

Strategies for Improving Sentence Clarity

It is very important that each sentence of your paper be clear to the reader, so that your message is understood as it was intended and is not misinterpreted. There are many ways to improve sentence structure to ensure the overall clarity of your paper including: using parallel construction, placing dependent clauses carefully, using the active voice, and avoiding common grammatical errors.

USE PARALLEL CONSTRUCTION

Parallel construction (also called parallelism and parallel structure) is the repetition of a chosen grammatical form within a sentence and is created by making each compared item or idea in your sentence follow the same grammatical pattern.

In writing, parallelism refers to balance and equality. In order for the reader to understand what the writer means, the words must make sense in time and space. If you start talking about one thing one way, you can't – mid-sentence – switch to talking about something else a different way.

When you have a series of words, phrases, or clauses, put them in parallel form (similar grammatical construction). This will allow the reader to identify the linking relationship more easily and clearly. Some examples of common parallel construction:

- Use consistent verb tenses for all parts of the string rather than mixing tenses:
 - *Not parallel:* She likes to sing, to dance, and reading.
 - *Parallel:* She likes to sing, to dance, and to read. She likes singing, dancing, and reading.
- Use similar grammatical structure when connecting two ideas with a conjunction:
 - *Not parallel:* Many people are turning away from renting apartments and bought houses.
 - *Parallel:* Many people are turning away from renting apartments and are buying houses.
- Use similar grammatical structure when making a comparison using “than” or “as”:
 - *Not parallel:* It is easier to work for a corporation than being self-employed.
 - *Parallel:* It is easier to work for a corporation than to work for oneself.

CAREFULLY USE DEPENDENT CLAUSES

Also known as “subordinate” clauses, dependent clauses cannot stand alone in a sentence, despite containing a subject and predicate. Dependent clauses often begin with subordinating conjunctions such as *because, if, unless, although, or which*.

Dependent Clause Examples:

- What the girl did was not very helpful.
- She finally finished her dissertation, after months of research.
- While I was asleep, my car was towed.
- The city where I was born is in California.

To avoid interrupting the meaning of a sentence, it is best to use dependent clauses at the beginning or end of a sentence, rather than in the middle of the independent clause:

- **Clear (dependent clause at the end):**
Industrial spying is increasing rapidly *because of the growing use of computers to store and process corporate information*.
- **Clear (dependent clause at the beginning):**
Because of the growing use of computers to store and process corporate information, industrial spying is increasing rapidly.
- **Not as clear (dependent clause embedded in the middle):**
Industrial spying, *because of the growing use of computers to store and process corporate information*, is increasing rapidly.

CHOOSING THE ACTIVE OR PASSIVE VOICE:

What is the difference between active and passive voice?

- In active voice sentences, the subject of the sentence is the one performing the action of the sentence: Maya wrote the book.
- In passive voice sentence, the action is being done to the subject: The book was written by Maya.

Why choose active voice?

- Sentences in active voice are usually easier to understand than those in passive voice.
- Changing from passive to active voice often results in a more concise sentence.

Why choose passive voice?

- The passive is useful when you don't want to call attention to the doer, or when the doer is obvious, unimportant, or unknown.
- Choose passive voice if it is the conventional style in your subject area (such as scientific writing).

Examples:

Active Voice (very clear): The committee *decided* to postpone the vote.

Passive Voice (not as clear): A decision *was reached* to postpone the vote.

COMMON GRAMMATICAL ERRORS TO AVOID:

- **Noun strings:** A series of nouns strung together is often unclear. One way to revise a string of nouns is to change one noun to a verb.
 - *Unclear (string of nouns):* This report explains our *investment growth stimulation projects*.
 - *Clear (changed stimulation to stimulate):* This report explains our *projects to stimulate growth in investments*.

- **Overusing noun forms of verbs:** Use verbs when possible rather than noun forms known as "nominalizations."
 - *Unclear (use of nominalization):* The implementation of the plan was successful.
 - *Clear:* The plan was implemented successfully. We implemented the plan successfully.

- **Multiple negatives:** Since multiple negatives can cause confusion, use affirmatives wherever possible:
 - *Unclear (multiple negatives):* Less attention is paid to commercials that lack human-interest stories than to other kinds of commercials.
 - *Clear (use of affirmative):* People pay more attention to commercials with human-interest stories than to other kinds of commercials.

- **Unclear pronoun references:** Be sure that the pronouns you use refer clearly to a noun in the current or previous sentence. It is very useful to have another person read your paper to check for this type of error.

Sources Consulted: Hacker, Diana. *Rules for Writers*. 4th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000.
 Raimes, Ann. *Keys for Writers*. 3rd ed. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002.