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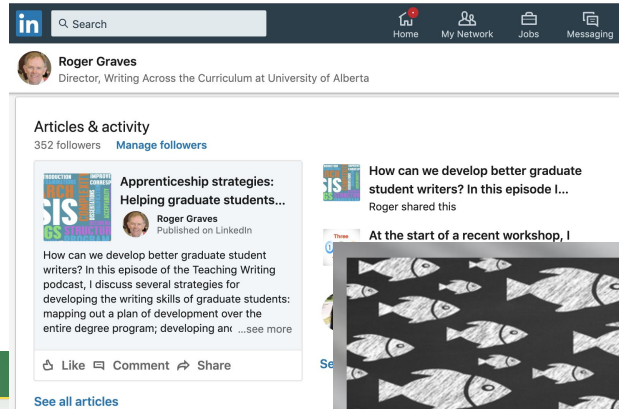
Clear and Concise

Become a Better Writer workshop series

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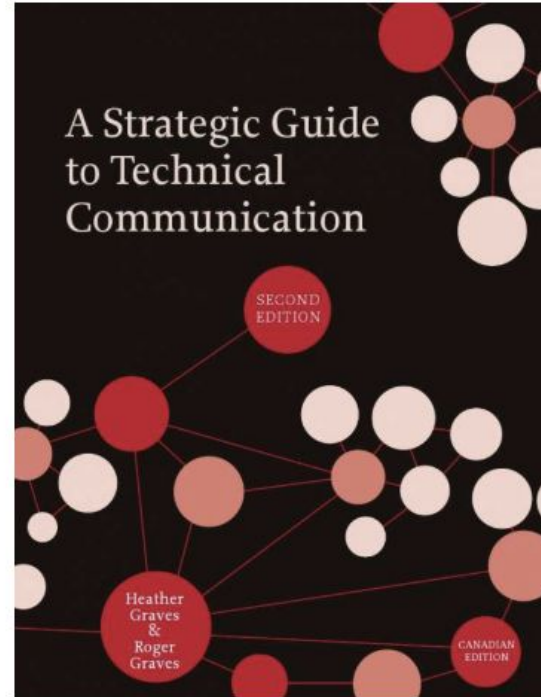
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A Strategic Guide to Technical Communication

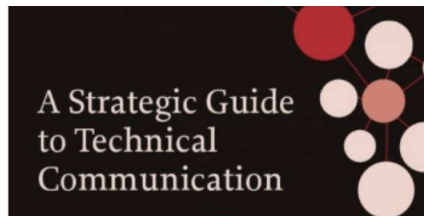
Chapter 4, Writing Technical Prose



Levels of Style

Low or plain (attenuata, subtile)

Suitable for instructing (docendi)



Middle or forcible (mediocris, robusta)

Suitable for moving



High or florid style (gravis, florida)

Suitable for charming (delectandi)



The High Life: Erasmus and De copia

On the ways to embellish and amplify writing

Your letter mightily pleased me.

To a wonderful degree did your letter please me.

Me exceedingly did your letter please.

By your letter was I mightily pleased.

I was exceeding pleased by your letter.

Your epistle exhilarated me intensely.

I was intensely exhilarated by your epistle.

Your brief note refreshed my spirits in no small measure.

I was in no small measure refreshed in spirit by your grace's hand.

More: http://www.gpullman.com/8170/de_copia.php

The biomedical sciences play a crucial role in this model of modernity. What Ulrich Herbert, among many others, called "the biologization of the social" appears here as a (often, the) central defining characteristic of modernity.⁴ This focus reflects the centrality of Darwinist evolutionary theory to the scientific "faith" of the entire period from the 1860s to the Third Reich. Darwinism naturalized, so to speak, the moderns' belief in the possibility (or inevitability) of progress; but it also naturalized their sense of existential threat, of the iron necessity of change if dissolution and extinction were to be avoided. The biomedical sciences were also arguably uniquely central to the project of renovating the human world, of defining and investigating the problems and potentials of human beings and human populations. Eugenics in particular — the study of the (alleged) inheritance of physical, intellectual, and social characteristics in human populations — has occupied a key place in this emerging model. The fear of degeneration neatly summed up the moderns' sense of crisis, and at the same time eugenics expressed the almost religious sense of possibility at the heart of modernity, by holding out the promise of transcendence, of improving the actual material of humanity itself. Thus, eugenics can be seen as a kind of transmission belt directly linking Darwinist evolutionary science to the project of social engineering. (224 words/8 sentences = 28 w/s)

Exercise 1.1: Amplify and vary this base sentence

Obesity is increasing at unprecedented rates worldwide (Seidell, 2000; Lu et al., 2001).

1. Regardless of what country you may be flying in around the world, you are likely to notice that contact with your seatmates is increasingly unavoidable.
2. *Your turn . . .*



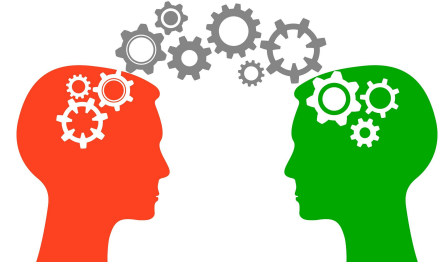
Clarity

Readers and Clarity

Achieving clarity is difficult. Why?

- Readers don't just “read” your prose; they *interpret* it
- They *examine* the prose structure to identify your/the writer's main ideas
- They *assemble* a pattern of ideas which becomes the meaning of the sentence (*for them*)
- They *link* the ideas from sentence to sentence, from paragraph to paragraph
- They *build* an understanding of what the sentence, then the paragraph, then the whole document is “about”

Conciseness enables clear ideas to become apparent.




Cohesion: subjects to the front, please

Place the context of familiar information on the left, at the start of a sentence.


Place main ideas as the subjects of sentences:

“In the past, **various techniques** have been used to deposit a film or coating on a substrate located in a vacuum chamber. **One technique** .
..”

An arrow originates from the end of the phrase 'various techniques' and points towards the phrase 'One technique', illustrating the concept of cohesion by showing how a specific instance is linked back to a general category.

Link sentences from start to start

“Various **techniques** have been used to deposit a film or coating on a substrate located in a vacuum chamber. **One technique** simply is to vaporize a metal thermally. **Another technique** is referred to as chemical vapour deposition . . .”



Link sentences from end to start

“There are no universal guidelines for the level at which glucose intolerance should be labeled as gestational diabetes, making the **diagnosis of gestational diabetes** controversial.

Currently, for a **diagnosis of gestational diabetes**, the criteria . . .”

“As nursing has developed as a professional discipline, a university degree has become a standard requirement for new nurses entering the profession, and the role of nursing scholarship has been critically **reexamined**. This **reexamination** holds important implications for the integration of writing and research instruction in nursing programs.”



Exercise 2.1: Revise to improve coherence

A key focus for this project was looking at the potential for technical difficulties experienced by students using the various platforms (eClass/Moodle, GWrit, email, Google Docs). When we looked at the responses to this question, however, we found that a very low number of students reported experiencing technical difficulties and that variation in responses to this question by term were consistent, with no statistically significant differences identified over time (see Table 1).

Exercise 2.2: Revise to improve coherence

We designed the course to have 250-500 word reflective assignments (“learning journals”) to help students reflect on their learning and encourage metacognitive practices. General research on learning, as well as research on learning academic writing, suggests that reflective learning activities such as these learning journals aid students in learning and retaining knowledge (Park, 2003; Walker, 2006). In the 2014 iteration of the course, students were required to write four learning journals, each one due immediately after each major assignment. Our data show that students in that year rated those assignments as useful in helping them become more aware of their writing processes (see Table 2).

Subjects and Verbs together

Locate the subject and the verb close to one another.

Not close:

“**A method** for the reactive plating of substrates to produce transparent conducting films and photoactive coatings **is disclosed.**”

Close:

“**A method is disclosed** for the reactive plating of substrates to produce transparent conducting films and photoactive coatings.”

Emphasis = the end

Place important ideas at the end of sentences to emphasize them:

“Obesity is increasing at unprecedented rates
worldwide.”

The sentence above emphasizes the scope of the problem by putting “worldwide” at the end of the sentence.

“Obesity worldwide is increasing at **unprecedented rates.**”

In this second example, the emphasis is on the rate of increase.

One sentence, one point

Place one point in each syntactic structure or unit containing a subject and verb:

“Highly transparent conducting ZnO films have been deposited using ion-beam-assisted reactive vacuum deposition.”

Old = start/important = end

Place old information that links back in the subject position, and put new information that you want readers to attend to at the point of emphasis.

“A major strength of this study was **the detail with which the variables were collected**. **This detail** allowed for more precise estimates [data] of the effect of alcohol. Using data on consumption . . .”

Verbs, yes; nouns, no

Use verbs rather than nominalizations to express action in your sentences:

Nominalizations

“This trial will involve the process of construct **validation**, with the ultimate goal of contributing knowledge to the validity of the **interpretations** that are made on the basis of the exam mark.”

Revised

“This trial **examines** the process of construct validation. The process aims to contribute knowledge that will help instructors interpret grades validly based on the exam mark.”

Parallel grammatical structures

Use matching grammatical structures when you write lists of items.

Not parallel

Arenadeck® is:

- Contamination-resistant
- Provides sound and thermal insulation

Parallel

Arenadeck®:

- Provides sound and thermal insulation
- Resists contamination

Less is More: Concision

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Expletives deleted



ex·ple·tive

/ˈeksplədɪv/

noun

plural noun: **expletives**

an oath or swear word.

Similar:

swear word

oath

curse

obscenity

profanity

epithet



• GRAMMAR

a word or phrase used to fill out a sentence or a line of verse without adding to the sense.

Similar:

filler

fill-in

stopgap

meaningless word/phrase



https://www.google.com/search?q=expletives&rlz=1C5CHFA_enCA763CA771&oq=expletives&aqs=chrome..69i57j0l5.1832j1j4&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8

At the
sentence/word
level, we focus
on phrases

1. **a number of**: some, many
2. **afford an opportunity**: allow, let
3. **an appreciable number of**: many
4. **as a means of**: to
5. **as prescribed by**: in, under
6. **at the present time**: now
7. **by means of**: by, with
8. **comply with**: follow
9. **due to the fact that**: because, due to, since
10. **during the period of**: during
11. **for a period of**: for
12. **has a requirement for**: needs, requires
13. **have an adverse effect on**: hurt, set back
14. **in a timely manner**: on time, promptly

Four Actions that Improve Conciseness

1. Delete meaningless words
2. Delete what readers can infer
3. Replace a phrase with a word
4. Use verbs rather than nominalizations to express action in sentences.

1. Delete meaningless words.

- The Queen Elizabeth Islands, **located** in Canada, contain approximately 14% of the Earth's glacier and ice cap area. **Not much** snow accumulates on these glaciers and **the overall total amount of** snow varies **very** little from **one year to the next**.
- Canada's Queen Elizabeth Islands contain 14% of the Earth's glacier and ice cap area. Snow accumulation on these glaciers is low and varies little from year to year. ~

–Sharp M, Burgess DO, Cogley JG, Ecclestone M, Labine C, Wolken GJ. Extreme melt on Canada's Arctic ice caps in the 21st century. Geophysical Research Letters 2011, 38, L11501. doi:10.1029/2011GL047381

2. Delete what readers can infer.

- One of several approaches to detection error that has been widely adopted is that of multiple visit surveys. In this type of approach, an N-mixture approach is used to estimate detection error for count data (Royle 2004). In the N-mixture approach, true abundance has typically been modeled using a Poisson or a Negative Binomial (NB) distribution, while detection error has been modelled as a Binomial observation process.
- One widely adopted approach to error detection is multiple visit surveys that use an N-mixture approach to estimate detection error for count data (Royle 2004). In this approach, true abundance is typically modeled using a Poisson or a Negative Binomial (NB) distribution, while detection error is modelled as a Binomial observation process.

—Solymos P, Lele S, Bayne E. Conditional likelihood approach for analyzing single visit abundance survey data in the presence of zero inflation and detection error. Manuscript draft, 2011.

3. Replace a phrase with a word.

A typical population time series, **consisting of** estimated population sizes, inevitably has some observation error and **likely has** missing observations. **In this paper,** we present a likelihood based population viability analysis (PVA) **in the presence of** observation error and missing data. We illustrate the importance of incorporation of observation error in PVA by reanalyzing the population time series of song sparrow (*Melospiza melodia*) on Mandarte Island, British Columbia, Canada from 1975-1998.

A typical population time series that estimates population sizes inevitably has some observation error and/or missing observations. Here we present a likelihood based population viability analysis (PVA) that accounts for observation error and missing data. We illustrate the importance of incorporating observation error in PVA by reanalyzing the population time. . .

--Solymos et al, 2011 draft manuscript.

Readers expect subjects to contain some kind of actor in the story

Recently, **state-space models have been used** to accommodate observation error (also called measurement error) and missing values (McGowan et al. 2011) in ecological analyses. A **state-space model consists** of two components: a stochastic model for unobserved population abundances and a stochastic model for the observation error (de Valpine and Hastings 2002). **State-space models provide** a flexible framework for estimating parameters of the population growth models in the presence of process variation and observation error.

“State-space models” are the subject/the actor.

- Readers also expect that actions in the sentence will be expressed in the verb.
- If the verbs contain no action and the subjects contain no actors, readers have no structural information about where the actions are described. They have to GUESS what the actions are.

Are these verbs descriptive enough to convey the action?

4. Use verbs rather than nominalizations to express action in sentences.

Since the pioneering work of Shaffer (1981), Population viability analysis (PVA) has become a key tool in wildlife **management and conservation** (Beissinger 2002). It is a procedure that uses population abundance data and population growth models to estimate the probability that a population will persist for a specified time into the future (Mills 2008). A typical PVA constitutes **data collection, model formulation, model estimation and validation, and estimation** of the extinction risk (Ralls et al. 2002).

Since the pioneering work of Shaffer (1981), Population viability analysis (PVA) has become a key tool for **managing and conserving** wildlife (Beissinger 2002). This procedure uses population abundance data and population growth models to estimate the probability that a population will persist for a specified time into the future (Mills 2008). A typical PVA includes **collecting data, forming a model, estimating and validating the model, and estimating** the extinction risk (Ralls et al. 2002).

--Solymos et al, draft manuscript 2011.

Exercise 3.1: Revise to be more concise

Original:

Currently, blended learning represents “any combination of face-to-face teaching with computer technology (online and offline activities/materials)” (Whittaker, 2013, p. 12), which can take place in another location from face-to-face teaching during a time convenient to learners (Hockly, 2018; Liu and Sadler, 2003).

Revision entry points:

- Do we need “currently”?
- Can we get rid of the quotation?
- Can we substitute for “in another location”?

Exercise 3.2: Revise to be more concise

Original:

Students write documents in their choice of disciplines and topics, and share their drafts in a gamified writing and editing online environment that features a leaderboard and a badge page for students to see their progress in the course.

Revision entry points:

- “In their choice of disciplines and topics”
- “For students to see their progress in the course”
- Divide into two sentences?

Exercise 3.3: Revise to be more concise

Original:

Students had ongoing access to the resources (provided in different formats) and online assessments, less in-class lecture time, access to direct communication with and formative feedback from the instructional team (which favored immediate support), and were encouraged to engage with classmates during in-class group writing activities.

Revision entry points:

Resources on phrase-level conciseness

[Purdue OWL on wordiness](#)

[APA Blog on wordiness](#)

[Plain language equivalents for wordy phrases](#)

[Grammarist on wordy phrases](#)