IMPROVE YOUR WRITING STYLE

1. Choose an appropriate tone.
The level of formality depends on the kind of assignment, the reader, and the purpose. Informal tone is personal, simple, and direct. Active voice is used more frequently than passive voice (see #2). Sentences may be somewhat shorter. Personal pronouns (I, we) may be used. This style is used in more casual writing assignments, journal entries, and classwork which is designated as informal. Remember, however, that writing informally does not necessarily mean you should use slang, colloquialisms, and contractions.

Formal tone is impersonal, with more frequent use of the passive voice, a fairly learned vocabulary, and longer sentences, and with avoidance of personal pronouns. This style is used for academic articles and essays. Remember, however, that writing formally does not mean that you should use unnecessary jargon, clumsy structures, awkward vocabulary, excessive verbiage, or pompous phrases such as this author believes in order to avoid using I or we, or that you should overuse the passive voice.

Formal: Research has shown an interesting connection between vitamin A and cancer, but the exact nature of the connection has not been conclusively determined.

Informal: Researchers believe there may be a link between vitamin A and cancer, but they do not know exactly what it is yet.

Whatever tone you use, always be clear, direct, and comprehensible.

2. Avoid using the passive voice unless absolutely necessary.
In a sentence written in active voice, an actor acts upon a receiver ("The dog bit the man"). In a sentence written in passive voice, the receiver is being acted upon by an actor ("The man was bitten by the dog"). Use the wordier passive structure only when the identity of the "actor" is unknown or is less important than the receiver or the act itself.

Passive: All beef has been marked down by the butcher.
Active: The butcher has marked down all the beef.
Passive: The water was boiled for ten minutes.
Active: I boiled the water for ten minutes.

Awkward passive: Therefore, it is recommended that this experiment be tested for its effectiveness. (recommended by whom? tested by whom?)
Better (still passive): Therefore, the effectiveness of this experiment should be tested. (but tested by whom?)
Better (active): Therefore, we should test the effectiveness of this experiment.
3. **Be simple and concise in your writing.**
   Choose a short word instead of a long one when the meaning is the same, and avoid jargon. Cut out unnecessary words. For example, use the simple word *about* instead of vague expressions such as *in reference to, regarding, with regard to, or relating to the subject matter of*. Use *because* instead of *due to the fact that, in view of the fact that, or owing to the fact that*. Avoid starting a sentence with empty passive phrases such as *it should be noted that, it is recommended that,* or *it was found that.*

**Wordy:** Poor living accommodations give promise of incrementing the negative side of the morale balance so far as new personnel are concerned.

**Better:** Poor living accommodations lower the morale of new personnel.

**Wordy:** It is expected by management that great progress will be made by personnel in providing a solution to these problems in the near future.

**Better:** Management expects that personnel will soon solve these problems.

4. **Be precise in your writing.**
   Avoid clichés and overused words or expressions. Don't use vague words such as *case* unless referring to a *case of canned goods or a case of malaria.* (Also avoid *factor, situation, position, aspect.*)

Avoid words or expressions that are ambiguous. Be clear in your use of the words *as, because, while,* and *when.* It is best to use *while* or *when* instead of *as* to indicate relationships in time, and *because* instead of *as* to indicate relationships of cause and effect.

Since I arrived, I have seen three new species. *(meaning is clear)*

Since I left my textbook at home, I will share. *("because" would be a better choice)*

As I got out of bed, I heard the sound of gunfire. *(meaning is clear)*

As he is the professor, we should listen to him. *("because" would be a better choice)*

As I ate, I studied my notes. *("while" would be a better choice)*

While I agree with him in principle, I don't see how his ideas could work. *("although" would be a better choice)*

**NOTE:** You can start a sentence with *because.* Although a simple sentence would be a sentence fragment if it started with *because* (e.g., *Because he needed further information.*), you can start a complex sentence with *because* as long as you complete the sentence (e.g., *Because he needed further information, he phoned the head office.*)

5. **Avoid starting a sentence with the pronoun *this or that* unless it is followed by a noun or refers clearly and directly to a noun in the previous sentence.**
   These pronouns should not be used to refer to the concept of the entire sentence (or paragraph, or essay) preceding it.

A scientist's work has no value unless he shares his thoughts with the scientific community. That is the cornerstone of science. *(What is that? Try *That communication . . .* )

6. **Avoid the use of *there is or there are* to begin a sentence.**

   After you complete these programs, there are many leagues available for you to join.

   **Better:** After you complete these programs, many leagues are available for you to join.

   **Or:** After you complete these programs, you can join one of the many leagues available.
7. Use verbs effectively.
   NO: The bacteria had an influence on the morphology of the plant.
   YES: The bacteria influenced the morphology of the plant.

8. Avoid the use of empty modifiers such as very, quite, and fairly.
   very large = huge, enormous, gigantic

9. Avoid redundancies in the qualification of words, as in absolutely perfect, completely surrounded, conclusive proof, green in color, serious crises.

10. Watch out for dangling or misplaced modifiers.
    Unclear modifiers often creep into formal writing because of the use of the passive voice (see #2)

    NO: After bleeding the mice, radioimmunoassays were conducted to test binding capabilities.
        (the sentence suggests that the radioimmunoassays bled the mice)
    YES: After the mice were bled, radioimmunoassays were conducted to test binding capabilities. (passive)
    YES: After we bled the mice, we conducted radioimmunoassays to test binding capabilities. (active)

11. Find out the proper usage of words that confuse you.
    For example, what is the difference between affect and effect? its and it’s?
    whose and who’s? less and fewer? that and which?

12. Combine sentences to improve the flow of your writing.
    Then condense - reduce from clauses to phrases and to single words if possible.

    The tapestries were hanging on the wall. They were abstract yet beautiful.
    The tapestries that were hanging on the wall were abstract yet beautiful. (clause)
    The tapestries hanging on the wall were abstract yet beautiful. (participial phrase - 4 words)
    The tapestries on the wall were abstract yet beautiful. (prepositional phrase - 3 words)
    The wall tapestries were abstract yet beautiful. (1 word)

13. Don’t use synonyms randomly.
    Avoid indiscriminate use of the thesaurus to find twenty different ways to say the same word throughout your paper. Using different words for the same concept can confuse a reader unless all terms are defined clearly. Repeating key words is, in fact, one of the simplest ways of providing transitions to maintain coherence in your essay.

14. Avoid the use of confusing double negatives such as not unlikely, not impossible.
    Be direct and precise: is it likely or not? is it possible or not?

15. Clear your writing of empty expressions such as in terms of, related to, reflective of, concerned with, in regards to, dealing with.
    Instead, decide what the exact relationship is, and say it.

THE LEARNING CENTER, 659-3725

The Learning Center offers Basic Composition (ENG 080) for students whose Writing Placement scores indicate a need for developmental composition.

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