How to Write Clear, Concise, and Direct Sentences

Clear writing is concise writing. By being direct, you avoid confusing your audience with unnecessary “filler” words. The following tips will help you avoid wordy writing.

1. **Unless you have a reason not to, use the active voice**

At the heart of every good sentence is a strong, precise verb; the converse is true as well—at the core of most confusing, awkward, or wordy sentences lies a weak verb.

*Passive:* It is believed by the candidate that a ceiling must be placed on the budget by Congress.

*Active:* The candidate believes that Congress must place a ceiling on the budget.

*Passive:* It was earlier demonstrated that heart attacks can be caused by high stress.

*Active:* Brown earlier showed that high stress can cause heart attacks.

Be aware that there are sometimes good reasons to use the passive voice, such as:

- To emphasize the action rather than the actor. ex) After long debate, the proposal was endorsed by the long-range planning committee.
- To keep the subject and focus consistent throughout a passage. ex) The data processing department recently presented what proved to be a controversial proposal to expand its staff. After long debate, the proposal was endorsed by . . . .
- To be tactful by not naming the actor. ex) The procedures were somehow misinterpreted.
- To describe a condition in which the actor is unknown or unimportant. ex) Every year, thousands of people are diagnosed as having cancer.
- To create an authoritative tone. ex) Visitors are not allowed after 9:00 p.m.

2. **Put the action of the sentence in the verb**

Don't bury it in a noun or blur it across the entire sentence. “Watch out especially for nominalizations (verbs that have been made into nouns by the addition of -tion).”

Example of blurring of the verb – which one sounds clearest?

a) An evaluation of the procedures needs to be done.
b) The procedures need to be evaluated.
c) We need to evaluate the procedures.

3. **Reduce unnecessary wordy verbs:**

Using "is" in a sentence gets it off to a slow start, and may weaken the sentence. Replace as many "to be" verbs with action verbs as you can, and consider changing passive ("is defended by") to active voice ("defends").² (ex. is aware, has knowledge of ------- > knows.

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¹ From the University of Wisconsin Writing Center: [http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/CCS_actionverb.html](http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/CCS_actionverb.html)
4. Avoid expletive constructions ("It is," "There is," "There are").

Wordy - It was her last argument that finally persuaded me.
Concise - Her last argument finally persuaded me.

Wordy - There are likely to be many researchers raising questions about this methodological approach.
Concise - Many researchers are likely to raise questions about this methodological approach.

5. Eliminate unnecessary prepositional phrases

Too many prepositions can drain all the action out of a sentence. Get rid of the prepositions, and find a strong active verb to make the sentence direct:³

Wordy - The opinion of the working group
Concise - The working group's opinion

This next example is quite wordy. Underline the prepositions and shorten the sentence.

The obvious effect of such a range of reference is to assure the audience of the author’s range of learning and intellect.

Exercise: Swap assignments with another student. Each student should, with these aforementioned tips in mind, go through the paper and:

a) Circle the prepositions (of, to, onto, despite, with, up, at, by, in, for) – do they take away from the sentence? Are there too many prepositions?

b) Circle the “is” verb forms (with specific attention to active and passive voice) – is the action “in” the verb?

c) Watch out for and underline specifically awkward wording that could possibly be cleared up. Ask yourself: “Is this clear? Could it be clearer?”

d) Watch out for and underline vague/undefined pronouns (he, she, this, that, it) Ex) This makes finding a solution difficult

   Ask yourself, what is this, exactly? Does the pronoun fit to the noun that was recently mentioned, or is there a possible confusion?

After students have reviewed and marked up papers, regroup them with their partners. Go through each paper together, addressing the circled and underlined areas. Discuss ways to clarify wording and make the writing more concise. Work together in clearing up these problem areas.

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² http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/CCS_wordyverbs.html
³ http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/CCS_prepphrases.html
⁴From the University of Richmond Writing Center: http://writing2.richmond.edu/writing/wweb/concise.html