

STYLE: SENTENCE-LEVEL

USE POSITIVE SENTENCE CONSTRUCTION.

Beware of double negatives. Negatives include: no, not, never, none, nobody, cannot, without, etc.

When you combine these "negatives" in a sentence, the expression contains a double negative.

Example: I cannot never ride the bus. (contains two negatives)

Revised: I cannot ride the bus. (contains one negative)

Example: Hugh does not like nobody. (contains two negatives)

Revised: Hugh does not like anybody. (contains one negative)

When possible, omit any negative words in the sentence.

Example: Hugh is not like his classmates.

Revised: Hugh is unlike his classmates.

Revised: Hugh is unique.

USE UNIVERSALLY ACCESSIBLE ENGLISH.

Colloquialisms and idiomatic expressions (also called idioms) are words that have regional or geographical specific meanings. To individuals from outside of the area, the meaning may be problematic or misunderstood.

Example: That's a sick new ride.

Example: Your new beater is cool.

Revised: Your new car looks really fast and really modern.

Clichés are sayings that are used over and over and over until the audience is basically tired of seeing the same saying. Some clichés are indigenous to an area and may not be understood to people outside of the locality; we call these colloquialisms. Here are a few examples.

Example: There are plenty of fish in the sea.

Revised: There are infinite choices for a romantic connection.

Example: Think outside the box.

Revised: Think of an alternative choice or an alternative method to complete your task/project.

Figurative language is when a person uses some sort of ornamental language (such as metaphor) to convey an idea. These uses of figurative language can be problematic if the reader is not a native speaker of English or again is not from the locality.

Example: The book catches the reader's attention.

In this example, the word catches does not help foreigners to understand what is happening. Most people interpret the word catching as literal (as in catching something in your hand). When the language is figurative, then the meaning is not easy to understand for a larger audience. Thus, we would change the wording to help the reader to understand what is happening.

Example: The book catches the reader's attention.

Revised: This book is very interesting and demands further reading.

USE REAL SUBJECTS, NOT DUMMIES.

Dummy Subjects are words and short phrases which simply serve no purpose other than filling a space in the sentence. They typically occur in the front of sentences.

Oftentimes, these structures simply weaken the sentence:

Examples:

It is

It was

It will be

This is

This was

This will be

That is

That was

That will be

Example: In order to get this to work, you must make sure that this is plugged in here. This should be put here, and this should be set to that. It should not be set to this; otherwise, all of it will probably do that.

Revised: In order to get your blender to work, you must make sure that the power plug is inserted into the wall. This plug should be here, while the power is set to low. The power should not be set to full; otherwise, all of the contents will fly through the air.

Which passage seems more specific, much clearer, and more concrete in terms of understanding?

Obviously, the second passage.

The quick fix is to change these words and short phrases to more specific choices with definite subjects.

Example: It is necessary to pick up Marjorie. (has a dummy subject)

Revised: Picking up Marjorie is necessary. (has a definite subject)

PUT THE SUBJECT OF THE SENTENCE FIRST

Placing the subject of the sentence first helps the reader to understand what is happening (with regard to the action or even to the complement easier and more quickly). Additionally, this practice sets up the sentence to be in the active voice, which is another important consideration in academic style. So, always place the subject of the sentence first whenever possible.

Provide context later in the sentence.

Example: Usually, Todd rides his bike.

Revised: Todd usually rides his bike.

Relocate introductory elements to the end*.

Example: Before she arrives at school, Diana styles her hair.

Revised: Diana styles her hair before she arrives at school.

Active voice replaces passive voice.

Example: The ball was hit by Michael. [the ball is the object, not the subject]

Revised: Michael hit the ball.

USE A ONE-TO-ONE RATIO: ONE SENTENCE FOR ONE IDEA.

To avoid making your sentence sound too convoluted or too busy, try to have one idea for each sentence. We call this the "one-to-one ratio." That's one idea to one sentence (for each sentence). Additionally, if you use a one-to-one ratio, you will have less instances of run-on sentences and comma splices.

Example: Yesterday, I was so busy that I had to turn to work and go to school and then I had to deal with my girlfriend.

Revised: Yesterday, I was very busy. I had to go to work. Also, I had to go to school. Finally, I had to deal with my girlfriend.

A useful strategy is to "Split and Connect." Have one sentence start its idea. Stop (add a period). Then, use a conjunctive adverb, and start a new sentence.

Conjunctive Adverbs:

In addition,

Additionally,

Moreover,

Furthermore,

Also,

Alternatively, etc.

UNPACK LONG SENTENCES.

Instead of jam-packing sentences with several different ideas. Take your time; slow down.

Following the admonition of the one-to-one ratio, unpack any long sentences.

Example: School can be a serious challenge for many students because of all of the assignments you do throughout the week and all of the expectations placed on students.

Revised: School can be full of challenges. Many students have multiple assignments during the week. Also, students have many expectations placed on them.

USE SENTENCE VARIETY.

Many scholars suggest that the key to avoiding monotony in a paragraph is to vary your sentences in terms of length.

Example: When I wake up, I have to roll out of bed. I have to shower. I have to shave. I have to dress myself. I have to eat breakfast. I have to brush my teeth. And, I have to drive to work.

Revised: When I wake up and roll out of bed, I take a shower. Typically, I have to shave, and then I dress myself. I eat breakfast, but I brush my teeth before I drive to work.

USE ACTIVE VOICE.

In writing, verbs have two types of voices: Active Voice and Passive Voice.

SUBJECT POSITION

In order to maintain clarity, conciseness, and consistency, put words in sentences in the following order:

Subject Position (doer) --- Verb Position (action) --- Object Position (receiver of the action).

Typically, when you follow this pattern, you use "active voice." Active voice is wonderful and is the most preferred voice in writing, because this type of voice allows us to understand the subject and action relationship immediately.

Example: The class was taught by the teacher (Passive Voice)

Revised: The teacher taught the class (Active Voice)

The first sentence is in the passive voice; notice how the word TEACHER is not in the subject position (that is, at the front of the sentence).

In contrast, notice how the second sentence has the word TEACHER in the subject position, allowing TEACHER to be the DOER of the action.

That's active voice: The subject should be in the front of the sentence and either "doing" the action or experiencing a state of being (that is a temporary or permanent state of description).

WHO DID IT?

To reiterate, in the passive voice, the subject is not doing the action. Examine these two sentences:

Example: Arnold has been described as a bonehead by reporters. (Passive Voice)

Revised: Reporters describe Arnold as a bonehead. (Active Voice)

Who is the "doer" of the action? The reporters. Thus, "reporters" should be in the front of the sentences rather than at the end.

Another important stylistic consideration: Looking at the two constructions again answer the question: How many words are in each sentence? For the passive, there are seven words. For the active, there are only five words. Since most instructors value clear and concise writing, the active voice would seem the most logical choice.

RECOGNIZING PASSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS

Passive constructions are easy to identify. Usually, a passive voice sentence contains a "to be" verb plus the "past participle."

TO-BE VERBS

"To Be" verbs include:

- am, is/was,
- are/were,
- have/has/had/will have been,
- am/are/is being,
- will be, or
- do/does get.

PAST PARTICIPLE

The past participle is a type of verbal. Verbals are words that function as other parts of speech. This fact aside, verbals are easy to spot. Typically, the past participle ends in -ed, -en/-n, -ght, or -t.

Examples of the Past Participle:

parked, danced, jumped (-ed)

broken, bitten, forgiven, written, spoken (-en or -n)

taught, fought, thought (-ght)

built, burnt, learnt (-t)

and any past-tense irregular words (For example, you wouldn't say "made-ed." You would say, "made." The irregular forms of the present tense word "make" is "made.")

Passive Voice Forms of the Verb, Describe:

- am described
- am being described
- are being described
- is being described
- do get described
- does get described
- will be described
- was described
- were described
- did get described
- have been described
- has been described
- had been described
- will have been described

EXCEPTIONS: THE IMPLIED-SUBJECT

Commands contain something called the Implied-Subject (or the Implied “YOU”), such as: “Take out the trash.”

Notice how there is no subject; the subject is implied. Furthermore, if we analyzed the sentence further, we would find an implied “You” before the actual sentence.

Example:[You] Take out the trash.

Because the subject is in the proper subject position, we consider these types of commands (or imperative structures) to be active.

EXCEPTIONS: QUESTIONS & EXCLAMATIONS

We consider questions to be active by default, since they do not usually refer to a clear cut subject and may be shorter than most declarative and imperative sentences. Likewise, we consider exclamations to be active by default as well.

ITEMS IN A SERIES

When writing, it is customary and useful to place items in a list into similar structures for the reader. We call this practice parallelism.

One suggestion is to keep items in a series alike. Therefore, when listing elements, make sure everything is similar

Example:

Noun + Noun + Noun + Noun

Verb + Verb + Verb + Verb

Noun Phrase + Noun Phrase + Noun Phrase + Noun Phrase

Independent Clause + Independent Clause + Independent Clause + Independent Clause

And, so forth

Likewise, whatever you do to one item, consistent and do it to the others.

Example: (WORSE)

When I begin my vacation, I will travel by boat, plane, by taxi, and train.

Example: (BETTER)

When I begin my vacation, I will travel by boat, by plane, by taxi, and by train.

Notice how the better sentence repeats elements to maintain a similar structure.

Placing ideas in similar sentence structures in paragraphs can be equally valuable.

Remember: Whatever you do to one item, you should do it to the others.

CONSIDER USING APPOSITIVE PHRASES

An appositive is a noun or phrase, which renames another noun in close proximity. Oftentimes, using an appositive helps the reader to better understand things such as definitions or concepts, which they may not know.

Example:

A katana, a long Japanese sword, was used to cut the ceremony ribbon in front of the shrine.

Example:

Names sometimes contain special meanings, such as Abigail, which refers to old Hebrew for "my father is joy."

Words introducing appositives include:

For example,

In other words,

In a sense,

That is,

Or,