Style: Writing Clearly

One of the main objectives in academic writing is to write clearly. Since much academic writing is designed to persuade the reader of an argument, writing clearly so the reader can understand the argument is essential. As a general rule of academic writing, the writing style should never conceal or confuse what you are actually trying to say. This means choosing your words (diction) carefully, and organizing your sentences as fluidly as possible (syntax).

Writing style is always a matter of choice, otherwise our assignments would all sound exactly the same. None of the style issues outlined below made the list for grammatical incorrectness. What follows is a collection of habits known to obstruct clarity in academic writing. A useful tactic is to watch for these issues during your editing stage: once you are finished your first draft, try to reconstruct the weaker sentences to tighten your prose.

Say what you mean

Make sure each sentence could not be misinterpreted by a reader. We’ve all had instances when we know what we want to say, but we’re fairly sure we haven’t communicated the idea clearly. A common strategy in cases like these is to hide the idea behind complicated wording and hope that even if the reader doesn’t quite get what we’re saying, they’ll at least get that we’re trying to say something, and hopefully forgive us (and give us a decent mark). If only this were the case. Readers can become frustrated by wording they don’t understand, and suspicious when the writer appears to have deliberately hidden their meaning beneath unclear wording.

Choose words precisely

Put extra thought into your word choice, especially when dealing with vague words such as “good,” “bad,” and “thing,” which add nothing to your sentence at all. Treat this type of diction as a placeholder for more precise wording in your editing stage. “Good” and “bad” are always subjective and contextual (ie. something can be “good” if it’s “timely” or if it’s “concise,” but you would never use these words interchangeably. Figure out what’s good about what you are describing, and substitute that word for “good”). Remember also that “thing” is a word used to describe the indescribable (ie. Swamp Thing, The Thing). Most of what you will write about in this program will be perfectly describable, so choose a better word than “thing.”

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Trend</th>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>Policy</th>
<th>Phenomenon</th>
</tr>
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</table>


Choosing the most evocative words to express your point is important, but so is choosing the *right* word. While there may not be one perfect word to describe your subject, there are undeniable shades of right and wrong when it comes to word choice in academic writing. Words with similar meanings might appear as synonyms in an online thesaurus, but carry very different connotations in a sentence. Consider what is evoked by the term “self-confident” vs. “aggressive”; or “introverted” vs. “withdrawn.” The latter in both cases carries a decidedly more negative tone.

**Avoid Wordiness**

Wordiness is one of the most common problems at any level of academic writing. Wordiness is, simply, cramming too many ineffectual words into a sentence when fewer, stronger words will do. Or, wordiness could also be considered the act of lengthening sentences utilizing an excess of words despite the fact that the meaning of the sentence could, essentially, be conveyed in an adequate manner to the reader by utilizing a lesser amount of wording that also carries an equal, if not greater, degree of effectiveness. (The sentence you just finished plodding through was an example of wordiness!)

Avoiding wordiness is not the same as avoiding long sentences. Every word in a long sentence might be necessary for the sentence to be fully meaningful. Wordy sentences contain too many unnecessary filler words that do not add meaning to the sentence at all.

At the editing phase, consider whether your sentences are crisp, clear, and meaningful, or whether they contain any of the following examples of wordiness:

**Clichés**

Clichés are formerly interesting expressions that have been overused to the point of meaninglessness. While the first person to say “once in a blue moon,” or “all that glitters is not gold” was clever, expressions like these sound unprofessional and boring in academic or creative writing. The above are obvious examples of clichés, so here are some less obvious (and commonly used) clichés to watch out for:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“In this day and age”</th>
<th>“In today’s society”</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“And the end of the day”</td>
<td>“Rude awakening”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Without a doubt”</td>
<td>“Needless to say”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“As luck would have it”</td>
<td>“Step on her toes”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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1 Example appears in Rosenwasser, Stephen, and Babington’s *Writing Analytically: With Readings*. 
The list goes on and on (also a cliché). Check out this massive, but probably not exhaustive, list of clichés: http://www.clichesite.com/alpha_list.asp?which=lett+1

Instead of using a cliché, write exactly what you mean, even if you feel you are over-explaining. Avoiding clichés will help you develop your own voice as a writer, rather than relying on dull, wordy, overused language.

**Double adjectives and extra qualifiers**

**Double adjectives** occur when writers want to place emphasis on something by referring to it as “extremely interesting” or “very specific” or “really innovative.” Sometimes a description calls for a double adjective, but use them thoughtfully and carefully to avoid sounding overzealous or self-aggrandizing (particularly if you are referring to your own research as “utterly significant” – never a good idea).

**Extra qualifiers** modify words unnecessarily (similar to the above, but not limited to adjectives). The qualifiers in this sentence are underlined: Many professors generally love to mark basically any type of assignment.

**Stock phrases**

Stock phrases are bulky, superfluous phrases that could (and should) be replaced by a single word. Here are some examples:

| “On account of the fact that” | “Because,” “Since” |
| “Due to the fact that” | “Although” |
| “Because of the fact that” | “If” |
| “In light of the fact that” | “May,” “Might” |
| “Regardless of the fact that” | “Regardless of the fact that” |
| “In the event that” | “In the event that” |
| “Supposing that” | “Supposing that” |
| “It is possible that” | “It is possible that” |
| “There is a chance that” | “There is a chance that” |

© A general rule: delete any incarnation of “the fact that” from your writing whenever possible.

**Active vs. Passive Voice**

In the active voice, the subject of the sentence performs the action; in the passive voice, the action is performed on the subject. In most cases, the active voice makes for stronger, clearer writing, and since passive voice requires some version
of the verb “to be,” passive voice sentences tend to be longer (and wordier). Here is an example:

**Passive voice:** “The library book was misplaced by the patron.”

1. Find the verb (the action word).
   - There are two: was (from the verb “to be”) and misplaced.
2. What is really happening here? What do you think is the main action of this sentence? (“being” or “misplacing”)
   - Answer: “misplacing”
3. Who, or what, is doing the misplacing in this sentence?
   - Answer: *the patron*

The patron is the grammatical subject of this sentence. However, since this sentence is in the passive voice, the patron has been hidden after the action. Here is a stronger sentence in the active voice:

**Active voice:** “The patron misplaced the library book.”

**Empty Openers**

Empty openers, also called “it is” constructions, are weak sentence starters. When a sentence begins with “It is” or “There is” or “There are,” the reader is already well into the sentence before they have any idea what the sentence is about.

“It is unlikely that the students will respond to the questionnaire.”
“There are 12 students attending the conference.”

The quickest fix for the empty opener is to move the subject closer to the beginning of the sentence.

“The students are unlikely to respond to the questionnaire.
“Twelve students will attend the conference.”

**Remember**

We’ve all seen the words “awkward” or “awk” scrawled in the margins at one time or another. Most of these problems are easily fixed with careful attention and revision.

**Works Consulted**
