

# Simplicity, Clarity, Consistency

A Practical Method of Revision

# Contents

In this lesson, we will discuss three goals of revision:

1. **Simplicity:**  
Eliminating unnecessary words
2. **Clarity:**  
Choosing the words that will best communicate your meaning
3. **Consistency:**  
Maintaining the same verb tense

We will then devise a simple and practical method to achieve these goals.

# 1. Simplicity: Eliminating Unnecessary Words

# Unnecessary Words

- ▶ Unnecessary words can make a sentence confusing.
- ▶ If it's possible to cut a word, always do so. Try to express the most content in the fewest words. Your meaning will be much clearer as a result.
- ▶ **Remember: The shortest way of saying something (without sacrificing necessary content, of course) is usually the best.**

# Example

Wordy (and consequently unclear):

- ▶ *Although Bradley Hall is regularly populated by students, close study of the building as a structure is seldom undertaken by them.*<sup>1</sup>

Simpler (and consequently clearer):

- ▶ *Although many students live in Bradley Hall, few stop to notice the building's architectural structure.*

<sup>1</sup> *Purdue Online Writing Lab*, "Eliminating Wordiness Exercise 1," Purdue University, accessed January 7, 2016, <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/exercises/print/6/9/24/>

# Other Examples

## Wordy:

- ▶ *In a situation in which a class is overenrolled, you may request that the instructor force-add you.<sup>2</sup>*

## Simpler:

- ▶ *When a class is overenrolled, you may ask the instructor to force-add you.*

# Other Examples

## Wordy:

- ▶ *In the not too distant future, college freshmen must all become aware of the fact that there is a need for them to make contact with an academic adviser concerning the matter of a major.<sup>3</sup>*

## Simpler:

- ▶ *In the future, college freshmen should contact their academic advisors when they select a major.*

# Advice from the Turabian Editors

- ▶ The first 8 words of a sentence are especially critical. The editors of the Turabian manual offer this advice:

The key to a clearly written sentence [is] in its first few words. When readers grasp those first seven or eight words easily, they read what follows faster, understand it better, and remember it longer.

1. Get to the subject of your sentence quickly.
2. Make subjects short and concrete.
3. Put key actions in verbs, not nouns.

[These] principles add up to this: Readers want to get past a short, concrete, familiar subject quickly and easily to a verb expressing a specific action.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Kate Turabian, *A Manual for Writers*, 7th ed, ed. Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 110.

# Get to the Subject Quickly

## Wordy:

- ▶ In view of claims by researchers on higher education indicating at least one change by most undergraduate students of their major field of study, first year **students** seem not well informed about choosing a major field of study.<sup>5</sup>

*Note that the subject of this sentence is “students” (in red type). This sentence takes much too long to get to the point! The introductory material (green type) needs to be simplified.*

## Simpler (and consequently clearer):

- ▶ **Researchers** on higher education claim that most students change their major field of study at least once during their undergraduate careers. **If that is so**, then first-year **students** seem ill informed when they choose a major.<sup>6</sup>

*The original sentence has been reworked, and now appears as two sentences. Note that the new sentences get to the point quickly. The subjects “researchers” and “students” appear in red type.*

<sup>5</sup> Turabian, 111.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

# Keep Subjects Simple

Wordy:

- ▶ **A school system's successful adoption of a new reading curriculum for its elementary schools depends** on the demonstration in each school of the commitment of its principal and the cooperation of teachers in setting reasonable goals.<sup>7</sup>

*Note that the complete subject of the sentence comprises all of the words in red type. Readers don't get to the verb until the word "depends". The subject is too wordy and complicated.*

Simpler:

- ▶ **A school system** will successfully **adopt** a new reading curriculum only when each principal demonstrates that she is committed to it and teachers cooperate to set reasonable goals.<sup>8</sup>

*Observe that the sentence has been simplified by making the subject shorter (see red type). Readers now reach the verb "will adopt" much more quickly.*

<sup>7</sup> Turabian, 111.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

# Wordy Verb Phrases

Whenever possible, verb phrases should be reduced to a one-word verb.

One word is simpler (and consequently better) than two, three, or four words

▶ Examples:

- “Make contact with” = “Contact”
- “Had the effect of” = “Caused”
- “Gave rise to” = “Caused”
- “Served the purpose of” = “Enabled” or “Caused”
- “Gave grounds for” = “Supported” or “Argued”
- “Made the case that” = “Argued,” “Reasoned”, etc.

## 2. Clarity: Choosing the Words that Best Communicate Your Meaning

# Big Words

- ▶ A big word is no better than a simple word.
- ▶ Never use a big word when a simple word will do just as well.
- ▶ Using big words when simpler words will work better will not impress readers. On the contrary, an experienced reader will view you as an immature writer.

# A Word Fitly Spoken ...

- ▶ Instead of using the biggest word in your vocabulary, use the word that best does the job. Don't use the big word just because it is a big word.
- ▶ Think about the idea that you're trying to communicate, or the concept that you're trying to explain, and select the words that readers will have the easiest time understanding.
- ▶ Remember that the purpose of communication is to communicate. If your language is so complex that readers can't understand what you mean, then you haven't communicated. You've obfuscated. (Yes, it's a big word, but it rhymes! 😊)

# A Time for All Things

- ▶ At times, a big word may be appropriate. In these instances, the big word has the most specific meaning, or expresses your thought most precisely.
- ▶ If so, the big word is fine. But don't choose the big word just because it's big. Instead, select the best word for the job, whether that word is big or small.
- ▶ Remember: Experienced readers will judge your writing based not on the size of your words but on the clarity of your meaning.

# Dead Words

Some words are so overused that they have lost their force and are now dead weight. It's usually best to avoid these words altogether.

- ▶ Real
- ▶ Really
- ▶ Very
- ▶ Impact
- ▶ Lots, a lot
- ▶ Mad (say either “angry” or “insane”)
- ▶ Bad
- ▶ Good
- ▶ Great
- ▶ Cool
- ▶ Awesome
- ▶ Nice
- ▶ So (as an adjective – “so happy” or “so impressive”)

### 3. Consistency: Maintaining the Same Verb Tense

# Verb Tenses

- ▶ There are three basic classes of verb tense:
  1. Present
  2. Past
  3. Future
- ▶ When writing, pick either the present or past tense, and stick with it throughout your essay. Do not switch tenses unless the content of your paper requires you to do so.

# Errors in Verb Tense

Example:

- ▶ The instructor **explains** the diagram to students who **asked** questions during the lecture.

*“Explains” is present tense, while “asked” is past tense. Pick one of the other, and use it consistently.*

Corrected:

- ▶ The instructor **explains** the diagram to students who **ask** questions.

OR

- ▶ The instructor **explained** the diagram to students who **asked** questions.

# More Examples

Example:

- ▶ About noon the sky darkened, a breeze sprang up, and a low rumble announces the approaching storm.

“Darkened” and “sprang” are past tense, but “announces” is present tense.

Corrected:

- ▶ About noon the sky darkened, a breeze sprang up, and a low rumble announced the approaching storm.

OR

- ▶ About noon the sky darkens, a breeze springs up, and a low rumble announces the approaching storm.

# Exception: The Literary Present Tense

On the previous slides, you have learned to use the same verb tense throughout your paper. There is an exception to this rule, however.

- ▶ Regardless of the verb tense you have been using in your paper, use the present tense to discuss a literary text.
- ▶ The reason for this is that even though a text may have been written many years in the past, its author still “speaks” in the present through the text.

# Examples

## Incorrect:

- ▶ The Apostle Paul **wrote** his second epistle to Timothy from a Roman prison as he **awaited** execution. Fittingly, in the epistle he **reminded** Timothy that “God has not given us the spirit of fear” (2 Tim 1:7).

The verbs above initially appear to be correct. They are all written in the past tense. However, remember to use the literary present tense to refer to a written text. Since the verb “reminded” refers to what Paul wrote in the book of II Timothy, it should be transferred to the present tense – “reminds.”

## Correct:

- ▶ The Apostle Paul **wrote** his second epistle to Timothy from a Roman prison as he **awaited** execution. Fittingly, in the epistle he **reminds** Timothy that “God has not given us the spirit of fear” (2 Tim 1:7).

# Examples

## Incorrect:

- ▶ The Declaration of Independence **was written** to explain the colonists' reasons for revolting from England. Primarily, the colonists **rebelled** because of King George's unjust government and taxation. As the Declaration itself **stated**, "the history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations."

Again, the above passage seems correct because all of the verbs are written in the past tense. However, what the Declaration "stated" in 1776 it still "states" today. As such, the verb "stated" should be made present tense.

## Correct:

- ▶ The Declaration of Independence **was written** to explain the colonists' reasons for revolting from England. Primarily, the colonists **rebelled** because of King George's unjust government and taxation. As the Declaration **states**, "the history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations."

# Conclusion: A Practical Method to Revise Papers

# Revision

- ▶ For an experienced writer, a single round of revision may suffice.
- ▶ However, if you struggle with writing, or if you are not an experienced writer, I recommend that you read and revise each paper 3 times before submitting it.

# The 1<sup>st</sup> Round – Simplicity

- ▶ Print out your paper. Most people read better when they look at an actual page than when they read from a screen.
- ▶ Read for simplicity. Do you see any passages that are wordy or confusing? Circle them on the paper.
- ▶ Once you have finished reading, revise the passages that you have circled. How can you word those passages more simply and clearly?

# The 2<sup>nd</sup> Round – Verb Tenses

- ▶ If necessary, print out another copy of the paper.
- ▶ Read your paper again. This time, focus exclusively on verb tenses. Circle any verb that shifts tense. Likewise, circle any verb that describes a literary work.
- ▶ After reading the paper, make necessary revisions. When a verb shifted tense, was the shift necessary? If not, correct the verb. When you referred to a literary work, did you use the present tense? If not, correct the verb.

# The 3<sup>rd</sup> Round – Word Choice and Grammar

- ▶ If necessary, print out another copy of the paper.
- ▶ Read the paper once more, paying particular attention to word choice. Did you use the simplest word for the job? If you used a “big” word, did you have good reason for doing so?
- ▶ Circle any questionable word choice. As well, if you know that you are prone to a particular grammatical error, circle any instance of that error.
- ▶ After reading the paper, revise the passages you have circled.