Writing Workshop: Style

Office of Graduate Studies

MISSOURI S&T

Today's Topics

- Voice
- Person
- Wordy Phrases
- Parallelism
- Numbers
- Dangling Modifiers
- Misplaced Modifiers

- Gender-Neutral Language
- Ambiguity
- Capitalization
- Abbreviations
- Commonly Confused Words
- American English vs. British English

Voice

- In **active voice**, the subject performs the action represented by the verb.
  The operating system starts the device.

- In **passive voice**, the subject receives the action identified by the verb.
  The device is started by the operating system.

Reasons to Prefer Active Voice

- **To emphasize action.**
  Active voice conveys directly that people do things or that things happen.

- **To establish responsibility.**
  Writers will sometimes use passive voice to hide the agent of the action. For ethical reasons, it might be more preferable to use active voice in similar situations.

Reasons to Prefer Passive Voice

- **To emphasize the result.**
  The emphasis is on the recipient of the action rather than the agent.

- **To follow expectations.**
  Many publications use passive voice as their preferred style. This is especially done in the sciences in order to maintain the author's objectivity.

Person

Person refers to the point of view you are writing from.

	Subject Pronouns	Object Pronouns	Possessive Adjectives	Possessive Pronouns	Reflexive Pronouns
1st Person	I	me	my	mine	myself
2nd Person	you	you	your	yours	yourself
3rd Person (Male)	he	him	his	his	himself
3rd Person (Female)	she	her	her	hers	herself
3rd Person	it	it	its	-	itself
1st Person (Plural)	we	us	our	ours	ourselves
2nd Person (Plural)	you	you	your	yours	yourselves
3rd Person (Plural)	they	them	their	theirs	themselves

Person

- Use **first person** for personal writing, such as a memoir, acknowledgements, or informal writing

- Use **second person** when writing correspondence or addressing an audience

- Use **third person** for formal or scientific writing

Wordy Phrases

Avoid using wordy phrases or inflated language. Wordiness can make writing difficult to read.

Choose plain words over fancy words when possible

Wordy Phrases

a majority of	most
a number of	many
despite the fact that	although
in order to	to
it is often the case that	often
based on the fact that	because
take into consideration	consider
in the event that	if

How to Eliminate Wordiness

1. Simplify verbs

2. Place the "doer" as the subject of the sentence

3. Use active voice

4. Simplify prepositional phrases

5. Eliminate redundancies

Wordiness Examples

Redundant
resulting in <u>positive</u> reservoir <u>benefits</u>

Nominalization
example: chip seal <u>provides a protection to </u>the asphalt layer
revised: chip seal <u>protects</u> the asphalt layer

Parallelism

When you are writing a series of words, phrases, or clauses, put them in parallel form (similar grammatical construction) so that the reader can identify the linking relationship more easily and clearly.

Non-parallel structure can be distracting or confusing to readers

Parallelism: Sentence Format

Clear (parallel):

In Florida, where the threat of hurricanes is an annual event, we learned that it is important (1) to become aware of the warning signs, (2) to know what precautions to take, and (3) to decide when to seek shelter.

Not as clear (not parallel):

In Florida, where the threat of hurricanes is an annual event, we learned that it is important (1) to become aware of the warning signs. (2) There are precautions to take, and (3) deciding when to take shelter is important.

Parallelism: List Format

Nonparallel

We need to complete the following tasks:

- Writing the proposal
- Interview instructors
- Rough draft
- Revise rough draft

Parallel

We need to complete the following tasks:

- Write the proposal
- Interview instructors
- Write a rough draft
- Revise the rough draft

Parallelism: Overlapping Items

When using parallel structure, be careful that items in different categories do not overlap.

Confusing:

We need to buy more lumber, hardware, tools, and hire the subcontractors.

Clear:

We need to buy more lumber, hardware, and tools, and we need to hire the subcontractors.

Numbers

Sentences cannot begin with a numeral, variable, or symbol

To avoid this problem, either spell out the numeral or reword the sentence so that it does not appear at the beginning

Numbers

Incorrect:
  6% of the group failed.

Correct:
  Six percent of the group failed.

Numbers: When To Spell Out

The decision over whether to spell out a number depends on the style guide you are following.

General Rules:
- Use numerals with abbreviated units of measurement (6 cm)
- Spell out other numbers less than 10 (four students)
- Use numerals for dates, decimals, and graphs and tables
- Don't use both in the same sentence unless they are back to back (*ten 7-point scales*)

Dangling Modifier

A dangling modifier is a word or phrase that modifies a word not clearly stated in the sentence.

Dangling Modifier:

Having finished the assignment, the TV was turned on.

Correct Usage:

Having finished the assignment, Jill turned on the TV.

Correcting Dangling Modifiers

1. Name the appropriate or logical doer of the action as the subject of the main clause.

Incorrect:
   Having arrived late for practice, a written excuse was needed.

Revised:
   Having arrived late for practice, <u>the team captain</u> needed a written excuse.

Correcting Dangling Modifiers

2. Change the phrase that dangles into a complete introductory clause by naming the doer of the action in that clause.

Incorrect:
Without knowing his name, it was difficult to introduce him.

Revised:
Because <u>Maria</u> did not know his name, it was difficult to introduce him.

Correcting Dangling Modifiers

3. Combine the phrase and main clause into one.

Incorrect:
To improve his results, the experiment was done again.

Revised:
He improved his results by doing the experiment again.

Misplaced Modifier

A misplaced modifier occurs when the subject of the modifier is unclear.

Misplaced Modifier:
   The jacket was too small in the store.

Correct Usage:
   The jacket in the store was too small.

Gender-Neutral Language

Using gender-specific language can often result in sexist bias. Instead, try to use gender-neutral or gender-inclusive language.

- Avoid using *he* when the passage could apply to both men and women

- Avoid exclusively using masculine or feminine pronouns to define roles (such as only using *she* when referring to a nurse)

- Avoid the use of *man* ending in an occupational title (such as *policeman* instead of *police officer*)

Gender-Neutral Language: Singular Third-Person Pronoun

Chicago Manual of Style, 16th edition:

- "It is unacceptable to a great many reasonable readers to use the generic masculine pronoun (*he*)."

- However, it is also unacceptable to many readers to use *they* as a singular pronoun

- Alternatives such as he/she or s/he are also discouraged

Gender-Neutral Language – Achieving Gender Neutrality

Omit the pronoun

- **Problematic:** The programmer should update the records when data is transferred to <u>her</u> by the head office

- **Revised:** The programmer should update the records when data is transferred by the head office

Repeat the noun

- **Problematic:** A writer should be careful not to antagonize readers, because <u>her</u> credibility will suffer

- **Revised:** A writer should be careful not to antagonize readers, because the writer's credibility will suffer

Gender-Neutral Language – Achieving Gender Neutrality

Use a plural antecedent

- **Problematic:** a contestant must conduct <u>himself</u> with dignity at all times
- **Revised:** contestants must conduct themselves with dignity at all times

Use an article instead of a personal pronoun

- **Problematic:** a student accused of cheating must actively waive <u>his</u> right to have his guidance counselor present
- **Revised:** a student accused of cheating must actively waive the right to have a guidance counselor present

Gender-Neutral Language – Achieving Gender Neutrality

Use the neutral singular pronoun *one*

- **Problematic:** an actor is New York is likely to earn more than <u>he</u> is in Paducah

- **Revised:** an actor is New York is likely to earn more than one in Paducah

Use the relative pronoun *who*

- **Problematic:** employers presume that if an applicant can't write well, <u>he</u> won't be a good employee

- **Revised:** employers presume that an applicant who can't write well won't be a good employee

Gender-Neutral Language – Achieving Gender Neutrality

Use *he or she*

- **Problematic:** if a complainant is not satisfied with the board's decision, then <u>he</u> can ask for a rehearing

- **Revised:** if a complainant is not satisfied with the board's decision, then he or she can ask for a rehearing

Revise the clause

- **Problematic:** a person who decides not to admit <u>he</u> lied will be considered honest until someone exposes <u>his</u> lie

- **Revised:** a person who denies lying will be considered honest until the lie is exposed

Ambiguity: Demonstrative Pronouns

Check your document for sentences beginning with pronouns:

- It is (or was)...

- This is...

- That is...

- These are...

- Those are...

Whenever you see a sentence like this, figure out what you're really talking about and replace ambiguous pronouns with more specific nouns, or add in a noun between the pronoun and verb (This <u>method</u> is...)

Ambiguity: Pronoun Antecedents

Confusing:

Henry et al. compared their study results with those of previous researchers and presented them at the conference.

Did Henry et al. present their study results or the previous researchers at the conference?

Ambiguity: Multiple Terms

Each term should be used in one and only one way throughout the thesis. Do not use two different terms to mean the same thing.

Example:

Young's modulus, modulus of elasticity, elasticity modulus, E

Ambiguity: Descriptions

Avoid words/phrases indicating ambiguous quantity or quality:

in terms of, lots of, kind of, type of, something like, a number of, and just about are usually too imprecise to be useful

Avoid saying something is "good" or "better"

- These words are opinion-based
- Instead, use specific, quantitative language, or elaborate on why it is good or better

Capitalization

Do not capitalize the following:

- elements
- medical conditions (tuberculosis; Parkinson's disease)
- laws, theories, models, statistical procedures, or hypotheses (Einstein's theory of relativity)
- names of disciplines unless referring to a nationality (German; chemical engineering)
- general references

Abbreviations

- Do not capitalize a spelled-out abbreviation unless it is a proper noun
  - scanning electron microscope (SEM)
  - Cloud and Aerosol Sciences Laboratory (CASL)

- Add an *s* without an apostrophe to make a plural (SEMs)

- Use *a* or *an* depending on the sound
  - a AA battery
  - an AA meeting
  - a NASA space shuttle
  - an NAACP meeting

Commonly Confused Words

affect (verb)	effect (noun)
can (certainty)	could (sense of uncertainty)
can (physical ability)	may (possibility or permission)
e.g. (for example)	i.e. (in other words)
ensure (to make sure)	insure (insurance)
farther (physical distance)	further (figurative distance)
impact (preferred as noun)	affect (verb) or influence (verb)
it's (contraction of it is)	its (possessive form of it)
led (past tense of verb lead)	lead (verb; also a noun for a type of metal)
less (for mass nouns)	fewer (for count nouns)

Commonly Confused Words – Exercise

1. More importantly, the way that this implementation (affects)/ effects OHS performance was projected in this study.

2. The cycle time was reduced, which lead/(led) to better work performance.

3. The flakiness index is defined as the percentage by weight of the used aggregates whose least dimension ((i.e.)/e.g., thickness) is less than three-fifths of its mean dimension.

4. The complexity can be farther/(further) amplified when a MIMO system with multiple transducers 47 and hydrophones is deployed.

American English vs. British English

- Different dialects of English might vary in vocabulary, style, spelling, and punctuation

- It is usually best to use whichever style conventions your audience expects

- Be consistent throughout your paper

American English vs. British English

- vocabulary (while, whilst; first, firstly)

- style (use of *that* and *which*)

- spelling (analyzes, analyses; sulfur, sulphur)

- count/mass nouns (research, researches)

- punctuation (double quotes vs single quotes; commas and periods inside vs. outside quotes)

Other Things to Note

- Avoid spatial references like "above" and "below" when referring to equations, figures, etc.

- Avoid beginning sentences with "Also,"

- Equations should grammatically be part of your sentence

- Make sure use of "respectively" is clear

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