

Principles of Writing Clear Sentences

Express crucial actions in verbs.

Not This:

It is my feeling that a continuance of my academic education would increase the effectiveness of my contribution to the future of American industry.

But This:

I feel that I can contribute more effectively to the future of American industry if I continue my academic education.

Use strong, precise verbs.

Not This:

She began to talk more slowly to him so that each part of the distinct words would be clear.

But This:

She enunciated each word for him.

Say *who* performed the action (the “subject”).

Not This:

There is a growing reluctance to allow new hazardous waste facilities to be built near population centers.

But This:

The public is increasingly reluctant to allow the chemical industry to build new hazardous waste facilities near population centers.

Put as little information as possible between the subject and the verb.

Not This:

The key to understanding Abco Refining's authority to use accounting methods which include imported raw materials and production part costs into inventory costs when paid, rather than when such materials and parts were imported, lies in Schedule C and its attachments.

But This:

Abco Refining uses accounting methods which include the cost of imported raw materials and production parts into inventory costs when the materials and costs are paid for rather than when they are imported. Schedule C and its attachments are the key to understanding Abco's authority to use these methods.

Put shorter elements of the sentence before the verb and longer elements after the verb.

Not This:

If the borrower is going to make an informed choice, the finance charge, the total payments, "total sale price," and especially the balloon payment are essential information.

But This:

To make an informed choice, the buyer must know the finance charge, the total payments, "total sale price," and especially the balloon payment.

Use parallel structure: when listing ideas within a sentence, make sure each element in the list can grammatically follow from the same words that precede the first element in the list.

Not This:

When she was done with her shift, she would need to remember to set the alarm using that day's unique code, turning the lights off in every room, except the foyer and she fastened all three locks on each of the two doors.

But This:

When she was done with her shift, she would need to remember to set the alarm using that day's unique code, to turn off the lights in every room except the foyer, and to fasten all three locks on each of the two doors.

When listing ideas, make the sentence structure reflect the relationship among those ideas.

Not This:

It seems evident that the SEC meant to establish a two-level materiality test, the first level of which enveloped all proceedings which could be generically grouped with the second level selecting out economically material proceedings and requiring the same individual description (including relief sought) as required for other material legal proceedings.

But This:

It seems evident that the SEC meant to establish a two-level materiality test: the first level groups all proceedings which are generically related, and the second level selects out economically material proceedings and requires for them the same individual description (including relief sought) that is required for other material legal proceedings.

Put known information near the beginning of the sentence (the “topic”), and introduce new information near the end (the “comment”). Each sentence should begin with a clear focus that logically follows from the previous sentences or from already established information.

Not This:

His most famous book was not *Moby-Dick* during Herman Melville's lifetime. A fictionalized account of his experiences in the Marquesas Islands, *Typee*, his first book, was Melville's biggest success instead. The sales figures were terrible for *Moby-Dick* compared to *Typee*. Lengthy metaphysical and cetological explanations fill the later book, unlike the crisp adventure plot of Melville's first novel. Was he even capable of writing an exciting adventure tale anymore was what many readers of *Moby-Dick* wondered.

But This:

Unlike in the twenty-first century, Herman Melville's most famous book during his lifetime was not *Moby-Dick*. Rather, his biggest success was his first book, *Typee*, a fictionalized account of his experiences in the Marquesas Islands. *Typee* was a bestseller, but sales of *Moby-Dick* six years later were terrible. These plummeting sales figures may be because of structural differences between the two books. Whereas *Typee* has a crisp, suspenseful adventure plot, the story of *Moby-Dick* is repeatedly interrupted by lengthy metaphysical and cetological explanations. Confused and unimpressed by Melville's increasingly complex and experimental narrative structure, fans of his early novels wondered if he was even capable of telling an exciting story anymore.

Emphasize important takeaways at the end of the sentence.

Not This:

In response to the problems identified in the self-study, several activities have evolved at this college to meet the ever-expanding needs of our students, but the traditional goals of the college, which are to educate the whole person in the basic skills of liberal education, are not neglected by these new programs.

But This:

In response to the problems identified in the self-study, this college has evolved several programs to meet the ever-expanding needs of our students. But the new programs do not neglect the traditional goals of the college -- to educate the whole person in the basic skills of the liberal arts.

Ground vague, abstract language (which includes broad categories and figurative concepts that might be differently interpreted by different readers) with specific, concrete examples, explanations, and details.

Not This:

The government has an obligation to protect people from fear.

But This:

The government has an obligation to protect people from fear, so in order to prevent future acts of domestic terrorism, the NSA should surveil all telephone and electronic communications.

Or This:

The government has an obligation to protect people from fear, and because warrantless wiretapping is a source of paranoia among many citizens, the NSA must abandon such surveillance practices.

Or Even This:

The government has an obligation to protect people from fear, so horror films should be made illegal and all novels by Stephen King should be burned.

Do not use a synonym from a thesaurus unless you are confident about the meaning and connotations of the alternate word. Some synonyms may be appropriate only in certain contexts (like a medical setting), when referring to certain subjects (like plants or internal organs), or when conveying certain tones (like disapproval or satire). An unfamiliar word might also be rare or obscure, which could make your writing awkward or indecipherable.

Not This:

Amidst his career, Bong Joon-ho's flicks have inclined to evert spectators' forecasts by coherently amalgamating incommensurate genres and resonances, immediately following a flaky scene of absurd humorousness, for instance, with a fortuitous moment of frantic, gruff macabre.

But This:

Throughout his career, Bong Joon-ho's films have tended to upend audience expectations by seamlessly blending disparate genres and tones, immediately following a goofy scene of slapstick comedy, for instance, with an unexpected moment of violent, brutal horror.

Avoid absolutes and hyperbole. (Also known as, “Never use never.”)

Not This:

Throughout all of human history, everyone has always hated snakes.

But This:

Evidence of widespread hatred of snakes has been recorded by many cultures for millennia.

Use effective transitional words and coordinating conjunctions to show the relationship between sentences and between parts of compound sentences.

Not This:

The framers envisioned themselves as establishing the most egalitarian republic of the time. They excluded most of the population though. James Madison’s extensive research into democratic principles failed to end his participation in slavery. He obtained and read every known book about global democracies, and his quest to raise funds for these treatises on freedom led him to deliberate over how to most profitably sell his human property. He writes that he will sell his body servant Billey in Philadelphia at a price not “near the worth of him.” He fears that Billey’s mind may have been “too thoroughly tainted” with notions of freedom to be sold as a slave in the South. He admits that he “cannot think of punishing him by transportation merely for coveting that liberty for which we [...] have proclaimed so often to be the right, and worthy pursuit, of every human being.” Madison recognized Billey’s interest in and entitlement to the rights he would later enshrine in the Constitution, so he refused to completely abandon his economic stake in chattel slavery.

But This:

The framers envisioned themselves as establishing the most egalitarian republic of the time, yet their democratic vision knowingly excluded most of the population. For example, James Madison’s extensive research into democratic principles failed to shape his individual actions despite alerting him to the irony of his role as the slaveholding author of the Bill of Rights. During his time at the Constitutional Convention, he obtained and read every known book about global democracies; however, his quest to raise funds for these treatises on freedom led him to deliberate over how he could sell his human property at the highest profit. In a letter to his father, Madison writes that he will sell his body servant Billey in Philadelphia, where lifetime bondage is outlawed and thus Madison will not be able to earn a profit “near the worth of him.” Paradoxically, Madison settles on this disappointing compromise because he fears that Billey’s mind may have been “too thoroughly tainted” with notions of freedom to be sold as a slave in the South, where he would fetch the highest price. Likewise, Madison admits that he “cannot think of punishing him by transportation [to the Caribbean, where he might also sell for a high price] merely for coveting that liberty for which we [...] have proclaimed so often to be the right, and worthy pursuit, of every human being.” Madison recognized Billey’s interest in and entitlement to the rights the framers would soon enshrine in the Constitution; nevertheless, like many of the founders, he refused to completely abandon his economic stake in chattel slavery.

Favor succinct sentences over unnecessarily long, complicated ones.

Not This:

Whereas a guard at eye level with prisoners would only be able to see a very limited range and would not be able to see past obstructions if, for instance, the prisoners were to shield each other from view in order to commit illicit acts, and whereas even an elevated yet still visible guard would be able to see farther, above and beyond most obstructions, but would still be limited by being able to see only in one direction and focus only on one thing at a time, a fact which would be apparent to any prisoner and could thus be exploited since a prisoner standing outside of a guard's probable range of view could commit an illicit act and escape detection so long as he kept an eye on the guard and performed the act only while the guard was not looking in his direction, the elevated *and* concealed guard theorized by English social theorist Jeremy Bentham in his "Panopticon" penitentiary proposals of the eighteenth century (which were later popularized by French philosopher Michel Foucault in his 1975 book *Discipline and Punish*) was effective in spite of the guard's inherent limitations to sight since the guard in his elevated position could potentially see any of the prisoners at any given time, yet the prisoners would never know for certain where the guard was looking, and, in fact, even if there were no guard at all in the Panopticon tower at a certain time, the prisoners' inability to see into the tower would prevent them from knowing this, forcing them to behave as though the guard were always looking at them simply because it was possible that he could be. (1 sentence, 280 words)

But This:

A guard at eye level with prisoners can only see a limited range and cannot see past obstructions at eye level. Prisoners can thus take advantage of such a guard's limitations by, for example, shielding each other from view in order to commit illicit acts. An *elevated* guard can see farther—as well as over most obstructions—yet he is still limited by his inability to see in more than one direction or to focus on more than one thing at a time. If he is visible to the prisoners, they can exploit these limitations. So long as he is careful to commit an illicit act only when the guard appears to be looking elsewhere, the prisoner can escape detection. Therefore, the form of surveillance that most effectively curtails the illicit acts of prisoners is the "Panopticon," in which the guard is both elevated *and* concealed from prisoners' view. This system nullifies the exploitability of the guards' sight limitations. Because he is elevated, the guard can potentially see any prisoner at any given time, yet because he is concealed, the prisoners never know for certain where he is looking. In fact, even if there is no guard at all in the panopticon tower, the prisoners' inability to definitively ascertain this fact forces them to behave as though the guard is *always* looking at them simply because it is *possible* that he could be. The panopticon was developed by English social theorist Jeremy Bentham in the eighteenth century but was popularized by French philosopher Michel Foucault in his 1975 book *Discipline and Punish*. (10 sentences, 26.2 words on average)

Adapted in part from: *The Little Red Schoolhouse*, University of Chicago.