



## Strategies for Improving Sentence Clarity

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### Go from old to new information

Introduce your readers to the "big picture" first by giving them information they already know. Then they can link what's familiar to the new information you give them. As that new information becomes familiar, it too becomes old information that can link to newer information.

The following example sentence is clear and understandable because it uses old information to lead to new information:

Every semester after final exams are over, I'm faced with the problem of what to do with books of lecture notes (new information). They (old) might be useful some day, but they just keep piling up on my bookcase (new). Someday, it (old) will collapse under the weight of information I might never need.

Here is a sentence that is not as clear. It moves from new information to old information:

Lately, most movies I've seen have been merely second-rate entertainment, but occasionally there are some with worthwhile themes. The rapid disappearance of the Indian culture (new) is the topic of a recent movie (old) I saw.

Did you find the second sentence hard to read or understand? If so, it could be because the old information comes late in the sentence after the new information. A clearer version that moves from old information to new information might look like this:

Lately, most movies I've seen have been merely second-rate entertainment, but occasionally there are some with worthwhile themes. One recent movie (old) I saw was about the rapid disappearance of the Indian culture. (new)

### Be careful about placement of subordinate clauses

Avoid interrupting the main clause with a subordinate clause if the interruption will cause confusion:

- **clear (subordinate clause at the end):**

Industrial spying is increasing rapidly *because of the growing use of computers to store and process corporate information.*

- **clear (subordinate clause at the beginning):**

*Because of the growing use of computers to store and process corporate information,* industrial spying is increasing rapidly.

- **not as clear (subordinate clause embedded in the middle):**

Industrial spying, *because of the growing use of computers to store and process corporate information,* is increasing rapidly.

### Use active voice

Sentences in active voice are usually easier to understand than those in passive voice because active-voice constructions indicate clearly the performer of the action expressed in the verb. In addition, changing from passive voice to active often results in a more concise sentence. So use active voice unless you have good reason to use the passive. For example, the passive is useful when you don't want to call attention to the doer; when the doer is obvious, unimportant, or unknown; or when passive voice is the conventional style among your readers.

For more on this topic, consult our handout on active and passive voice at [http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/grammar/g\\_actpass.html](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/grammar/g_actpass.html).

- **clear (active):**

The committee *decided* to postpone the vote.

- **not as clear (passive):**

A decision *was reached* to postpone the vote.

## Use parallel constructions

When you have 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.

- **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.

In the second sentence, notice how the string of "things to be aware of in Florida" does not create a parallel structure. Also, notice how much more difficult it is for a reader to follow the meaning of the second sentence compared to the first one.

## Avoid noun strings

Try not to string nouns together one after the other because a series of nouns is difficult to understand. One way to revise a string of nouns is to change one noun to a verb.

- **unclear (string of nouns):**

This report explains our *investment growth stimulation projects*.

- **clearer:**

This report explains our *projects to stimulate growth in investments*.

## Avoid overusing noun forms of verbs

Use verbs when possible rather than noun forms known as "nominalizations."

- **unclear (use of nominalization):**

The implementation of the plan was successful.

- **clearer:**

The plan was implemented successfully.  
We implemented the plan successfully.

## Avoid multiple negatives

Use affirmative forms rather than several negatives because multiple negatives are difficult to understand.

- **unclear (multiple negatives, passive):**

Less attention is paid to commercials that lack human interest stories than to other kinds of commercials.

- **clearer:**

People pay more attention to commercials with human interest stories than to other kinds of commercials.

## Choose action verbs over forms of *be*

When possible, avoid using forms of *be* as the main verbs in your sentences and clauses. This problem tends to accompany nominalization (see above). Instead of using a *be* verb, focus on the actions you wish to express, and choose the appropriate verbs. In the following example, two ideas are expressed: 1) that there is a difference between television and newspaper news reporting, and 2) the nature of that difference. The revised version expresses these two main ideas in the two main verbs.

- **Unclear (overuse of *be* verbs):**

One difference between television news reporting and the coverage provided by newspapers *is* the time factor between the actual happening of an event and the time it takes to be reported. The problem *is* that instantaneous coverage *is* physically impossible for newspapers.

- **Clearer:**

Television news reporting *differs* from that of newspapers in that television, unlike newspapers, *can provide* instantaneous coverage of events as they happen.

## Avoid unclear pronoun references

Be sure that the pronouns you use refer clearly to a noun in the current or previous sentence. If the pronoun refers to a noun that has been implied but not stated, you can clarify the reference by explicitly using that noun.

- **Unclear (unclear pronoun reference):**

With the spread of globalized capitalism, American universities increasingly follow a corporate fiscal model, tightening budgets and hiring temporary contract employees as teachers. **This** has prompted faculty and adjunct instructors at many schools to join unions as a way of protecting job security and benefits.

- **Clearer:**

With the spread of globalized capitalism, American universities increasingly follow a corporate fiscal model, tightening budgets and hiring temporary contract employees as teachers. **This trend** has prompted faculty and adjunct instructors at many schools to join unions as a way of protecting job security and benefits.

- **Unclear (unclear pronoun reference):**

Larissa worked in a national forest last summer, **which** may be her career choice.

- **Clearer:**

Larissa worked in a national forest last summer; **forest management** may be her career choice.  
Larissa worked in a national forest last summer, and she may choose a **forest management career**.

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