

Conciseness and Clarity

Handout courtesy of Angela Gulick

1. Write in active voice: Active voice means beginning your sentence with the person or thing **doing** the action of the sentence. Passive voice means beginning your sentence with the person or thing **receiving** the action. In most cases, writing in the active voice is more clear because readers know who did the action. However, in scientific writing, passive voice is often used. For example, a scientist would write, “Subjects were injected,” not “We injected the subjects.”

| Passive Voice | Active Voice |
|--|---|
| The debate was postponed by the committee. | The committee postponed the debate. |
| It has been determined that the consumption of cold drinks contributes to the body’s ability to cool itself off. | Consuming cold drinks aids the body in cooling off. |
| Playing <i>Guitar Hero</i> is enjoyed by both my brother and me. | My brother and I enjoy playing <i>Guitar Hero</i> . |

2. Avoid double-barrel writing: Some writers think if one word is good, two are better! If you ~~continue to keep on reading and perusing~~ this textual passage, you will ~~certainly and undoubtedly~~ see and ~~perceive~~ prose writing that is packed full of ~~duplicate and repetitious language and vocabulary~~ which is really ~~extremely annoying and troublesome~~.

3. Avoid nominalizations: A nominalization occurs when an action verb is turned into a “the _____ of” phrase. Nominalizations are unnecessarily wordy. Here are some examples:

| Action Verb | Nominalization |
|---|--|
| created (Amy created a new quilt). | the creation of (The creation of the new quilt was done by Amy). |
| established (Students established a new recycling program at Parkland College). | the establishment of (The establishment of a new recycling program at Parkland College was completed by the students). |
| developed (The photographer developed the film of the birthday party). | the development of (The development of the film of the birthday party was done by the photographer). |

4. Avoid delayed beginnings: Sometimes writers “hide” the subjects of their sentences. Two examples involve starting sentences with “It” and “There is/are.” Here are some examples:

| Direct Wording | Long-winded Wording |
|---|--|
| The chairperson of each committee should collect dues at each meeting. | It is the responsibility of the chairperson of each committee to collect dues at each meeting. |
| College students should think carefully about taking out student loans to pay for their educations. | There should be a great deal of planning and thought when college students think about taking out student loans to pay for their educations. |

5. Avoid unnecessarily qualified language: Qualifiers are words that provide exceptions to all-or-nothing statements. Qualifiers are fine *if* you indeed want to acknowledge an exception to your statement. However, if you want your statement to be direct and assertive, don't qualify it because you make the sentence more wordy *and* misleading. Here are some examples:

| Unqualified Language | Qualified Language |
|--|--|
| Make sure your will is updated before going on a long trip. | You may want to make sure that your will is updated before going on a long trip. |
| The committee is in a difficult situation because of the tax increase. | It appears to be a somewhat difficult situation in which the committee finds itself due to the fact that the taxes have increased. |

6. Use pronouns carefully: A pronoun is a word that replaces the noun the pronoun immediately follows, such as his, its, their, my, our. A special group of pronouns is called **indefinite pronouns**, including the following: anyone/anybody/anything, everyone/everybody/everything, no one/nobody/nothing, someone/somebody/something, none, each, either, neither, and another. Indefinite pronouns, while often sounding plural, are **grammatically singular**. For example, the word **everybody** *sounds* plural, but it is singular (I find it helpful to focus on the second half of each word: everyone, somebody, anything)

Incorrect Version: When a patient is allergic to something, they must tell their doctor right away. >>> Patient is singular, so the rest of the sentence needs to be singular.

Singular Version: When a patient is allergic to something, he/she must tell his/her doctor right away. >>> All the nouns and pronouns are singular.

Plural Version: When patients are allergic to something, they must tell their doctors right away. >>> All the nouns and pronouns are plural. Notice how the noun following "their" is also plural (doctors) because we're talking numerous patients and numerous doctors.

Incorrect Version: Everyone must pick up their ticket by 5:00, or they won't be able to get on the bus. >>> Everyone is singular, so the rest of the sentence needs to be singular.

Singular Version: Everyone must pick up his/her ticket by 5:00, or he/she won't be able to get on the bus. >>> All the nouns and pronouns are singular.

Plural Version: All Blue Oyster Cult fans must pick up their tickets by 5:00 or they won't be able to get on the bus. >>> All the nouns and pronouns are plural (fans, their, tickets, they).

✱ **Helpful Hint: Avoid using indefinite pronouns. Replace them with the actual nouns they represent.** By definition, indefinite pronouns are *indefinite*. This means they are vague.

Singular Version: Everyone in the kitchen had to hold his/her nose because the smell of burned popcorn was making him/her sick to his/her stomach.

Plural Version: My four brothers had to hold their noses because the smell of burned popcorn was making them sick to their stomachs. Notice how the nouns following "their" are also plural because we're talking numerous brothers, noses, and stomachs.