

## How to Write Clear, Concise, and Direct Sentences\*

### 1. Use the active voice unless you have a reason not to.

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.

There are sometimes good reasons to use the passive voice:

To emphasize the action rather than the actor:

After long debate, the proposal was endorsed by the long-range planning committee.

To keep the subject and focus consistent throughout a passage:

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:

The procedures were somehow misinterpreted.

To describe a condition in which the actor is unknown or unimportant:

Every year, thousands of people are diagnosed as having cancer.

To create an authoritative tone:

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*).

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

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\*This is a lightly modified version of:

[https://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/Clear,\\_Concise,\\_and\\_Direct\\_Sentences.pdf](https://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/Clear,_Concise,_and_Direct_Sentences.pdf)

- a. The stability and quality of our financial performance will be developed through the profitable execution of our existing business, as well as the acquisition or development of new businesses.
- b. We will improve our financial performance not only by executing our existing business more profitably but by acquiring or developing new businesses.

### 3. Reduce wordy verbs.

- a. is aware, has knowledge of -----> knows
- b. is taking -----> takes
- c. are indications -----> indicate
- d. are suggestive -----> suggests

### 4. Use expletive constructions ("It is," "There is," "There are") sparingly.

- a. It was her last argument that finally persuaded me.
- b. Her last argument finally persuaded me.
  
- a. There are likely to be many researchers raising questions about this methodological approach.
- b. Many researchers are likely to raise questions about this methodological approach.

### 5. Try to avoid using vague, all-purpose nouns, which often lead to wordiness.

--*factor, aspect, area, situation, consideration, degree, case . . .*

- a. Consumer demand is rising in the area of services.
- b. Consumer demand for services is rising.
- c. Consumers are demanding more services.

### 6. Unless your readers are familiar with your terminology, avoid writing strings of nouns (or noun strings!).

- a. patient program satisfaction
- b. student-professor relationship factors
- c. processing step change
- d. competitive cotto salami performance test
- e. program implementation process evaluation
  
- f. MHS has a hospital employee relations improvement program.
- g. MHS has a program to improve employee relations.
- h. MHS has a program to improve relations among employees.

### 7. Eliminate unnecessary prepositional phrases.

- a. The opinion of the working group.
- b. The working group's opinion.
  
- c. The obvious effect of such a range of reference is to assure the audience of the author's range of learning and intellect.

8. Avoid unnecessarily inflated words.

**Instead of**

cognizant of  
facilitate  
impact on  
implement  
subsequent to  
utilize

**Use**

aware of, know  
help  
affect  
start, create, carry out, begin  
after  
use

9. Simplify wordy phrases.\*

**Instead of**

the reason for  
for the reason that  
due to the fact that  
owing to the fact that  
considering the fact that  
on the grounds that  
this is why

**Use**

because, since, why

despite the fact that  
regardless of the fact that

although, even though

in the event that  
if it should transpire/happen that  
under circumstances in which

if

on the occasion of  
in a situation in which  
under circumstances in which

when

as regards  
in reference to  
with regard to  
concerning the matter of  
where . . . is concerned

about

it is crucial that  
it is necessary that  
there is a need/necessity  
it is important that  
it is incumbent upon  
cannot be avoided

must, should

**Instead of****Use**

is able to  
has the opportunity to  
is in a position to  
has the capacity for  
has the ability to

can

it is possible that  
there is a chance that  
it could happen that  
the possibility exists for

may, might, can, could

prior to  
in anticipation of  
subsequent to  
following on  
at the same time as  
simultaneously with

before, after, as

\*This list comes from Joseph Williams, *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*. 3rd ed. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1989.