

IES 140 – Final Project

Style in a Nutshell¹

Book an appointment at the **Writing Center NOW** for Week 10 before the paper is due!

<http://www.wp.ucla.edu/index.php/home>

1. Clarity

People have an easier time understanding your prose if you present your content in terms of **somebody doing something (an action)**, rather than some situation *existing*.

- *There is low consumer spending in Cyprus.* [this is a situation: it is abstract and impersonal]
- *In Cyprus, people are spending less.* [this is an action: I can visualize people physically doing something]

Here's another example:

- *There is disagreement among scholars as to Homer's knowledge of Bronze Age warfare.* [this may sound more "formal" to you, but it's actually just not very clear]
- *Scholars disagree as to whether Homer knew Bronze Age warfare.* [this is a clearer option that you should prefer]

Why you should present your content in terms of ACTIONS

Sentences containing actions feel more concrete and easy to visualize.

Sentences containing actions also force you to name *who is doing the action*, so they force you to give more complete information to your reader.

These are sentences that do not name who is doing the action:

- *There is disagreement on Homer's knowledge of warfare.*
Who disagrees?
- *Homer's technique of composition has been much discussed.*
Who has discussed it?

A better sentence would clearly state who is doing what (**unless you don't want your reader to know**, for some reason).

Quick Tip: When you start a sentence with "there is" you are most likely describing a situation, not an action. Be careful!

¹ These guidelines are adapted from the excellent book: *Style: Towards Clarity and Grace* by J. Williams and G. Colomb (1990).

Exercise:

The sentences have nominalizations and verbs of existence, and their characters are not the subjects of the clause: rewrite them to improve clarity! Note that sometimes you will have to change the sentence entirely, words included!.

Ex:

Valmiki's portrayal of Sita as a faithful wife is famous.

a nominalization

a verb of existence!

Rewriting: Famously, Valmiki portrays Sita as a faithful wife.

Now the characters are subject (and object respectively), and the main action is expressed by a verb, not a noun.

1. There is an insistence on Valmiki's part upon Sita's innocence.
2. There is a clear correspondence between Sita's behavior and the consequences of her actions.
3. This paper is going to conduct an analysis of Sita's behavior.
4. Rama's impatience with Sita reflects his doubts about her fidelity.
5. The acceptance of the tragic ending of the story varied between different regions.
6. Close text analysis reveals Rama's awareness of the impermanence of things.
7. The lack of a prompt response to this issue would mean ruin.
8. Insistence on sentiment (*rasa*) is a notable feature of Valmiki's poetry.

2. Cohesion

People expect familiar information at the beginning of the clause, and new, important, and unfamiliar information at the end.

This is just how our brains work, and it's true across languages. In order to process new information, your brain needs to first anchor the new information to some old information that it already knows. This is why your sentences should always move from OLD (known) to NEW, from KNOWN to UNKNOWN.

Here is an example (NEW INFORMATION is underlined):

- Cyprus is another troubled member of the European Union. The economic downturn has been the most important recent piece of news to come out of Cyprus. [this feels unclear because the NEW INFORMATION is put first, and the OLD INFORMATION last.]
- Another troubled member of the European Union is Cyprus. Cyprus has been in the news recently for its economic downturn. [This flows much better, and it gradually leads the reader from what he knows to what he doesn't know]

When you introduce a new concept to your reader, MENTION it at the END of a sentence, and EXPLAIN it in a new sentence.

- Throughout the Trojan war, all heroes strive to achieve kleos; kleos, meaning 'fame', is the glory that a warrior earns through his deeds, and the only form of immortality that humans can achieve.

Exercise:

Using the last example as a model, write a few clauses in which you introduce a new concept at the end of a sentence and explain it in a new sentence.

3. Emphasis

End your sentences on something important. People will pay most attention to what you put at the end. Don't waste this opportunity!

Here's an example:

- *People in Cyprus are spending less, as the **statistics** show.* [if your main point is about *spending less*, you should put that at the end of the sentence! Here it seems that your main point is about *statistics*].
- *As the statistics show, people in Cyprus are **spending less**.*

What you put at the end of a sentence should suggest the topic of your next sentence. In the first example, people will assume that you are going to talk about 'statistics' next; in the second example, people will assume that you are going to talk about 'spending less' next. Make sure to be consistent with this principle!

4. Coherence

Each paragraph should be about one main **TOPIC** and have some **recurring keywords** that help the reader navigate the text. A paragraph that does not clearly announce its topic and does not contain recurring keywords will feel confusing to the reader.

Though it may feel awkward to actively think about keywords as you are writing, you can introduce keywords as you revise your text.

Keep your keywords consistent

Sometimes people use several different terms to refer to the same thing. Writers often feel that this adds variety and elegance to their prose. In fact, this can be confusing for your reader, precisely because the reader is looking for recurring keywords, and can't find them. Keep your keywords stable and well in sight.

Parts of a paragraph: ISSUE and DISCUSSION

Each paragraph that you will ever write can be broken down into two parts: ISSUE and DISCUSSION:

- In the issue, you introduce your TOPIC. (This is an extended version of the 'topic sentence'; it often takes more than just one sentence to properly introduce a topic).
- In the discussion, you present your evidence and analyze it in order to prove the main POINT (thesis) of your paragraph.

POINT

Each paragraph should have a POINT. A POINT is a sentence that clearly articulates the main message of the paragraph (its thesis). In summarizing your paper, that sentence should be able to stand in for the entire paragraph.

Where should the POINT BE?

Readers expect a POINT at **one of two** possible places in the paragraph:

- At the end of the ISSUE (If the point is easy to understand, or if the paragraph is extremely long)
- At the end of the DISCUSSION (if the point is hard to understand and you need to build up to it gradually; if the paragraph is extremely long, think about placing an *anticipatory point* at the end of the ISSUE, so that the reader knows where you are going –this is a rougher, vaguer version of your real POINT).

Do not repeat your POINT in your paragraph. Once is enough!

5. Concision

There are two very common ways of making your sentences too long for no good reason. Here's how to spot them and eliminate them.

a. "Careful" Padding

A way to gratuitously add complexity (and subordination) to your sentences is to use excess "careful padding":

An example:

Padded: *One may not be wrong in arguing that he was not guilty of the crime*

Unpadded: *Arguably, he was not guilty of the crime*

What you do with padding you can often be achieved with adverbs instead. You could even go without any padding:

He was not guilty of the crime

Excessive padding makes you sound insecure and is often confusing for the reader. Writing means taking risks: you should diminish the risks you take by constructing a SOLID argument, rather than padding everything you say.

b. Perceptual Filtering:

Another kind of padding is to report everything through the filter of perception, instead of stating it directly:

Filtered: *The fact that Gargamel was not guilty of the crime can be seen in how he dealt with the aftermath of the situation, remaining calm and keeping his composure.*

Verbs of seeing, viewing, observing (etc.) are often used as filters. This kind of padding normally involves large usage of passives.

By using perceptual filtering, you are describing the thinking process that lead you to the conclusions. Give the results of your thinking instead:

Unfiltered: *Gargamel is not guilty of the crime: in the aftermath, he remained calm and composed.*

Another example:

Filtered: *if one looks at the diction in passage A, one can observe that Hector is portrayed as arrogant and aggressive.*

Unfiltered: *in passage A, the diction qualifies Hector as arrogant and aggressive.*

6. Length

Long sentences can be hard to process for a reader, and are hard to write for a writer. However, you will need to write long sentences sometimes.

The way to keep a long sentence CLEAR is to make sure you **don't break the SUBJ-VERB-COMPLEMENT sequence**.

- Mary_{Subject} went_{Verb} to the party_{Complement}

Though English allows you to easily break the sequence, by putting lot of other information in between the elements, your sentences will be much more clear if you don't break the sequence.

Example of an unclear sentence where the sequence has been broken:

- *Mary, despite the traffic and her headache, after much hesitation, **went** on the third of May, with her friend Julia, **to the party**, which was at Carl's house*

Same sentence with the sequence unbroken:

- *On the third of May, **Mary went to the party**, which was at Carl's house, after much hesitation, despite the traffic and her headache, with her friend Julia.*

Now the sentence is more clear, but it still feels a bit rambling – this is why there's way too much information in it, and also because it ends on a weak note (see that paragraph on Emphasis above).

Note that I have put the main clause "Mary went to the party" close to the beginning of the sentence. If I hadn't done it, the sentence would feel unfocused (even without breaking the Subject-Verb-Complement sequence). Here's an example of an unfocused sentence:

- *Despite the traffic and her headache, on the third of May, after much hesitation, and with her friend Julia, **Mary went to the party**, which was at Carl's house.*

This sentence does not quite work because the reader has no idea where the whole thing is going (what the main point of the sentence is) until the very end of the sentence. For clear writing, the main clause (main point of the sentence) should always be close to the beginning.

Quick Tip:

- Never break the Subject-Verb-Complement sequence
 - Keep your main clause (your main point) close to the beginning of the sentence.
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