

# Sentence Revision

Good academic writing is compact and concise. To achieve a mature academic style you should learn to write sentences that are concise, coherent, varied and vigorous – more or less the opposite of vague, wordy, disjointed, monotonous, choppy or dull. The goal is to make your writing informative, interesting and readable.

The following five writing techniques will help you learn to focus and tighten your sentences as well as use syntax or sentence structure to emphasize analysis and argument.

## 1. Co-Ordinate Ideas of Equal Importance

Coordinate words, phrases, and clauses by giving them parallel grammatical form:

### a) Words

- **The lion** *and* **the tiger** belong to the cat family.
- The witness **blushed**, **cleared** his throat, *and* **began** to speak in a halting manner.

### b) Phrases (a group of grammatically connected words)

- Bush made the offer in order **to pacify** European critics of his nuclear defense strategy, **to test** the sincerity of the Soviet call for peace, and **to initiate** a new round of talks on the reduction of arms.

### c) Main Clauses (an independent group of words with a subject and a predicate)

- Main clauses can be connected with coordinating conjunctions: and, but, for, or, nor, so, yet

- The economists considered budget cuts, *and* the politicians thought of votes.
- We are all in the gutter, *but* some of us are looking at the stars. -Oscar Wilde
- Main clauses can be connected with semicolons:
  - **I came; I saw; I conquered.** -Julius Caesar
  - Some books are **undeservedly forgotten**; none are **undeservedly remembered.** -W.H.Auden
- Main clauses can be connected with semicolons and conjunctive adverbs: moreover, likewise, however, consequently, therefore, in fact, then etc.
  - Many young Englishmen condemned the English war against France in the 1790s; *likewise*, many young Americans condemned the war against North Vietnam in the 1960s.

## 2. Subordinate Ideas of Secondary Importance

Put the main idea in the main clause and the supporting or subordinate idea in a subordinate clause:

**Main Clause:** a group of words with a subject and a predicate; it can stand alone (shown in bold).

**Subordinate or Dependent Clause:** a group of words with a subject and a predicate; it depends on a main clause (shown in italics).

**X** Medical researchers have long been seeking a cure for a disease. The disease takes thousands of lives every year. (Wordy, vague, redundant, loose.)

**✓** **Medical researchers have long been seeking a cure for a disease** *that takes thousands of lives every year.* (Concise, specific, logical.)

Subordinating Conjunctions: who, which, that, while, because, although, if, so that, what etc.

- **A mind that is stretched to a new idea never returns to its original dimensions.** -Oliver Wendell Holmes
- **Amelia Earhart**, who disappeared in 1937 during a round-the-world trip, **set new speed records for long-distance flying in the 1930s.**
- *While Marian sang*, **Zachary played the piano.**
- *Because the moon has no atmosphere*, **it affords a perfectly clear view of the stars.**
- **A wall collapsed** *because the foundation was poorly constructed.*
- *What Sylvia did* **amazed me.** (The subordinate clause is the subject of the main clause)
- **Alexandra wondered** *what marriage would do to her.* (The subordinate clause is the object of the main clause)
- *Although a U.S treaty forbade white men to enter the Black Hills*, **white men entered the area in 1874 under General George Custer**, *who had led the slaughter of the Southern Cheyenne in 1868.*

As you can see from the last example, subordinate clauses give important supporting detail.

Subordinate clauses also establish important logical relationships that are essential for coherence and overall progression of thought. The next example shows just how complex a sentence can get without being difficult to read.

- *Though* some claim *that* society's institutions nurture evil in otherwise good people, **others insist** *that* evil springs directly from human nature, *which* is said to be inherently corrupt.

In this sentence, the main clause (in bold) doesn't start until after the first comma. It is preceded by two subordinate clauses (starting with *though* and *that*), and completed by a third subordinate clause (starting with *which*). Finally the object of the main clause is a subordinate clause (starting with *that*).

### 3. Use Modifiers to Reduce Wordiness

X The stag leapt. He was startled. He leapt suddenly. He leapt from a rock. The rock was high. (Five choppy, wordy sentences without a line of thought.)

✓ *Startled and terrified*, the stag leapt *suddenly* from a *high rock*, *bounding and crashing through the dense green woods*.

*Startled and terrified*, the stag (adjectives modifying the noun "stag")

leapt *suddenly* (adverb modifying the verb "leapt")

from a high rock (prepositional phrase)

(the stag)..., *bounding and crashing* (adjectives modifying the noun "stag")

*through the dense green woods* (prepositional phrase)

**Adjectives** have many forms:

- dense, green, bounding (present participle), startled (past participle)

**Adverbs** may have either the ending -ly, like suddenly, or no ending at all, like fast.

Reduce clauses to modifiers (adjectives and adverbs) to create tight, concise sentences:

- the stag was startled → the startled stag
- the stag was bounding → the bounding stag
- the woman who is studying is... → the studying woman

The following sentences are examples of concise sentences where clauses and phrases have been reduced to modifiers. Modifiers carry all the specific details that make writing interesting:

- The examiner has *mistakenly* assumed that *competent* students can write *clearly* and *intelligently* on five topics in just one hour.

- A bus took us to our *initial* destination, *the University of Miami*, where we attended lectures on culture shock, personal hygiene, foreign exchange rates, and communication problems.
- *Raised on the Isle of Wight*, he conceived a *grand* passion for the sea – *a passion that* lasted all his life and that filled his poems with *wild* music.

## 4. Avoid Using "Filler" Words and Phrases

Get straight to the point. Cut all redundant words and phrases.

### *Wordy*

- at the present moment
- due to the fact that
- if conditions are such that
- in the course of
- in the event that
- in the near future
- it is often the case that

### *Concise*

- now
- because
- if
- during
- soon
- often

Avoid unspecific use of "empty" pronouns: **this, these, which, it**

**X** Some people insist that a woman should have a career, while others say that she belongs in the home. This is unfair.

✓ Some people insist that a woman should have a career, while others say that she belongs in the home. This contradictory set of demands is unfair.

Most often these "empty" pronouns are used to create "band-aid coherence" between a noun (antecedent) previously stated and the "empty" pronoun. The writer recognizes the need for making a connection between two ideas but lazily puts an unspecific pronoun (that may refer to several different antecedents) in the place of a precise noun or noun phrase.

## 5. Use Strong Action Verbs

Put energy in your writing with strong action verbs.

Avoid using forms of the verb "to be" (is, are, was, were, has been, had been).

Instead choose verbs that denote an action:

**X** Nat's bustling, matronly wife, Essie, **is** constantly overanxious about their children.

✓ Nat's bustling, matronly wife, Essie, constantly **frets** about their children.

Turn nouns into verbs:

**X** The reason for his desire to visit Spain **was** his desire to see a bullfight.

✓ He **decided** to visit Spain because he wanted to see a bull fight.

Avoid overuse of the passive voice:

- **Passive:** Territory size **was found** to vary with population density.
- **Active:** Territory size **varied** with population density.
  
- **Passive:** From field observations, it **was shown** that virtually all tagged individuals remained in their original home ranges.
- **Active:** Field observations **showed** that virtually all tagged individuals remained in their original home ranges.

Examples of overuse of the passive voice are from *Writing Papers in the Biological Sciences* by Victoria E. McMillan.

All other examples are from *Writing: A College Handbook* by Heffernan and Lincoln and from teaching material accompanying the handbook.

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