

Revising: Style

As you work toward a final version of your draft, your attention should turn to stylistic issues. Your goal as a stylist is precise, clear prose.

Wordiness

- Don't waste space on windy repetition of the terms of the assignment.

There are many similarities and differences between Samuel Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and John Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn."

- Don't clutter up your sentences with filler. Empty phrases like *there is* and *there are* engender other clutter (many *which's* and *that's*, for example). In the following sentence, by getting rid of "There is," you shorten and strengthen the sentence:

There is one tree central to the composition which is large and fills the picture space. (original, 16 words)

One large tree, central to the composition, fills the picture space. (revision, 11 words)

- Similarly, avoid useless repetition of words or phrases.

In the border closer to the image, there is a crease which runs through the border about one inch. (original, 19 words)

Closer to the image, a one-inch crease runs through the border. (revision, 11 words)

- Avoid needlessly stringing together prepositional phrases (phrases headed by *of*, *about*, *in*, *or*, etc.). In the following example, you could use a combination of strategies to create a much leaner, more direct revision:

One of the important chapters of the book that I find interesting is the one about the language of chimpanzees. (20 words, 4 prepositional phrases)

The important chapter on chimpanzee language interests me. (8 words, 1 prepositional phrase)

Active and Passive Voice

You've probably noticed in the above examples that weak verbs like *is* and *was* contribute to wordiness, especially if they are part of what we call passive constructions.

The English language includes two “verbal voices”: passive and active. The active voice is usually more direct, concise, and vivid than the passive voice. In the passive voice, the subject of the sentence doesn’t perform the action, but is acted upon by someone or something. The verb is always some form of the “to be” verb, such as *is*, *are*, *were*, and *was*. Here’s a sentence in the passive voice:

Most academic prose is marred by jargon.

To change this sentence to active voice, eliminate the “to be” verb, *is*, and turn the word that follows it into a “real” verb:

Jargon mars most academic prose.

The real source of the action in the sentence often becomes clearer after revision from passive to active voice:

Lolita was called a brilliant but obscene book.

Get rid of the “to be” verb, ask yourself who called *Lolita* brilliant but obscene, and you come up with:

Critics called *Lolita* brilliant but obscene.

Alert: Don’t use the passive voice to give your own opinion spurious weight, as in:

Lolita was called a brilliant but obscene book.

The passive voice may be appropriate if the agent or the actor is unknown or unimportant:

The reagent was added to the solution in the beaker.

Louis Philippe was known as the Citizen King.

Parallel Structure

Parallel constructions—phrases or clauses within the same sentence that repeat the same grammatical structure—also help keep your prose tight. Using parallel structure almost always makes your sentences shorter, and at the same time it provides emphasis, reinforces meaning, and clarifies relationships. The last half of the sentence you just read embodied parallel structure nicely. Compare it to the following:

Parallel structure is usually economical, and it is emphatic, seems to reinforce meaning, and generally clarifies relationships.

Alert: When you make a comparison, be sure that the elements you’re trying to compare are parallel. In the following example the writer intends to compare two novels:

Like *Bleak House*, Joseph Conrad uses *Lord Jim* as an exercise in multiple narrators.

But because of the way she's structured the sentence, she's actually comparing a novel with a novelist (apples and oranges, some would say). A better way is to make the elements of the comparison parallel:

Like Dickens' *Bleak House*, Conrad's *Lord Jim* is an exercise in multiple narrators.

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