Writing with Style: Basic Tips

Effective writing captures and keeps the reader’s interest. Paying attention to word choice, punctuation, and sentence structure can clarify your writing. Reading aloud to yourself is one of the best ways to get a sense of how your writing sounds to the reader. Another reader or listener can also point out areas that could be revised.

Word Choice

Select Strong Verbs
Use strong verbs that keep adjectives to a minimum and give exact meaning to your words.

WEAK: He got out of bed quickly and agilely.
STRONG: He sprang out of bed.

WEAK: He went to the lake.
STRONG: He hiked to the lake.

WEAK: My parents have an expectation that I will graduate in four years.
STRONG: My parents expect me to graduate in four years.

Avoid Overusing Pronouns
Consolidate your writing by cutting down strings of pronouns.

WEAK: He looked sad and lonely, and he knew his expression reflected his feelings.
STRONG: Doug knew his sad and lonely expression reflected depression.

Keep It Concise
Avoid unnecessary detail and relative clauses that begin with who, that, or which.

WEAK: The doctor, who was in a hurry, rushed out the door. (Rushed tells us he was in a hurry, so the relative clause is unnecessary.)
STRONG: The doctor rushed out the door.

Avoid Clichés
Overused expressions prevent your writing from sounding original.

WEAK: A picture is worth a thousand words.
STRONG: A range of emotions welled up inside me when I saw the photograph, an experience language can’t describe.

Show; Don’t Tell
Effective writing shows the reader essential information using description, active voice, and concrete word choice. Less effective writing tells readers what they need to know.

TELLING: She started to become extremely afraid.
SHOWING: Her heart began to pound and her legs trembled as she tried to dry her sticky palms by wiping them on her pants.

Know When to Use “I”
Some instructors encourage the use of “I” in formal papers and some prefer that you never use it.

• Generally, you might choose to use “I” to differentiate your argument from that of your sources.
• Some disciplines use “the writer” or “the researcher” to avoid first person.
• To assert a third-person viewpoint, use “one” or “many” instead of “I,” “you,” or “a person.”
• Don’t overuse phrases such as “I think” and “I believe” because it may reduce your credibility.
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Note: This document should only be used as a reference and should not replace assignment guidelines.

Punctuation
Appropriate punctuation emphasizes and clarifies your ideas. Generally, a series of sentences of the same length creates a repetitive rhythm; punctuation can add variety to your sentence structure.

Semicolon
Semicolons signal to your reader that the information in both sentences should be taken together.
   EXAMPLE: I go to the movies often; it gives me something to do on the weekends.

Colon
A colon at the end of an independent clause introduces an example or expansion of what you have said.
   EXAMPLE: Education prepares you for the future: it provides knowledge you need to succeed.

Dashes
Dashes isolate phrases for emphasis, humorous effect, or a break in thought.
   EXAMPLE: My dad sleeps in—or hibernates—every Saturday.

Exclamation Point
Exclamation points are rarely used in academic writing and are generally reserved for exclamations, demands, or shouting in quoted dialogue.
   WEAK: Monet was the most influential painter of his time! (Most emphasizes influential painter; therefore, an exclamation point is not needed.)
   STRONG: Monet was the most influential painter of his time.

Sentence Structure
Your sentence organization determines emphasis and readability.

Choose Active Voice
In most cases, active voice engages the reader more than passive voice.
   PASSIVE: The ball is struck by the baseball player.
   ACTIVE: The baseball player strikes the ball.

Keep Items Parallel
List items (two or more) in the same grammatical form.
   NOT PARALLEL: Sarah does not like hot milk or water that is cold.
   PARALLEL: Sarah does not like hot milk or cold water.
   NOT PARALLEL: The author discusses the need for closer supervision, for additional training, and employees should feel comfortable approaching supervisors.
   PARALLEL: The author discusses the need for closer supervision, for additional training, and for supervisors to make their employees comfortable in approaching them.

Transitions
Transitions are words or phrases that connect one sentence or paragraph to the next. You can transition by introducing the next paragraph’s idea at the end of the first, beginning a new paragraph with a connection to the last, or by using words such as next, also, additionally, in contrast, however, and first, second, third. (See the Transitions handout for further information.)