

Some Simple Guidelines for More Effective Writing

The Prime Directive(s): Make it clear and keep it simple.

- Figure out a single purpose for what you write, and state it clearly early in your essay or paper. That purpose should be as specific as possible, rather than broad and vague. The most effective purposes are those which make some definite analytical statement about a subject, an issue, or a work of literature/scholarship.
- Stick to your stated purpose. Don't allow tangential issues and questions to distract you, because though they may appeal to you, they will confuse your readers.
- Each paragraph should embody a cohesive group of thoughts around a single idea called a topic. Each paragraph should include a topic sentence that indicates the idea expressed in that paragraph.
- Paragraphs should form a topical sequence that builds logically towards accomplishing your stated purpose.
- Each sentence in a paragraph should express a single thought.
- Structure your sentences as effectively as possible.
 - The most effective structures are *active* ones in which the subject acts through the verb, as in "The boy (subject) hits (verb) the ball."
 - Less effective are *descriptive* structures that use state-of-being verbs such as "to seem" or "to appear", or the various forms of "to be" (is, are, was, etc.) to describe a subject rather than having the subject act. "The boy (subject) is (verb) a ball-hitter."
 - Least effective are *passive* structures in which the subject is acted on through the verb, as in "The ball (subject) was hit (verb) by the boy."
 - Most of your sentences should be active. Use descriptive structures only when required and passive structures very sparingly, primarily to vary the tone of your composition.
- Keep your sentences as simple as possible. Independent and subordinate clauses can complicate a sentence's thought and confuse a reader's mind about your purpose in writing the sentence. Sometimes you will need to make such clauses part of a sentence, but do so *only* when you need to. Consider turning them into separate sentences.
- Avoid sentence fragments. A sentence expresses a complete thought; a sentence fragment expresses an incomplete one, even though the fragment may contain a subject and a verb. "I had lunch at the OP" is a sentence. "Although I had lunch at the OP" is a sentence fragment. Do you see the difference?

- Choose your adjectives (words which describe [or “modify”] nouns) and adverbs (words which describe [or “modify”] verbs or adjectives) very carefully. Vague modifiers can confuse readers and turn your writing into mush, the same way that unnecessary clauses can. Try to pick words that say something definite about the word they modify. Don’t pile up adjectives and adverbs around the words they modify. Pick fewer, but more effective and descriptive, adjectives and adverbs, rather than picking lots of vague and lifeless ones.
- Pronouns (he, she, it, they, those, etc.) refer to nouns. Always make it clear to which noun a pronoun refers. Always make sure that you use singular pronouns to refer to singular nouns, and plural pronouns to refer to plural nouns. Don’t ever use plurals to refer to singulars or singulars to refer to plurals.
- The subjects of sentences can be either singular or plural in form; the verbs can also be singular or plural. Always make sure that you use the singular form of a verb with a singular subject, and the plural form of a verb with a plural subject. Never mix singulars with plurals, or vice versa.
- **PROOFREAD what you write before you turn it in !!!!!**
- Use the Writing Center. It’s there for your benefit, and your tuition dollars pay for it.