

# The Sentence

The writer's job is not simply to make sure a sentence can be understood—rather, it is to make sure that it can't be *misunderstood*.

# Ten Principles

1. Write short sentences
2. Focus each sentence on a single thought
3. Use active verbs
4. Use forceful verbs
5. Search for verbs hidden in nouns
6. Use short words
7. Eliminate extra words
8. Use parallel structure
9. Use concrete examples
10. Use concrete language

# Ten Principles of Clear Sentences

- Not absolute rules
- Should be followed generally
- Diagnostic tools to fine-tune writing

# 1. Write short sentences

- Most sentences 2-3 lines
- Important sentences 1-2 lines

# Short Sentences

**Too long:**

The management practices that contributed to the jobless recovery were an increased use of temporary workers, a greater reliance on part-time workers, and the use of more overtime hours.

# Short Sentences

## Revised:

Three practices contributed to the jobless recovery. Management hired more temporary workers, relied more on part-time workers, and increased overtime hours.

## 2. Focus each sentence on a single thought

Dense sentences have too many ideas to parcel out to the reader in a single breath.

# Focus on a single thought

Dense:

Over the last 25 years, much investment has shifted from heavy equipment toward high-tech equipment, an unprecedented change that has confused the interpretation of standard investment measures.



# Focus on a single thought

## **Revised:**

Over the last 25 years, much investment has shifted from heavy equipment toward high-tech equipment. This unprecedented change has confused the interpretation of standard investment measures.

### 3. Use active verbs

Turning passive and static verbs into active and forceful verbs substantially increases the power and clarity of your writing.

# Syntactical Order

**Actor + Action + Object**

**I + threw + paper**

# Active Verbs

Passive voice forces readers to reconstruct an idea, adding another step to understanding—and slowing reading down.

# Appropriate Uses of Passive Verbs

- **When actor isn't clear:**

Petroleum supplies throughout the state were depleted.

- **To keep focus on the main idea of a paragraph:**

In addition, fuel supplies have been kept low by producers to boost prices.

- **To emphasize a point:**

These surprising results were confirmed by empirical analysis.

## 4. Use forceful verbs

Verbs should be active in imagery as well as voice.

# Weak vs. Forceful Verbs

## Latinate

Decline

Increase

Demonstrate

Affect

Implement

## Anglo-Saxon

Drop, fall, plunge, dip,  
plummet

Grow, swell, spiral, jump,  
spike, surge, soar

Show, prove

Hurt, hinder, hamper,  
help, boost

Launch, start

## 5. Search for verbs within nouns

We often hide the true meaning of a sentence by turning verbs into nouns, by a process called *nominalization*.



# Verbs within Nouns

## **Nominalized sentence:**

Limitations are imposed on the accuracy of the method by several factors.

## **Revised:**

Several factors limit the accuracy of the method.

# Spotting Nominalized Verbs

**Passive voice:**

**The announcement was made by the SEC.**

**Prepositional phrases (*especially “of”*):**

**The findings of the committee indicated moral hazard.**

# Spotting Nominalized Verbs

Words ending in Latin suffixes (*-tion, -ive, -ment, and -ance*):

The **creation** of the framework was accomplished by the committee.

The two departments made a **collaborative** effort to end the practice.

The **judgment** was passed down from a higher court.

**Acceptance** of the proposal was finally granted by the regulating body.

## 6. Use short words

Short words are best and the old words  
when short are best of all.

—*Winston Churchill*

# Short Words

We shall not flag or fail. We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.

—*Winston Churchill*

## 7. Cut extra words

A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts.

—*The Elements of Style*

# Cut Extra Words

- Slash redundant adverbs and adjectives. The verb *plunged* gains nothing by adding the adverb *sharply*. Choose adverbs and adjectives carefully to make your words more precise rather than simply more emphatic.
- Turn nominalizations back into verbs.
- Strengthen weak constructions by focusing on the verb. *Interest rates soared for five reasons* is stronger than *There are five reasons interest rates soared*. Also beware of such constructions as *it is important to note . . . the reason is because . . .* and *this means that*.

# Simplify Wordy Phrases

## Verbose

As a consequence

At that point

At present

By virtue of

During the time that

For the purpose of

For the reason that

In accordance with

In addition to

In association with

In order to

In the absence of

On behalf of

Prior to

Subsequent to

With the exception of

## Simple

Because

When

Now, today

By

When

For

Because

By, under

Besides

With

To

Without

For

Before

After

Except



## 8. Use parallel structure

Sentence structure should reflect the relationship of ideas in a paragraph.

# Balanced Ideas

## **Unbalanced:**

Land values edged upward for two reasons. Cattle producers' balance sheets improved because their profits increased. And grain crops were more bountiful.

## **Balanced:**

Land values edged upward for two reasons: higher cattle prices and more bountiful crops.

# Unequal Ideas

Misleading balance:

The drought cut supplies of grain, and the price of grain soared.

Revised:

The drought cut supplies of grain, sending prices soaring.

## 9. Use concrete examples

*The primeval law of storytelling:*

Show it, don't tell it.

# Concrete proof

## Abstract assertion:

Diversification helps risk-averse investors feel more confident about the future.

## Proof:

For example, inflation-indexed bonds help investors maintain their buying power despite rising prices.

## 10. Use concrete language

The surest way to arouse and hold the attention of the reader is by being specific, definite, and concrete.

— *The Elements of Style*

# Concrete Language

## **What the reporter asked:**

How will you handle your new job as commissioner of baseball?

## **What Bowie Kuhn might have said:**

I can provide leadership, but each owner is going to have to join me in a concerted effort. At present, there's a lot of competition among owners. Each owner appears to have his or her own agenda. The owners are pursuing their goals with varying intensity, but some owners are completely apathetic.

# Concrete Language

## **What Uberroth said:**

I can lead, but each of the owners is going to have to pick up an oar and start rowing the same way. At present, some owners are facing in different directions, some with big oars, some with little oars, and some with no oars in the water at all.