Improving Your Writing Style: Conciseness, Cohesion, and Coherence

Designed
by
Duke University's
Writing Studio

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Announcement

This Power Point slide presentation is not designed to take the place of a group workshop, where you are given handouts and have an opportunity to work with your own writing. It does, however, provide an overview of the topic for those who haven't taken the workshop and a useful refresher for those who have.

"Have something to say, and say it as clearly as you can. That is the only secret of style."
_ Matthew Arnold

"And how is clarity to be achieved? Mainly by taking trouble; and by writing to serve people rather than to impress them."

_ F. L. Lucas

Three Principles of an Effective Style

1. Conciseness
2. Cohesion
3. Coherence

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Conciseness

"I believe more in the scissors than I do the pencil."

_ Truman Capote

"Some of my dearest and most beloved bits of writing have gone with a very quick slash, slash, slash….Because something was heavy there. Cutting leads to economy, precision, and to a vastly improved script."

_ Paddy Chayefsky

Conciseness

- Cut repetition and redundancy.
  - Delete meaningless words.
  - Delete words that repeat the meaning of other words.
  - Delete words implied by other words.
  - Replace a phrase with a word.
  - Change negatives to affirmatives.

Conciseness

Cut repetition and redundancy.

- Original: TV "reality" shows, because they have an appeal to our fascination with real life conflict because of our voyeuristic impulses, are about the most popular shows that are regularly scheduled to appear on TV.

- Revision: "Reality" shows are the most popular shows on TV because they appeal to our voyeuristic tendencies.

Conciseness

Cut repetition and redundancy.

Original: Productivity actually depends on certain factors that basically involve psychology more than any particular technology.

Conciseness

Cut repetition and redundancy.

Original: Productivity actually depends on certain factors that basically involve psychology more than any particular technology.

Revision: Productivity depends on psychology rather than on technology.

Conciseness

Delete unnecessary "which's" and "that's.

Original: Of the areas of science important to our future, few are more promising than genetic engineering, <u>which is</u> a new way of manipulating the elemental structural units of life itself, <u>which are</u> the genes and chromosomes <u>that</u> tell our cells how to reproduce to become the parts <u>that</u> constitute our bodies. <underlining added>

Revision: Many areas of science are important to our future, but few are more promising than genetic engineering. It offers a new way of manipulating the elemental structural units of life itself, the genes and chromosomes that tell our cells how to reproduce to become the parts constituting our bodies.

Conciseness

- Choose between the active or passive voice, basing your choice on the situation and on discipline-specific conventions.

    Identify the passive voice by using this formula: any combination of the verb *to be* and a past participle.

    is, are

    was, were   +   …ed,…t,…d,…en

    am, be

    being, been

Conciseness

- Choose between the active or passive voice, basing your choice on the situation and on discipline-specific conventions.

  Passive: The play is an allegorization of the conception and development of a new concept of justice delivered by the character Angelo and embodied in the character of the Duke.

Conciseness

To change from passive to active voice, ask yourself *Who's doing what?* or *What's doing what*? Then restructure the sentence to put the subject in front of the action verb.

Conciseness

- Passive: The play is an allegorization of the conception and development of a new concept of justice delivered by the character Angelo and embodied in the character of the Duke.

- Active: The play allegorizes the new concept of justice that Angelo delivers and the Duke embodies.

Cohesion

- *Cohesion* refers to the sense of sentence-by-sentence flow by which we move easily through a passage.

Should we use the passive?

- The collapse of a dead star into a point perhaps no larger than a marble creates a black hole.

- A black hole is created by the collapse of a dead star into a point perhaps no larger than a marble.

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Which passage is cohesive?

- Some astonishing questions about the nature of the universe have been raised by scientists studying black holes in space. *The collapse of a dead star into a point perhaps no longer than a marble creates a black hole.* So much matter compressed into so little volume changes the fabric of space around it in puzzling ways.

- Some astonishing questions about the nature of the universe have been raised by scientists studying black holes in space. *A black hole is created by the collapse of a dead star into a point perhaps no larger than a marble.* So much matter compressed into so little volume changes the fabric of space around it in puzzling ways.

What's the difference?

- The sentence with the passive voice causes the paragraph to *flow* better.

- It connects easily to the sentence that precedes it and the sentence that follows.

The First Principle of Cohesion: Old First

- **Begin your sentences with information familiar to your readers.**

  – This can be information you've recently introduced within the text.

  – This can be brought to the text with the general knowledge of the audience.

The Second Principle of Cohesion: New Last

- **End your sentences with information your readers cannot anticipate.**

The Principle of Cohesion as a Law of Cognition

- The principle of old-before-new is built into our perception of time and story.

- The principle forms the conceptual basis of the *introduction* or *background* sections of an essay.

What Cohesion Means for Your Sentence Beginnings

- Don't begin a sentence with a bit of new information.

- Don't begin a sentence with a bit of technical information.

- Use your openings to refer back to previous material or gently introduce a new topic.

What Cohesion Means for Your Sentence Endings

- Don't end a sentence with old information.

- Put the new, technical, and difficult information at the end of the sentence.

- Clearly signal when the end of a sentence begins.

"But then my point will be lost!"

- Ending sentences with new and important information is counter-intuitive.

- We want to put the new information first, to "highlight" it.

- But if readers don't understand its importance, placing it first will not help.

- Besides, we remember what's last anyway.

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What Readers Remember from Sentences

- First: the sentence ending

- Second: the sentence beginning

- Last: the sentence middle

Topic and Stress

- The beginning of your sentence is its **topic**: it's what the sentence is about.

- The end of the sentence is its **stress**: it's what the sentence delivers.

Topic and Stress in a Sentence

Topic (the "beginning")	Stress (the "ending")
Old, familiar, simple information linking back to previous sentences	New, complex, unfamiliar information linking forward

Practice Exercise

- For practice, look at the first three sentences of a paragraph you've written. Check to see if your sentences start with old information and end with new.

Coherence

- *Coherence* refers to the overall sense of unity in a passage.

Coherence

As a reminder, please promptly return the lecture notes you borrowed. Slide the notes under my door if I am not there. I may become agitated if you are late, much like my uncle Chester after several egg nogs on Christmas Eve. Most Christmases I liked to stay up and open my stockings after midnight. Staying up late was exciting and would be repeated a week later at New Year's. So would Uncle Chester's disgraceful behavior.

Cohesion Vs. Coherence

- **The previous example is cohesive.**
  - Each sentence connects with the next and the previous.
  - Sentences begin with familiar information.
  - Sentences end with new information.

- **But the previous example is incoherent.**
  - The paragraph has no sense of focus.
  - Each sentence shifts topic from the previous.

How Coherence is Destroyed

- [you]return the lecture notes. . .
- [you]slide the notes under my door. . .
- I may become . . .
- Most Christmases I liked . . .
- Staying up late was exciting . . .
- Uncle Chester . . .

Coherence is Established in Two Ways

- Readers identify the topics of individual sentences clearly.

- Topics of sentences come in a connected set (usually a *paragraph*).

"Sometimes I will stay up in my room for a day trying to get two sentences that will flow, that will seem as if they were always there."

_ Maya Angelou

Summary of Key Points

1. Conciseness: Cut repetition.

2. Cohesion: Connect sentences by moving from old to new.

3. Coherence: Create thematic continuity in passages.

The End

"Nobody should suppose that good writing – the kind that says what it means while being pleasant to read – has ever been easy."

_ Jacques Barzun

Resources

- Schedule regular Writing Studio appointments.
- Check "Resources for Writers" at http://uwp.aas.duke.edu/wstudio for helpful links on style.
- Check the Writing Studio Library for useful books on style.
- Find information on the 20 most common errors: http://www.bedfordstmartins.com/lunsford/twenty.html

Books

- ***Revising Prose*** by Richard Lanham
- ***Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*** by Joseph M. Williams
- ***Style: The Basics of Clarity and Grace*** by Joseph M. Williams
- ***The Elements of Style*** by William Strunk and E.B. White

Interested In A More In-Depth Experience?

To sign up for a workshop, go to "Schedule An Appointment" and "Workshop/Group Sign Up" on the Writing Studio's website:

http://uwp.aas.duke.edu/wstudio/