of the sentence because they disrupt the flow of the main idea(s).

Example: *(clear: subordinate clause placed at the beginning)*
Because she meets with a French tutor three days a week, Sarah's French grade is improving.

(clear: subordinate clause placed at the end)
Sarah's French grade is improving **because** she meets with a French tutor three days a week.

(unclear: subordinate clause placed in the middle)
Sarah's French grade, **because** she meets with a French tutor three days a week, is improving.

Use parallel structures

Parallelism is the use of matching words, phrases, clauses, or sentence structures to express similar ideas. Parallel structures allow the reader to flow smoothly from one idea, sentence, or paragraph to the next and to understand the relationships and connections between ideas.

Example: *(does not use parallelism)*
There is an increase in the number of consumer complaints dealing with contractor fraud. Homeowners must remember to ask the contractors for references. It is important to compare the services and terms of contractor bids. Homeowners should make sure the contractors are properly insured.

(uses parallelism for clarity)
Because of the increase in the number of consumer complaints dealing with contractor fraud, homeowners must remember to ask the contractors for references, to compare the services and terms of contractor bids, and to make sure the contractors are properly insured.

Eliminate nominalizations

Nominalizations are nouns created by adding various endings to verbs. Nominalizations often result in words that are long and have abstract meanings. For clarity, use the verb form of the word whenever possible.

Example: *(nominalization)*
The **documentation** of all customer complaints received last week was done by the secretary.

(verb form)
The secretary **documented** all customer complaints received last week.

Eliminate unclear pronoun references

Unclear pronoun references occur when the antecedent (the word, phrase, or clause to which a pronoun refers) is not specifically stated. To eliminate ambiguous pronoun references, place the pronoun as close as possible to the noun it is replacing. If the pronoun reference is still unclear, replace the pronoun with the actual noun.

Example: *(unclear pronoun reference)*
Sarah and Jane agreed to drive to work in **her** car. **She** will pay for half of the commuting expenses. (Whose car are they taking? Who will pay for half of the expenses?)

(clear pronoun reference)
Sarah and Jane agreed to drive to work in **Jane's** car. **Sarah** will pay for half of the commuting expenses. (They are taking Jane's car. Sarah will pay for half of the expense.)

Eliminating Wordiness and Repetition

While repetition can help achieve coherence in an essay, improper use of repetition can cause an essay to become wordy and cumbersome for the reader. As a result, the reader can become distracted and lose sight of the main points within the essay. Sometimes it is only necessary to say something once.

Example: *(word and repetitive)*

The Museum of Natural History will unveil its new dinosaur exhibit this Friday. The museum exhibit will include over forty complete dinosaur skeletons. The dinosaur exhibit will also include a full-scale model of the tyrannosaurus and the brachiosaurus.

(direct and clear)

This Friday, the Museum of Natural History will unveil its new dinosaur exhibit, which will include over forty complete dinosaur skeletons and a full-scale model of the tyrannosaurus and the brachiosaurus.

Eliminating Unnecessary Phrases

When writing, try to avoid using wordy and unnecessary phrases when a shorter phrase is available. Using a shorter phrase or eliminating unnecessary phrases will make the statement more clear and concise.

Example: *(wordy phrase)*

At this point in time, the safety committee feels there is no reason to change the safety protocol for fire emergencies.

(clear and concise phrase)

Currently, the safety committee feels there is no reason to change the safety protocol for fire emergencies.