

## Use Parallel Constructions

Clear: *The best way to judge if you have written clearly is:*

1. **To put** your writing aside for a few hours or days, and then come back and read it again.
2. **To ask** a friend or roommate to read what you have written.
3. **To read** your paper aloud, either to yourself or to someone else.

Less Clear: *The best way to judge if you have written clearly is:*

1. **To put** your writing aside for a few hours or days, and then come back and read it again.
2. **Ask** a friend or roommate to read what you have written.
3. **Try reading** your paper aloud, either to yourself or to someone else.

## Avoid Using Long Strings of Nouns

Unclear: *This brochure focuses on improvement of student writing clarity methods.*

Clear: (note that one noun has been changed to a verb) *This brochure focuses on methods to improve student writing clarity.*

## Avoid *that were, that are, who are, and who were*

*The mosquitoes that were bothering me are gone.  
The bothersome mosquitoes are gone.*

*The painters who were at our house all summer did a great job.  
Our summer house painters did a great job.*

## Accessing More Information

You can find excellent information about sentence clarity from these sources:

- Raimes, Ann. *Keys for Writers*. 5th ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008.
- The Online Writing Lab (OWL) at Purdue University: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/>

## Acknowledgments

Information for this brochure was adapted from “Improving Sentence Clarity.” The Online Writing Lab (OWL) at Purdue University. 27 Jan 2009 <[http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gl\\_sentclar.html](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gl_sentclar.html)>.

## Where to Find Help on Campus

Consultants at the **Hamline University Writing Center**, located in the basement of Bush Library, are eager to help you with all stages of your writing. We will work with you whether you have just received an assignment and have no idea how to begin or you have a finished draft and want help with revisions.

You can make appointments online at WC Online. Simply follow the instructions at: <http://rich37.com/hamline>

We look forward to seeing you!



**The Writing Center**  
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# Improving Sentence Clarity



Clear, crisp sentences are a pleasure to read. They grab a reader's attention and keep it, working to move the reader—to learn, laugh, cry, reflect—and bring him/her to a higher level of understanding.

On the other hand, unclear, unnecessarily wordy sentences are annoying and make the reader want to stop.

Here are some tips to make your sentences clearer and thus more effective and pleasurable to read.

### Use the Active Voice

Below are some sentences written in the passive voice followed by revisions written in the active voice. Which do you find most lively and interesting?

Passive: *Visits were paid to the nearby ruins and the hot springs.*

Active: *We visited the nearby ruins and the hot springs.*

Passive: *The work was divided by group members and the next meeting date was set.*

Active: *Group members divided the work and set the next meeting date.*

Occasionally, the passive voice is useful. For example, sometimes you don't know who is performing the action, or you don't want to draw attention to this person.

*The tables had been set up prior to the meeting.*

*The fine was paid and the incident was forgotten.*

### Use Verbs, Not Nouns, to Convey Action

In the following three sentences, the verbs *has*, *needs to be done*, and *takes place* are dull. Note how the verbs in the revisions are more interesting.

*He has knowledge of Spanish verbs.*  
*An evaluation of the cafeteria needs to be done.*  
*The recruiting of athletes takes place in the fall.*

*He knows his Spanish verbs.*  
*The cafeteria needs to be evaluated.*  
*We recruit athletes in the fall.*

### Use *It is*, *There is*, and *There are* Sparingly

*It was her last sentence that finally persuaded me.*

*Her last sentence finally persuaded me.*

### Use Simple Words Instead of Complex Ones

Use the words in the left-hand column instead of the ones on the right.

<u>Simple</u>	<u>Complex</u>
start, create	initiate
carry out	implement
affect	impact
use	utilize
try	attempt
good, best	optimal
before	prior to

### Reduce Wordy Phrases

One word will often do just as much as a string of words. Choose from the words on the left instead of those on the right.

<u>Clear</u>	<u>Wordy</u>
because	on account of
because	due to the fact that
for example	in the case of
as you suggested	as per your suggestion
is needed, needs to be	there is the necessity for
may, might, could	it is likely that

### Make Verbs Do the Work

Weak verbs tempt us to use strings of adverbs to make up for them. Consider these two versions of the same sentence.

*He ran very fast across campus to avoid being late.*  
*He sprinted across campus to avoid being late.*

*She was really happy about her grades.*  
*She was elated about her grades.*

The sentences with the stronger verbs are more descriptive and don't need adverbs.

### Rewrite Several Times to Make a Sentence Clear

*1<sup>st</sup> Student needs are increasing in the area of writing help.*

*2<sup>nd</sup> Student need for writing help is increasing.*

*3<sup>rd</sup> Students need more writing help.*

### Place Subordinate Clauses Carefully

Interrupting the main clause of a sentence with a subordinate clause can lead to confusion.

Unclear: subordinate clause embedded in the middle:

*Food shelf use, because of the growing number of people losing their jobs, is increasing.*

Clear: subordinate clause at beginning:

*Because of the growing number of people losing their jobs, food shelf use is increasing.*

Clear: subordinate clause at the end:

*Food shelf use is increasing because of the growing number of people losing their jobs.*