

This handout offers tips for keeping academic writing clear and concise.

- **Express actions in verbs (avoid nominalization)**

Consider this sentence:

Original: The cause of our schools' failure at teaching basic skills is not understanding the influence of cultural background on learning

The central verb in the sentence is *is*—a verb that doesn't pack much punch. The sentence abounds with actions much more interesting than *being*, but they're not expressed as verbs: the nouns *cause*, *failure*, *influence*, and *learning* imply the verbs *to cause*, *to fail*, *to influence*, and *to learn*.

Actions expressed in nouns rather than verbs are called nominalizations. We can't eliminate nominalizations altogether. However, letting verbs express actions usually makes sentences more direct, clear, and concise:

Revised: Our schools have failed to teach basic skills because educators do not understand how cultural backgrounds influence learning.

What makes the revision clearer than the original?

- **Avoid strings of prepositional phrases**

Notice that the above revision eliminates clunky strings of prepositional phrases (*of the failure*, *of our schools*, *of cultural background*, *on learning*).

Consider another example:

Original: A revision **of** the program will result **in** increases **in** our efficiency **in** the servicing **of** our customers.

Revised: If we revise the program, we can serve our customers more efficiently.

Strings of prepositional phrases are often red flags for nominalizations.

- **Choose clear subjects**

Compare the subjects in the first two examples above:

The cause of our schools' failure at teaching basic skills...
versus: Our schools...educators...cultural backgrounds...

Which subjects are more concrete? Which are easier to understand? Why?

Clear subjects typically include people, institutions, and events. Abstractions and processes often create unclear subjects.

- **Favor active voice over passive voice, using passive-voice constructions with intent**

Which sentence is more concise?

- It was decided by the Director to expand the program.
- The Director decided to expand the program.

Which sentence is clearest?

- The Snark was lassoed successfully. [By whom?]
- The Snark was lassoed successfully by the Animal Control Officer. [Still passive]
- The Animal Control Officer successfully lassoed the Snark. [Active]

Note that passive voice is more prevalent and accepted in some disciplines (e.g. some sciences, public policy) than others.

- **Avoid beginning sentences with expletive constructions**

Expletive constructions (there is/are..., it is...) take up space but add little meaning to sentences. Compare the following:

Original: It is vital that we delete the word “absolutely.”
Revised: We must delete the word “absolutely.”

Original: There are five car alarms that are blaring in the parking lot.
Revised: Five car alarms are blaring in the parking lot.

- **Eliminate unnecessary words**

Writers sometimes feel the urge to add emphasis to their prose by using extra words or phrases that don't contribute much to the meaning (and indeed, sometimes obscure it). Consider the following:

- It is *absolutely* vital that... [What does vital mean? Can something be only sort of vital?]
- Their strategy is *quite* unique. [What does unique mean? Are there degrees of uniqueness?]
- He prefers wheat *due to the fact that*... [Substitute because...]
- I need *some sort of* response by Thursday. [Replace some sort of with a.]

- **Revise your work**

The rules of thumb discussed above are useful not only when you draft an essay, but also when you revise. Try the following steps¹ on your own writing, especially in passages you find inelegant or unnecessarily wordy:

1. Underline the actions (including nominalizations—implied actions in non-verb forms)
2. Put boxes around the verbs
3. Circle the prepositions.
 - Do the prepositions point to unnecessary nominalizations? Can you replace forms of “to be” with action verbs?
 - If a sentence still sounds wordy after revision, check the distance between the subject and the verb. Do you have clear subjects followed directly by verbs?
4. Scan your passage for passive voice
Does the text benefit from the passive construction, or would it sound more direct using active voice?
5. Scan your passage for redundant words and expletive constructions.
Do they add necessary stress, or can they be eliminated?

¹ Adapted from the “Paramedic Method” developed by Richard Lanham in *Revising Prose* (1979).