Composition I: Join the Conversation

COMPOSITION I: JOIN THE CONVERSATION

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CONTENTS

PART I

REVISING AND EDITING

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STRONG WRITERS STILL NEED REVISION

Additional Resource

- Links to Editing Tools, available in Blackboard

Laura Giovenelli

Adapted by Liz Delf, Rob Drummond, and Kristy Kelly

The fantasy that good writers summon forth beautiful, lean, yet intricate sentences onto a page without sweating is an unhealthy fiction, and it is wrong. What writers need is revision. Novice writers, experienced writers, *all* writers. Anyone interested in writing clearer, stronger, more persuasive and passionate prose, even those of us who are procrastinators panicking because we need to get a project finished or a paper written and it's 2:00 a.m. the night before our deadline—writers need revision because revision is not a discrete step. Revision is not the thing writers do when they're done writing. Revision *is* the writing.

Student looking at her test result by RODNAE Productions / Pexels

It's important to keep in mind I'm not talking about revision as proofreading or copyediting; no amount of grammatical, spelling, and style corrections transforms a piece of writing like focused attention to fundamental questions about purpose, evidence, and organization. That, to me, is revision: the heavy lifting of working through why I'm writing, who I'm writing for, and how I structure writing logically and effectively.

Revision Is Writing

My writing students are usually relieved to hear that published authors often find writing just as fraught as they do. Like college students, people paid to write—the journalists and the novelists and the technical writers—more often than not despair at the difference between what's in their heads and hearts and what ends up on the page the first time around. The professionals are just a little better at waiting things out, pushing through what Anne Lamott calls "shitty first drafts" and all the ones that follow, the revision of a tenth and a thirteenth and a twenty-third draft.

In class, I show a YouTube video by Tim Weninger, a computer scientist and engineer at the University of Notre Dame. In the video, Weninger stitches together his revisions of a research paper. In my class, we play a game, guessing how many revisions Weninger did. The answer—463!—almost always surprises them. It still sometimes surprises me. And sure, some of those revisions are small, fiddly changes. But most of the time, even watching this quickly on classroom monitors, my students notice Weninger aims for the jugular in his writing. He's after a wholesale overhaul of his argument and of his larger work.

However, talking about revision in terms of numbers of drafts implies that all writing, all writers, and all revision work one way: hit your target draft number, like your daily Fitbit goals, and you magically get good writing. But more revision isn't necessarily better. Effective revising isn't making changes for the sake of change but instead making smarter changes. And professional writers—practiced writers—have this awareness even if they aren't aware of it. In Stephen King's memoir *On Writing*, he calls this instinct the *ideal reader:* an imagined person a writer knows and trusts but rewrites in response to, a kind of collaborative dance between writer and reader. To writers, the act of *writing* is an act of *thinking.*

One writer in a landmark study comparing the habits of experienced writers to those of novices called their first drafts "the kernel." If you're someone like me who is constantly struggling to demystify this complex cognitive thing we humans do, that metaphor of writing as a seed is revelatory. Revision is not a sign of weakness or inexperience or poor writing. *It is the writing.* The more writers push through chaos to get to the good stuff, the more they revise. The more writers revise, whether that be the keystrokes they sweat in front of a blinking, demanding cursor or the unofficial revising they do in our heads when they're showering or driving or running, the more the ideal reader becomes a part of their craft and muscle memory, *of who they are* as writers, so at some point, they may not know where the writing stops and the revision begins.

Because writing and revision are impossible to untangle, revision is just as situational and interpretive as writing. In other words, writers interact with readers—writing and revision are social, responsive, and communal. Take Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. King gave a rough draft of the most famous American speech of the twentieth century to eighteen hundred people crammed into a gymnasium in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, in November of 1962. Seven months later, King gave another revision of the speech to a gathering of political and spiritual leaders, musicians, and activists in Detroit. In August of 1963, in front of the Lincoln Memorial, King riffed and reworked and rebuilt what he preached in Rocky Mount and Detroit, ad-libbing, deleting, and flipping lines. "I Have a Dream" is what Americans remember today, engraved in our collective memories, archives, and textbooks as a symbol of an entire era, but King's famous refrain singing his vision for a less racially divided country was not even part of his speech's official text that day.

Was King writing a new speech? Was he done with the Rocky Mount or Detroit one? "I Have a Dream" was not one speech but many, written and rewritten. King was not content to let his words sit, but like any practiced writer working out his muscles, he revised and riffed, adapting it for new audiences and purposes.

Revision: Alive and Kicking

All this revision talk could lead to the counterargument that revision is a death spiral, a way of shoving off the potential critique of a finished draft forever. Tinkering is something we think of as quaint but not very efficient. Writers can always make the excuse that something is a work in progress, that they just don't have time for all this revision today. But this critique echoes the point that writing is social and responsive to its readers. Writing is almost always meant to be read and responded to, not hoarded away.

A recent large-scale study on writing's impact on learning supports the idea that specific interventions in the writing process matter more in learning to write rather than how much students are writing (Anderson et al.). Among these useful interventions are participation in a lively revision culture and an interactive and social writing process such as talking over drafts—soliciting feedback from instructors and classmates.

Extending the modern definition of writing more broadly to composing in any medium, revision is as bound to writing as breathing is to living. If anything, humans are doing more writing and revision today. Sure, there are people who call themselves writers and mean that it is part of their formal job title. But then there are the greater numbers of us who are writers but don't label ourselves as such, the millions of us just noodling around on Facebook or Snapchat or Instagram. Facebook and Instagram have an edit feature on posts. Google Docs includes a revision history tool. When we send a text and our buzzy little e-devices kick in with autocorrect, changing Linkin Park to Kinky Park, we compensate with frantic asterisks. We edit our comments or return to clarify them; we cannot resist. Revision as writing is an idea that we should not abandon or trash—and it may not even be possible to do so if we tried.

The original chapter, Strong Writing and Writers Don't Need Revision by Laura Giovanelli, is from Bad Ideas about Writing

Additional Resources

1. For more about the relationships between revision, writing experience, and writing processes, see Alice Horning and Anne Becker's *Revision: History, Theory, and Practice* (Parlor Press) and Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle's *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies* (Utah State University Press), specifically Doug Downs's chapter, "Revision Is Central to Developing Writing."
2. Just a handful of many important studies that have helped writing scholars better understand what's going on when writers revise are Nancy Sommers's "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Writers"; Lester Faigley and Stephen Witte's "Analyzing Revision"; Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing* (Oxford University Press); and Paul Anderson, Chris Anson, Charles Paine, and Robert M. Gonyea's "The Contributions of Writing to Learning and Development: Results from a Large-Scale Multi-Institutional Study."
3. For more on how to frame revision and feedback for student writers, see Donald Murray's *A Writer Teaches Writing* (Wadsworth), Nancy Sommers's *Responding to Student Writers* (Macmillan Learning), and the video "Across the Drafts: Students and Teachers Talk about Feedback."

Works Cited

Anderson, Paul, Chris Anson, Charles Paine, and Robert M. Gonyea. "The Contributions of Writing to Learning and Development: Results from a Large-Scale Multi-Institutional Study." *Research in the Teaching of English*, vol. 50, no. 1, 2015, pp. 199–235.

2

CONCEPTS AND STRATEGIES FOR REVISION

Shane Abrams

Adapted by Liz Delf, Rob Drummond, and Kristy Kelly

Woman draw a light bulb in white board by Andrea Piacquadio / Pexels

Concepts and Strategies for Revision

Let's start with a few definitions. What is an *essay?* It's likely that your teachers have been asking you to write essays for years now; you've probably formed some idea of the genre. But when I ask my students to define this kind of writing, their answers vary widely and only get at part of the meaning of "essay."

Although we typically talk of *an* essay (noun), I find it instructive to think about essay (verb): to try, to test, to explore, to attempt to understand. An essay (noun), then, is an attempt and an exploration. Popularized shortly before the Enlightenment era by Michel de Montaigne, the essay form was invested in the notion that writing invites discovery: the idea was that he, as a layperson without formal education in a specific discipline, would learn more about a subject through the act of writing itself.

What difference does this new definition make for us as writers?

Writing invites discovery.

Throughout the act of writing, you will learn more about your topic. Even though some people think of writing as a way to capture a fully formed idea, writing can also be a way to process ideas—in other words, writing can be an act of thinking. It forces you to look closer and see more. Your revisions should reflect the knowledge you gain through the act of writing.

An essay is an attempt, but not all attempts are successful on the first try.

You should give yourself license to fail, to an extent. If to essay is to try, then it's OK to fall short. Writing is also an iterative process, which means your first draft isn't the final product.

Now, what is *revision?* You may have been taught that revision means fixing commas, using a thesaurus to brighten up word choice, and maybe tweaking a sentence or two. However, I prefer to think of revision as "re | vision."

Revision isn't just about polishing—it's about seeing your piece from a new angle, with "fresh eyes." Often, we get so close to our own writing that we need to be able to see it from a different perspective in order to improve it. Revision happens on many levels. What you may have been trained to think of as revision—grammatical and mechanical fixes—is just one tier. Here's how I like to imagine it:

Fig 16.1 Global revision, local revision, and proofreading

Even though all kinds of revision are valuable, your global issues are first-order concerns, and proofreading is a last-order concern. If your entire topic, approach, or structure needs revision, it doesn't matter if you have a comma splice or two. It's likely that you'll end up rewriting that sentence anyway.

There are a handful of techniques you can experiment with in order to practice true revision. First, if you can, take some time away from your writing. When you return, you will have a clearer head. You will even, in some ways, be a different person when you come back—since we as humans are constantly changing from moment to moment, day to day, you will have a different perspective with some time away. This might be one way for you to make procrastination work in your favor: if you know you struggle with procrastination,

try to bust out a quick first draft the day an essay is assigned. Then you can come back to it a few hours or a few days later with fresh eyes and a clearer idea of your goals.

Second, you can challenge yourself to reimagine your writing using global and local revision techniques, like those included later in this chapter.

Third, you can (and should) read your paper aloud, if only to yourself. This technique distances you from your writing; by forcing yourself to read aloud, you may catch sticky spots, mechanical errors, abrupt transitions, and other mistakes you would miss if you were immersed in your writing. (Recently, a student shared with me that she uses an online text-to-speech voice reader to create this same separation. By listening along and taking notes, she can identify opportunities for local- and proofreading-level revision.)

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, you should rely on your *learning* community. Because you most likely work on tight deadlines and don't always have the opportunity to take time away from our projects, you should solicit feedback from your classmates, the writing center, your instructor, your peer workshop group, or your friends and family. As readers, they have valuable insight into the rhetorical efficacy of your writing: their feedback can be useful in developing a piece that is conscious of audience. To begin setting expectations and procedures for your peer workshop, turn to the first activity in this section.

Throughout this text, I have emphasized that good writing cannot exist in a vacuum; similarly, good rewriting often requires a supportive learning community. Even if you have had negative experiences with peer workshops before, I encourage you to give them another chance. Not only do professional writers consistently work with other writers, but my students are nearly always surprised by just how helpful it is to work alongside their classmates.

The previous diagram (of global, local, and proofreading levels of revision) reminds us that everyone has something valuable to offer in a learning community: because there are so many different elements on which to articulate feedback, you can provide meaningful feedback to your workshop, even if you don't feel like an expert writer.

During the many iterations of revising, remember to be flexible and to listen. Seeing your writing with fresh eyes requires you to step outside of yourself, figuratively.

Listen actively and seek to truly understand feedback by asking clarifying questions and asking for examples. The reactions of your audience are a part of writing that you cannot overlook, so revision ought to be driven by the responses of your colleagues.

On the other hand, remember that the ultimate choice to use or disregard feedback is at the author's discretion: provide all the suggestions you want as a group member, but use your best judgment as an author. If members of your group disagree—great! Contradictory feedback reminds us that writing is a dynamic, transactional action that is dependent on the specific rhetorical audience.

Table 16.1 Definitions of terms used in the following chapter

Vocabulary	Definition
Essay	A medium, typically nonfiction, by which an author can achieve a variety of purposes. Popularized by Michel de Montaigne as a method of discovery of knowledge: in the original French, *essay* is a verb that means "to try, to test, to explore, to attempt to understand."
Fluff	Uneconomical writing: filler language or unnecessarily wordy phrasing. Although fluff occurs in a variety of ways, it can be generally defined as words, phrases, sentences, or paragraphs that do not work hard to help you achieve your rhetorical purpose.
Iterative	Literally a repetition within a process. The writing process is iterative because it is nonlinear and because an author often has to repeat, revisit, or reapproach different steps along the way.
Learning community	A network of learners and teachers, each equipped and empowered to provide support through horizontal power relations. Values diversity insofar as it encourages growth and perspective but also inclusivity. Also, a community that learns by adapting to its unique needs and advantages.
Revision	The iterative process of changing a piece of writing. Literally revision: seeing your writing with "fresh eyes" in order to improve it. Includes changes on global, local, and proofreading levels. Changes might include the following: • Rewriting (trying again, perhaps from a different angle or with a different focus) • Adding (new information, new ideas, new evidence) • Subtracting (unrelated ideas, redundant information, fluff) • Rearranging (finding more effective vectors or sequences of organization) • Switching out (changing words or phrases, substituting different evidence) • Mechanical cleanup (standardizing punctuation, grammar, or formatting)

Revision Activities

Establishing Your Peer Workshop

Before you begin working with a group, it's important for you to establish a set of shared goals, expectations, and processes. You might spend a few minutes talking through the following questions:

- Have you ever participated in a peer workshop before? What worked? What didn't?
- What do you hate about group projects? How might you mitigate these issues?
- What opportunities do group projects offer that working independently doesn't? What are you excited about?
- What requests do you have for your peer workshop group members?

In addition to thinking through the culture you want to create for your workshop group, you should also consider the kind of feedback you want to exchange, practically speaking. In order to arrive at a shared definition for "good feedback," I often ask my students to complete the following sentence as many times as possible with their groupmates: "Good feedback is…"

The list could go on forever, but here are a few that I emphasize:

Table 16.2 A set of qualities that describe good feedback

"Good feedback is…"		
Kind	Actionable	Not prescriptive (offers suggestions, not demands)
Cognizant of process (i.e., recognizes that a first draft isn't a final draft)	Respectful	Honest
Specific	Comprehensive (i.e., global, local, and proofreading)	Attentive

Once you've discussed the parameters for the learning community you're building, you can begin workshop-

ping your drafts, asking, "What does the author do well and what could they do better?" Personally, I prefer a workshop that's conversational, allowing the author and the audience to discuss the work both generally and specifically; however, your group should use whatever format will be most valuable for you. Before starting your workshop, try to get everyone on the same page logistically by using the following flowcharts.

To set the tone and expectations for your unique workshop group, talk through the following prompts. Record your answers. The first activity will establish a climate or culture for your group; the second will help you talk through logistics.

Choose the 3-5 descriptors of good feedback that are most important to the members of your group. Discuss for 3-5 minutes: What do each of you need for this Peer Workshop to be effective? **From each other? From the instructor? From yourselves? From your environment?** Record responses on a separate sheet of paper.

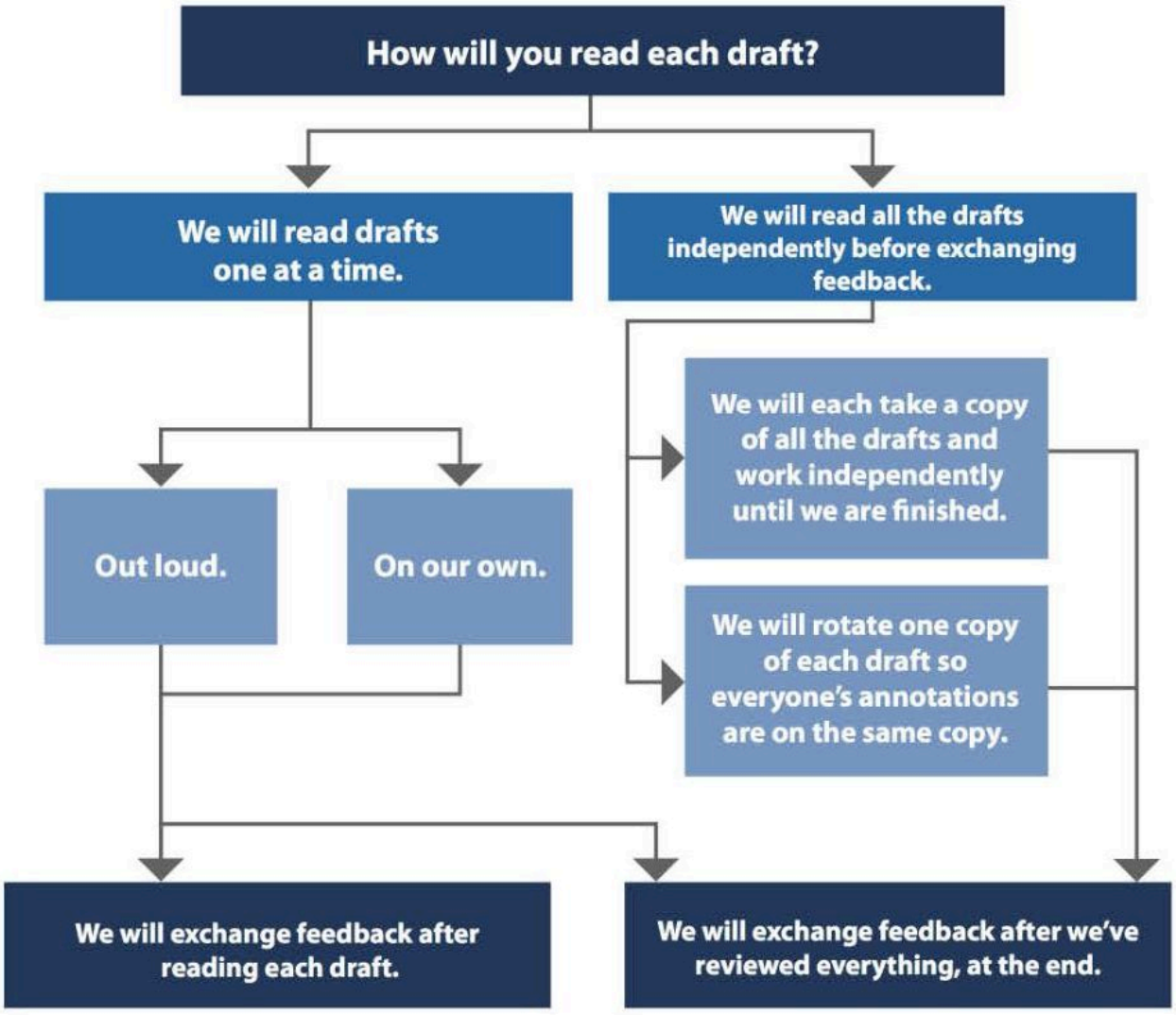

Fig 16.2 Establishing your peer workshop

Fig 16.3 How will your group develop feedback?

Global Revision Activity for a Narrative Essay

This assignment challenges you to try new approaches to a draft you've already written. Although you will be "rewriting" in this exercise, you are not abandoning your earlier draft: this exercise is generative, meaning it is designed to help you produce new details, ideas, or surprising bits of language that you might integrate into your project.

First, choose a part of your draft that (1) you really like but think could be better or (2) just isn't working for you. This excerpt should be no fewer than one hundred words and can include your entire essay, if you want.

Then complete your choice of one prompt from the list below: apply the instruction to the excerpt to create new content. *Read over your original once, but do not refer back to it after you start writing. Your goal here is to deviate from the first version, not reproduce it.* The idea here is to produce something new about your topic through constraint; you are reimagining your excerpt on a global scale.

After completing one prompt, go back to the original and try at least one more or apply a different prompt to your new work.

1. *Change genres.* For example, if your excerpt is written in typical essay form, try writing it as poetry, or dialogue from a play/movie, or a radio advertisement.
2. *Zoom in.* Focus on one image, color, idea, or word from your excerpt and zoom way in. Meditate on this one thing with as much detail as possible.
3. *Zoom out.* Step back from the excerpt and contextualize it with background information, concurrent events, or information about relationships or feelings.
4. *Change point of view.* Try a new vantage point for your story by changing pronouns and perspective. For instance, if your excerpt is in first person (I/me), switch to second (you) or third person (he/she/they).
5. *Change setting.* Resituate your excerpt in a different place or time.
6. *Change your audience.* Rewrite the excerpt anticipating the expectations of a different reader than you first intended. For example, if the original excerpt is in the same speaking voice you would use with your friends, write as if your strictest teacher or the president or your grandmother is reading it. If you've written in an "academic" voice, try writing for your closest friend—use slang, swear words, casual language, whatever.
7. *Add another voice.* Instead of just the speaker of the essay narrating, add a listener. This listener can agree, disagree, question, heckle, sympathize, apologize, or respond in any other way you can imagine.
8. *Change timeline (narrative sequence).* Instead of moving chronologically forward, rearrange the events to bounce around.
9. *Change tense.* Narrate from a different vantage point by changing the grammar. For example, instead of writing in past tense, write in present or future tense.
10. *Change tone.* Reimagine your writing in a different emotional register. For instance, if your writing is predominantly nostalgic, try a bitter tone. If you seem regretful, try to write as if you were proud.

Reverse Outlining

Have you ever written an outline before writing a draft? It can be a useful prewriting strategy, but it doesn't work for all writers. If you're like me, you prefer to brain-dump a bunch of ideas on the paper, then come back to organize and refocus during the revision process. One strategy that can help you here is *reverse* outlining.

Divide a blank piece of paper into three columns, as demonstrated below. Number each paragraph of your draft, and write an equal numbered list down the left column of your blank piece of paper. Write "Idea" at the top of the middle column and "Purpose" at the top of the right column.

Table 16.3 A worksheet example for reverse formatting

Paragraph Number (¶#)	Idea (What is the ¶ saying?)	Purpose (What is the ¶ doing?)
Paragraph 1	**Notes:**	**Notes:**
Paragraph 2	**Notes:**	**Notes:**
Paragraph 3	**Notes:**	**Notes:**
Paragraph 4	**Notes:**	**Notes:**
Paragraph 5	**Notes:**	**Notes:**
Paragraph 6	**Notes:**	**Notes:**
Paragraph 7	**Notes:**	**Notes:**

Now wade back through your essay, identifying what each paragraph is *saying* and what each paragraph is *doing.* Choose a few key words or phrases for each column to record on your sheet of paper.

- Try to use consistent language throughout the reverse outline so you can see where your paragraphs are saying or doing similar things.
- A paragraph might have too many different ideas or too many different functions for you to concisely identify. This could be a sign that you need to divide that paragraph up.

Here's a student's model reverse outline:

Table 16.4 A model of a reverse outline

Paragraph Number (¶)	Idea (What is the ¶ saying?)	Purpose (What is the ¶ doing?)
Paragraph 1	Theater is an important part of education and childhood development.	Setting up and providing thesis statement
Paragraph 2	There have been many changes in recent history to public education in the United States.	Providing context for thesis
Paragraph 3	Theater programs in public schools have been on the decline over the past two decades.	Providing context and giving urgency to the topic
Paragraph 4	a. Theater has social/emotional benefits. b. Theater has academic benefits.	Supporting and explaining thesis
Paragraph 5	a. Acknowledge argument in favor of standardized testing. b. STEAM curriculum incorporates arts education into other academic subjects.	Disarming audience, proposing a solution to underfunded arts programs
Paragraph 6	Socioeconomic inequality is also an obstacle to theater education.	Acknowledging broader scope of topic
Paragraph 7	Looking forward at public education reform, we should incorporate theater into public education.	Call to action, backing up and restating thesis

But wait—there's more!

Once you have identified the idea(s) and purpose(s) of each paragraph, you can start revising according to your observations. From the completed reverse outline, create a new outline with a different sequence, organization, focus, or balance. You can reorganize by

- combining or dividing paragraphs,
- rearranging ideas, and
- adding or subtracting content.

Reverse outlining can also be helpful in identifying gaps and redundancies: Now that you have a new outline,

do any of your ideas seem too brief? Do you need more evidence for a certain argument? Do you see ideas repeated more than necessary?

After completing the reverse outline above, the student proposed this new organization:

16.5 Student proposed changes based on previous table

Proposed changes based on reverse outline:
1
4a
4b
Combine 2 and 5a
Combine 3 and 6
5b
Write new paragraph on other solutions
7

You might note that this strategy can also be applied on the sentence and section level. Additionally, if you are a kinesthetic or visual learner, you might cut your paper into smaller pieces that you can physically manipulate.

Be sure to read aloud after reverse outlining to look for abrupt transitions.

You can see a simplified version of this technique demonstrated in this video.

Local Revision Activity: Cutting Fluff

When it's late at night, the deadline is approaching, and we've simply run out of things to say…we turn to fluff. Fluff refers to language that doesn't do work for you—language that simply takes up space or sits flat on the page rather than working economically and impactfully. Whether or not you've used it deliberately, all authors have been guilty of fluffy writing at one time or another.

Example of fluff on social media ["Presidents don't have to be smart" from funnyjunk.com].

Fluff happens for a lot of reasons.

- Of course, reaching a word or page count is the most common motivation.
- Introductions and conclusions are often fluffy because the author can't find a way into or out of the subject or because the author doesn't know what their exact subject will be.
- Sometimes, the presence of fluff is an indication that the author doesn't know enough about the subject or that their scope is too broad.
- Other times, fluffy language is deployed in an effort to sound "smarter" or "fancier" or "more academic"—which is an understandable pitfall for developing writers.

These circumstances, plus others, encourage us to use language that's not as effective, authentic, or economical. Fluff happens in a lot of ways; here are a few I've noticed:

Table 16.6 A list of common fluff origin stories

Fluff's Supervillainous Alter-Ego	Supervillain Origin Story
Thesaurus syndrome	A writer uses inappropriately complex language (often because of the right-click "Synonyms" function) to achieve a different tone. The more complex language might be used inaccurately or sound inauthentic because the author isn't as familiar with it.
Roundabout phrasing	Rather than making a direct statement ("That man is a fool."), the author uses couching language or beats around the bush ("If one takes into account each event, each decision, it would not be unwise for one to suggest that that man's behaviors are what some would call foolish.")
Abstraction or generalities	If the author hasn't quite figured out what they want to say or has too broad of a scope, they might discuss an issue very generally without committing to specific, engaging details.
Digression	An author might get off topic, accidentally or deliberately, creating extraneous, irrelevant, or unconnected language.
Ornamentation or flowery language	Similarly to thesaurus syndrome, often referred to as "purple prose," an author might choose words that sound pretty or smart but aren't necessarily the right words for their ideas.
Wordy sentences	Even if the sentences an author creates are grammatically correct, they might be wordier than necessary.

Of course, there's a very fine line between *detail* and *fluff.* Avoiding fluff doesn't mean always using the fewest words possible. Instead, you should occasionally ask yourself in the revision process, *How is this part contributing to the whole?* Is this somehow building toward a bigger purpose? If the answer is no, then you need to revise.

The goal should not necessarily be "Don't write fluff" but rather "Learn to get rid of fluff in revision." In light of our focus on process, you are allowed to write fluff in the drafting period, so long as you learn to "prune" during revisions. (I use the word prune as an analogy for caring for a plant: just as you must cut the dead leaves off for the plant's health and growth, you will need to cut fluff so your writing can thrive.)

Here are a few strategies:

- Read out loud.
- Ask yourself what a sentence is *doing,* rhetorically.
- Combine like sentences, phrases, or ideas.
- Use signposts, like topic-transition sentences (for yourself during revision and for your reader in the final draft).
- Be specific—stay cognizant of your scope (globally) and the detail of your writing (locally).

To practice revising for fluff, workshop the following excerpt by yourself or with a partner. Your goal is not to cut back to the smallest number of words but rather to prune out what you consider to be fluff and leave what you consider to be detail. You should be able to explain the choices you make.

> There was a time long before today when an event occurred involving a young woman who was known to the world as Goldilocks. On the particular day at hand, Goldilocks made a spontaneous decision to wander through the forest, the trees growing up high above her flowing blonde pigtails. Some time after she commenced her voyage, but not after too long, she saw sitting on the horizon a small residency. Goldilocks rapped her knuckles on the door, but alas, no one answered the door. Therefore, Goldilocks decided that it would be a good idea to enter the unattended house, so she entered it. Atop the average-sized table in the kitchen of the house, there were three bowls of porridge, which is similar to oatmeal. Porridge is a very common dish in Europe; in fact, the Queen of England is well known for enjoying at least one daily bowl of porridge per day. Goldilocks, not unlike the Queen of England, enjoys eating porridge for its nutritional value. On this day, she was feeling quite hungry and wanted to eat. She decided that she should taste one of the three bowls of porridge, from which steam was rising indicating its temperature. But because she apparently couldn't tell, she imbibed a spoonful of the porridge and vocalized the fact that the porridge was of too high a temperature for her to masticate and consume: "This porridge is too hot!"

The original chapter, Concepts and Strategies for Revision by Shane Abrams, is from EmpoWord: A Student-Centered Anthology and Handbook for College Writers

3

IT'S NOT JUST WHAT YOU SAY, IT'S HOW YOU SAY IT

Style as a Series of Choices

Liz Delf

What you have to say matters. Writing is all about communicating your ideas, argument, or perspective with others. When we talk about thesis statements, supporting arguments, evidence, exigency, and more—that's all about *what* you say.

In this chapter, though, we are going to shift away from *what* you have to say to how you say it. Style is something that many writers develop on their own over time, but giving language to the different elements of style—as we will do in this chapter—can help us better recognize and understand what works for us and why.

Corrections on a paragraph written on a paper by Cottonbro Studio / Pexels

How to Decide

Purpose, Audience, Context

Over the course of your day as a college student, you might write a lab report, a personal essay, an email to a professor, and a bunch of texts to your roommate. As a writer, you know instinctively that these different categories (or genres) of writing require different approaches. The content is varied, yes, but *how* you write is also distinct in each case.

A lab report is objective, is fact based, and often uses passive voice with no "I"; its sentences may be short, clear, and direct. A personal narrative, on the other hand, almost certainly uses an active "I" voice and potentially more adjectives and sensory language. Your personal style might lead you to longer sentences in that context, even experimenting with semicolons or em dashes.

You can imagine similar (or even more pronounced) differences between an email to a professor and a text to your roommate. How does your voice or style change between the two contexts? How do you adapt your vocabulary, formality, punctuation, and more to fit each situation? What's the problem with sending an email filled with emojis and no caps to your professor? They might get your meaning, but an email like that might also (perhaps unfairly) reduce your credibility with that particular audience. When we think about how to

write something, the most important thing to consider is who will read it and why. In other words, read the room, people.

And that brings us to an important point: how you write or speak in your community might be very different from the expectations of academic writing. This extends beyond just emojis; depending on your family and history, you may use a different system of grammar, syntax, and dialect than what is sometimes called "standard" English. That's OK! We don't want to change who you are or how you speak with your family or friends.

Some have even argued that the academic insistence on standardized English is racist and socially unjust. For example, Dr. Vershawn Ashanti Young argues that the college writing classroom's focus on standardized English reveals a prejudice against Black and other nonwhite dialects and privileges white language practices (110–111). Dr. Asao Inoue argues that traditional writing assessment (which emphasizes "correctness") ignores students' experiences and leads to a racist writing classroom with inequitable outcomes (52–53). For these reasons—among others—there is a move within rhetoric and composition classrooms to more widely embrace a variety of student dialects rather than insisting on one single mode of writing and speaking.

That said, though, writing is a series of choices—often impacted by audience and purpose—and those choices can impact the effectiveness of your message. The goal of this chapter is to help you identify the places in your writing where you can make a choice—more or less formal, longer or shorter sentences, dialect or standardized English (or a blend)—to communicate your ideas in a particular context. Choices like this can make your writing clearer and more rhetorically effective.

We make these stylistic changes not to hide who we are but because the purpose, audience, and context of each writing task are different. It is true, though, that some people feel like they have to hide their voice more than others in order to "fit" in college writing. The question of how to honor a diversity of voices and experiences—while still acknowledging that standardized English or academic writing is the expectation in many settings—is a significant challenge and conversation in college writing classrooms.

Our goal is to be rhetorically effective in our writing, and our strategies may vary based on the particular rhetorical situation in which we find ourselves. As writers, it is a powerful tool to be able to move back and forth between stylistic modes and communication styles—the better to reach our readers.

The following elements of style (in alphabetical order) are just some of the areas where you can make these writerly choices.

Concise Writing

Concision is the opposite of wordiness. Concise writing is tight and bright; it is clear and content-rich. In other words, it contains no additional fluff or unnecessary words.

Why is fluff a problem, at a sentence or paragraph level? Why does this matter, do you think?

In the worst cases, wordiness leads to whole paragraphs of fluff and repetition. Sometimes this happens when students are asked to meet a page-length requirement for an assignment. "How can I possibly write five to six pages about the Endangered Species Act?" you may wonder. That's a great question and one you could work on with your instructor—but the answer should ultimately boil down to better content, not fluff paragraphs. (A few ideas: add a counterargument, bring in another source, give an example, ask a more complex question, etc.)

In most writing, though, wordiness happens unconsciously. The kinds of extra words that we add in conversation can make a written sentence confusing and less impactful. Because writing is a more crafted form of communication, we can take the time to edit ourselves and remove the fluff for a stronger final product.

Consider the following examples:

> *Wordy:* The author of this article, Dr. Belinda Jackson, who is a psychologist and researches cognition, makes the argument that metacognition is very helpful for student learning.
>
> *Concise:* Cognitive psychologist Dr. Belinda Jackson argues that metacognition improves student learning.

Notice that the *content* of the sentence didn't change. Concision is not about simplifying your ideas or removing important details. Instead, the goal is to remove unnecessary words that dilute or confuse the sentence. A more concise sentence is easier to understand and therefore makes a stronger impact. In fact, it leaves room for *more* content: a concise writer can pack an incredible amount of information and ideas into a paragraph.

Conciseness is an ongoing exercise for all writers. Here are a few tips to make your writing more concise:

- Remove unnecessary repetition. For example, a "slow, unhurried, leisurely stroll" could be rewritten as simply "a leisurely stroll."
- Remove empty modifiers—adjectives and adverbs that don't significantly contribute to the meaning of the sentence and are used only to intensify the word they are modifying. The most common ones are *very, really, pretty, totally,* and *just*.
- Use an active voice when it makes sense to do so. More on this in the "Passive and Active Voice" section below.
- Combine sentences to avoid repetition. For example, this version is wordy: "I went to the store. The store was Winco. They were closed." A more concise version would be "I went to Winco, but they were closed." Notice that concise writing does not always mean short, simple sentences.

As Strunk and White put it in their famous book *The Elements of Style*,

> Vigorous writing is concise. 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. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell. (46)

That's a high bar but something to aspire to as you work to make your writing concise and content-rich.

Correctness

Many writers feel concerned about "grammar" (I used quote marks here because often what they really mean is clarity, syntax, punctuation, or even spelling—any kind of English usage or mechanics). Often, these writers have been told that their writing contains errors or that it's difficult to understand. This can happen for many reasons. Knowledge of mechanics and English usage comes from a combination of the language or dialect you spoke growing up, the way you process language, your exposure to written language, and more.

This anxiety can be exacerbated by encounters with "grammar Nazis"—people who take it upon themselves to get out their (literal or figurative) red pen and tell you (and the world) exactly what you've done wrong. You may have a grammar stickler in your own life, and the internet is certainly full of them. We've all seen the correction **you're* as a saucy retort to haters in the comments section (one of the most satisfying and, it has to be said, pedantic responses out there).

The internet itself—and all digital communication—is a great example of how language and English usage are constantly in flux. How often do you see a period at the end of a text message—and if you do, what did you do to make the writer angry? How long has the phrase "because internet" been considered a complete thought? Internet linguistics is fascinating in its own right, but I bring it up here as an example of a larger point: grammar is made up. Yes, there are some stylistic and usage choices that make our meaning clearer and more graceful, but some rules are arbitrary and were invented by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century grammarians. ("Never end a sentence with a preposition," I'm looking at you—an arbitrary rule if I ever heard one.)

There is something to be said for correctness. Errors can distract readers from ideas or make meaning murky, and it is true that others may judge us (again, unfairly) for errors and typos in our emails. (Interestingly, one study suggests that the people most bothered by these kinds of errors are not united by age, education, or time spent reading; instead, their commonality is personality type. Extroverts are more willing to overlook written errors that introverted people may judge negatively [Boland and Queen].)

In the field of rhetoric and composition, though, we have moved away from a heavy emphasis on correct usage in the past few years. While there is value in correctness, the most important thing is for your meaning to be clear and your ideas to be sound. Too much focus on where the apostrophe goes can detract from the larger issues of how to build an argument, support a stance, or structure an essay. We need to work on those global aspects of writing before getting down to the nitty-gritty of comma usage. As Stephen Pinker put it,

> For all the vitriol brought out by matters of correct usage, they are the smallest part of good writing. They pale in importance behind coherence, classic style and overcoming the curse of knowledge, to say nothing of standards of intellectual conscientiousness. If you really want to improve the quality of your writing, or if you want to thunder about sins in the writing of others, the principles you should worry about the most are

> not the ones that govern fused participles and possessive antecedents but the ones that govern critical thinking and factual diligence. (485)

In other words, grammar and usage are only a small part of the larger writing picture. Your instructor may note patterns of error or point out places where a comma would make your writing clearer—but it will not be the primary focus of most college writing classes.

However, when you leave school, it will be up to you to judge the rhetorical situation of any piece of writing and handle correctness accordingly. You already know this subconsciously; just think again about the example of texting a friend versus emailing an instructor.

English usage and mechanics are another way to make your writing more effective, powerful, and clear. Think of them as tools to help you strengthen the rhetorical impact of your words and ideas. How can you use these tools to clarify your meaning and help your readers focus on the good stuff?

See the "Additional Resources" and "Activities" sections for more practical and specific guidance on comma usage and more.

Passive and Active Voice

Maybe this is a familiar phrase: "Ugh, he's so passive! Why won't he speak up for himself?" When we describe a person as passive, we mean that they let things happen *to* them. They don't take action; instead, they allow things to happen without resistance.

That definition is helpful when learning about passive voice in writing as well. In passive voice, the object (or recipient) of the action becomes the subject of the sentence. In other words, the focus is on who (or what) received the action rather than on who (or what) completed the action. Here's an example to show you what I mean:

> *Passive:* The coffee was drunk by Poppy.
> *Active:* Poppy drank the coffee.

Both of these sentences are grammatically correct, but as you can see, they have some notable differences. The passive construction is a little longer, and it emphasizes the coffee (the recipient of the action) rather than Poppy (the doer of the action). The active version is more concise, and it focuses on Poppy and her actions.

These may seem like small differences, but they add up over the course of a paper. Active voice is often considered sharper, clearer, and cleaner than passive voice. In the example above, you can see why.

So why would anyone ever use passive voice? Well, in some cases, the doer of the action is unknown or irrelevant, as in "The package was delivered this morning" (passive). We don't know who delivered it, and while the delivery person matters as a human, they don't matter in the meaning of this sentence.

In other cases, the receiver of the action is more important than the doer; we emphasize the recipient of the action because that's what matters in the context of the sentence. For example, we almost always say, "She was born in 1994," which is a passive construction. In this situation, who did the action (her mother) is not the most relevant information. If we wrote, "Her mother gave birth to her in 1994" (active voice), we would be making a conscious decision to highlight her mother's role in the moment.

This is often true in technical and scientific writing as well, which is why the passive voice is more common in STEM fields. In a lab report, for example, the experiment is more important than the researcher; for that reason, it's common to write in the passive voice. For example, "Hydrochloric acid was then added" (passive) is more common than "I added hydrochloric acid."

We also often use passive voice to avoid blaming others in a negative situation. In some cases, this is considered the most polite route. It may feel accusatory or aggressive to say, "You did this assignment incorrectly" (active). Instead, we might say, "This assignment was done incorrectly." Again, both are correct, but we can make a writerly choice here to focus on the receiver of the action (the assignment) and in this case spare someone's feelings.

However, be careful! The passive voice is sometimes used in this way to avoid taking responsibility. Newspapers famously use passive voice in a way that emphasizes the victims rather than the criminals. Politicians, corporations, and regular people also use the passive voice to duck blame or responsibility. Consider the following examples:

Passive: She was assaulted at a party.
Active: An unknown male assaulted her at a party.
Passive: Authors of color have been historically marginalized by the publishing industry.
Active: Historically, the publishing industry marginalized authors of color.
Passive: Mistakes were made.
Active: We made a mistake. (Or even more unthinkable: *I* made a mistake.)

How does the active voice shift the focus of the sentence and potentially the cultural framing of sexual assault, racism, and other errors? You can see how the use of active or passive voice can be a political choice as well as a stylistic one.

Passive voice isn't grammatically incorrect, and it has its place. The key (as with all elements of style) is to consider how its use impacts your writing. Notice it and make a choice about when to use it and when to cut it.

You can check your own writing for passive voice. Does the "doer" of the action come *after* the action (the thing that was done)? Or does the doer disappear completely? If so, the sentence is likely in a passive voice. You can also look for this construction in your sentences:

"to be" verb (is, are, was, etc.) + past participle (walked, taken, seen, etc.) = passive voice

Point of View: To "I" or Not to "I"

As a general rule, an "I" voice will give your writing a more personal and subjective feel. That's why a first-person perspective is common in memoirs and personal essays but rarely seen in STEM fields (although some scientific articles do refer to the researchers as "we," which is a personal pronoun but somehow slightly less intimate than "I"). Academic writing in the humanities and social sciences is somewhere in between these two extremes—depending on the subject and context, a writer can make their own choice. Many well-known scholars in these fields use an "I" in their academic papers, especially if their connection to the subject is important to understanding their perspective or point. Some authors use it just a little bit—maybe they open their article with a personal anecdote before moving into a more objective tone—while others use it throughout a piece of writing.

It's worth noting that although writing without the "I" can be read as more objective, all writing is created by people with perspectives and stances. If I make an argument, it doesn't matter if I frame it with "I argue" or not; it's still my argument. From one perspective, then, using an "I" voice is simply more transparent about the subjectivity of the work.

The "I" voice is slightly less formal, although it can still have a place in academic writing. It can also feel quite personal, depending on the subject. Consider the difference between these two sentences:

While I recognize the potential value of a longer school day in improving test scores, I don't agree that the benefits are worth the cost.

While a longer school day may improve test scores, the benefits aren't worth the cost.

How would you describe the difference between these two? You can see how even minor changes like this have an impact on how they "sound" to the reader's ear.

Syntax

The word *syntax* comes originally from ancient Greek: *sun* (arrange) and *tassein* (together) became the Greek word *suntaxis.* The syntax of a sentence is how it's arranged or how the words are put together. This isn't just a question of correctness; the structure or order of a sentence affects how it strikes its audience.

Consider a widespread example from the well-known style guide by Strunk and White. Thomas Paine wrote, "These are the times that try men's souls." How do these rewrites change the impact of the message?

- Times like these try men's souls.
- How trying it is to live in these times!
- These are trying times for men's souls.
- Soulwise, these are trying times.

As you can see, sentences gain or lose power depending on how they're structured. Longer sentences can seem more formal, but shorter sentences can be more direct and impactful in their own way. Sentences can be combined using semicolons, em dashes, and more; each method will have a slightly different "feel."

This can be a fun thing to play around with! Experiment with your own writing by rewriting one sentence in three ways. Which one do you like most?

Tone

When you were a kid, you may have heard a grown-up say, "Don't use that tone with me!" As a parent myself, I have to admit that I have said these words more than I ever imagined I would. When someone says this, they are usually hearing something in your tone—the attitude of your voice—that they don't like. In other words, the way you speak conveys your attitude toward the listener or the situation.

The same is true in writing. **Tone** is the author's attitude toward their subject or their audience. It might be humorous, sarcastic, intimate, distanced, light, serious, warm, cold, subjective, objective, gloomy, cheerful, formal, informal, or something else. This tone comes from word choice (diction), point of view, sentence structure (syntax), and even punctuation.

Formality

The level of formality in your writing is one important element of tone. This is one of the most obvious differences between a text message and an email to your professor, as we considered above. Academic writing tends to be somewhat formal, although it should still be clear and understandable.

Formality is determined by word choice (diction) and sentence structure (syntax). In English, there are often many phrases and words that mean the same thing, but they have different connotations—including their level of formality. Consider the following:

> The research team will *look into* these issues.
> The research team will *investigate* these issues.

Which is more formal? As you can see, word choice has a big impact. Try it for yourself. Can you come up with a more formal substitution for the following phrases?

- Come around
- Decide
- Do tests
- Find
- Fit in
- Futz around
- Judge
- Make of (as in "What do you make of it?")
- Pin down
- Stick to my position
- Read up on
- Turn up
- Work with

Again, the goal here isn't to change who you are or how you speak. It's about fitting into the genre expectations of whatever you're writing, knowing that your ideas can be more effectively communicated if you adapt to the audience and context. In academic writing, this means making your word choice a bit more formal.

The reverse is also true: your friends might roll their eyes if you started texting them with formal academic language! How would you adapt these phrases into a more conversational style?

- Examine
- Indoctrinate
- Interrogate
- Probe

- Regulate
- Resolve
- Scrutinize

Three more simple ways to adjust the level of formality in your writing:

1. Contractions (can't, don't, it's) are an informal move. You can remove them to make your writing more formal. However, this is not a strict rule! It's a choice that you can make as a writer: How formal do you want to be? Are there times, even in academic writing, where a contraction flows better?
2. Some common transition phrases are inherently formal. Have you ever heard someone say "while this may be the case" or "therefore" in casual conversation?! Only if you have very fancy friends. You can add these to boost your formality or cut them to make your writing more approachable and relatable.
3. Exclamation points are also informal. Again, they're not forbidden in academic writing—but they are infrequent. Use them only with intention and care to highlight an important point.

Voice

Imagine you're sitting around with your friends, debating the qualities of a recent Netflix series. Even though you're all talking about the same thing, the way you say things is different: the resonance of your actual voice, of course, but also your word choice, accent, speed, and more.

This is true in writing too. In any piece of writing, you can include some of your personal "voice" in the piece. Letting yourself shine through often makes a paper more interesting and engaging to read! Voice is the part of your writing that is unique to you as a writer; it's like your fingerprint (or, well, your voice). It comes from word choice, syntax, punctuation, and point of view.

Voice is related to tone but slightly different. Voice is about who you are as a writer, while tone is about how you feel about your subject or audience. In other words, my voice is still my own, whether I'm annoyed, charmed, or frazzled.

What part of your voice comes through—and how much—might depend on the audience and context of the piece. For that reason, many writers have an academic writing "persona." In other words, writers choose (consciously or unconsciously) to present a particular aspect of their character in an academic setting. That doesn't mean it's fake, but it's how they want to be seen in that context (and is probably not a full view of every part of who they are).

Of course, you can imagine how this could *feel* fake if you are new to academic writing or if academic style asks you to push aside your language background or dialect. Writing personas and voice raise complicated questions about what we expect of writers and students.

For example, in writing this chapter, I am writing in a teacherly persona. My voice here is similar to how I would speak in a classroom: warm, friendly, and unpretentious. My tone or attitude toward the subject (style) and the audience (you) is informal and, I hope, encouraging and helpful without being patronizing.

The voice I am using here is authentic—it does really feel true to me and who I am—and that's easy for me to achieve after teaching for many years. It's mostly unconscious at this point, but that certainly wasn't the case when I started my career! Even still, this writing voice isn't every part of me. My voice can be sassier—or even raucous!—in a lively text chain with friends, and it's stern in an angry email to my insurance company. However, in all of those scenarios, you can hear me. How I write is always a little different than how you write—and that's a good thing. It makes writing more interesting and engaging to read.

One of the best ways to develop your voice is to write a lot. You might try writing a page a day, or reading your own work out loud, or asking a friend to read through your work. Writers have to "find" their own voice through time and practice.

Ultimately, the goal is to find a balance between yourself and the writing expectations of the genre. Find an academic writing style (or persona) that feels appropriate and—if possible—true to who you are.

Additional Resources

Standardized English and Correctness

1. The Writing Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has many excellent handouts on and examples of elements of style, including passive voice, conciseness, semicolons, commas, and more.
2. For more on "correctness" in writing, including the correct and incorrect usage of commas, colons, modifiers, and more, see Amy Guptill's chapter on Getting the Mechanics Right.
3. Oregon State University has a growing video series on grammar, including topics like commas, parallelism, and gender-neutral language. Check out the playlist at The Oregon State Guide to Grammar.
4. For interactive learning and practice with standardized English, including parts of speech, punctuation, and syntax, dig into the Khan Academy Grammar series.

Internet Linguistics

If you are interested in internet linguistics and how language has changed in the digital age, check out Gretchen *McCullough's book Because Internet: Understanding the New Rules of Language.*

Another fun one is Emmy Favilla's *A World without "Whom": The Essential Guide to Language in the Buzzfeed Age.* Favilla was the global copy chief at Buzzfeed and often had to invent the rules for writing in internet speak. The many screenshots and chat debates here show the social and invented nature of grammar!

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4

CLARITY AND CONCISION

Amy Guptill

Adapted by Liz Delf, Rob Drummond, and Kristy Kelly

Crop office employee working with document near laptop by Monstera / Pexels

Writing like You Drive

Many student writers get hung up on sentence-level expression, thinking that only elegant, erudite sentences will earn top grades. Or worse, some students assume that they'll never produce strong papers if they do not already have some kind of inborn gift for wordsmithing.

While it is true that some people can produce extraordinarily elegant and graceful prose, it is also true that anyone can learn to write effectively in ways that will persuade and satisfy readers. Producing and reading elegant writing is a pleasure, but what really matters in academic writing is precision.

However, focusing first or only on sentence-level issues is a troublesome approach. Doing so is like driving while looking only at the few feet of the road right in front of the bumper.

Experienced drivers instead take in the larger scene and more effectively identify and avoid potential hazards with ongoing course corrections. Writing well is like that. When you've put in the time and effort to take in the bigger picture of your analysis, most of the microscale moves happen automatically. That is, if you have a well-developed thesis and a carefully sequenced argument organized into cohesive and coherent paragraphs, many of the sentence-level issues take care of themselves. It's easier to write effective sentences when their purpose is clear.

You'll still have to edit for clarity, concision, and mechanics, but if the thinking process behind the writing is well developed, editing shouldn't be a huge chore. It can actually be a satisfying part of the process. One common metaphor notes that a good edit is like the last twist of a camera lens that brings the whole picture into focus.

One approach that often leads to a difficult writing process and a clunky result is the pursuit of "academese": an effort to write in an ornamented and "scholarly" way. As Michael Harvey explains, the desire to sound more academic might prompt a student to write "To satisfy her hunger for nutrition, she ate the bread" rather than simply "She was hungry, so she ate the bread" (3). It is true that a lot of academic writing is laden with unnecessary jargon, but the culture is shifting among scholars to favor plainer language and insist on

clarity. Your instructors are much more likely to find a self-consciously highbrow writing style tedious than impressive. As the saying goes, any fool can make simple things complicated; it takes a genius to make complicated things simple.

My hope with this chapter is to help you see those habits for yourself and, most importantly, how your readers experience them. If you've fallen prey to habits of academese, I hope this chapter helps you develop a more straightforward writing style, one well suited to nuanced thinking and effective communication. And while I don't want you to think of sentence-level wordsmithing as some kind of abstract, enchanted virtue, I do want you to understand that clarity and concision are more than aesthetics. Convoluted or wordy prose may contain some insightful or intriguing ideas, but if you can render those ideas in clear and concise prose, then you will inevitably develop those ideas even further in the course of writing. Unclear and bloated prose isn't just tedious to your reader; it's a needless obstacle to your own thinking.

The best way to achieve clarity and concision in writing is to separate the drafting process from the revision process. Highly effective writers routinely produce vague, tortuous, and bloated drafts and are happy to do so. It usually means that they're onto an interesting idea. Similarly, writers often write the same idea three or four different ways as they're getting their thoughts down on paper. That's fine. In fact, that's better than fine because each repetition helps develop key ideas and alternative approaches to the argument. A snarly first draft is often a great achievement. One just needs to take the time to develop relevant ideas and make them clear to the reader.

For that reason, this chapter envisions someone who has already cranked out a very rough draft and is now in the process of revising for clarity and concision.

Revising for Clarity: Who Did What to Whom?

What makes a complex line of thinking easy to follow? The tricks of cohesion and coherence are a big help. Williams and Bizup offer another key point. They explain that readers experience writing as clear when the "character" of a sentence is also its grammatical subject and the key "action" a grammatical verb. They provide this fanciful example: "Once upon a time, as a walk through the woods was taking place on the part of Little Red Riding Hood, the Wolf's jump out from behind a tree caused her fright" (29). Grammatically, the subject of the first part is "a walk through the woods," and the verb is "taking place." The character, though, is obviously Little Red Riding Hood, and the action is walking. A much more straightforward version—"As Little Red Riding Hood walked through the woods"—makes the character the subject and the action the key verb. That example goes out of its way to be silly, but consider this example from a website offering free college papers (and another reason why you should never use such sites!):

> Another event that connects the colonist and the English together is the event of a hated King in England trying to take away freedom and go back to the old ways. The idea of how much power the King had struck Parliament. After that, the Parliament and the people made the King sign the Magna Carta, which limits the amount of power the King has. The Magna Carta also affected the rights of the American colonies. It practically took away all relationships between the King and the colonies. After the relationship was broken, America broke off from England. (MV22091)

Apparently, the author is claiming that the colonists (in the 1700s?) pushed back against the power of the English Crown in a manner similar to the Parliamentarians in 1215 (after having apparently been "struck" by an "idea" of "how much power the King had"). Grammatically, the subjects are an "event" and an "idea" rather than the characters, colonists, the king, and Parliament. The third sentence is refreshingly straightforward in structure (though vague on details). The fifth and sixth sentences are fairly straightforward but also incredibly vague: the Magna Carta predated the American colonies by at least four hundred years; how does that document relate to the American Revolution? The last sentence essentially says that after the relationship was broken, the relationship was broken.

If the author were to rewrite the passage to make the grammatical subjects match the characters, he or she would be prompted to clarify what exactly the king, the Parliament, the English populace, and the American colonists did (and to whom), something that the author of the above passage may not actually understand. This example illustrates how clarifying "who did what to whom" for the reader also makes writers clarify it for themselves. Writing clearly involves thinking clearly, and clear rigorous thinking is why your professors assign you writing in the first place.

While the Magna Carta example is comically bad, here's one that is more or less logical but would still benefit from greater clarity (edited for the purposes of this demonstration):

> IgE-dependent allergic hypersensitivity reactions such as allergic asthma and food allergy involve mast cells, which are typically regarded as troublesome cells as a result. Further, the allergic sensitization-processes also involve a role for mast cells. Recent findings show that their functionality not only is proinflammatory but can on the contrary have suppressive or immunomodulatory effects in allergic inflammation.

The above passage isn't a terrible slog, and it's fairly clear that the whole passage is about mast cells. But here's a version of the same passage—the real version, as it were—that demonstrates that the passage *feels* a lot clearer when mast cells, the "characters" driving the narrative, are also the grammatical subject of the sentence and the referent for the key verbs:

> Mast cells are typically regarded as troublesome cells due to their prominent role in IgE-dependent allergic hypersensitivity reactions such as allergic asthma and food allergy. Further, it seems that mast cells are also able to play an additional role in the allergic sensitization-processes. Recent findings show that mast cell functionality is not only pro-inflammatory, but can on the contrary have suppressive or immunomodulatory effects in allergic inflammation. (Kraneveld et al. 96)

Both versions of the passage are consistently about mast cells, but the second version makes that consistency much more obvious to readers, as mast cells are the main character of every sentence. That clear consistency allows us to devote more of our brain power to recalling technical terms (like immunomodulatory) and comprehending the key ideas. That makes it both easier and more interesting to read.

To further illustrate the principle, let's take a straightforward passage and rewrite it so that the characters are objects (rather than subjects) and the actions are nouns (rather than verbs). Here's the clear original:

> What most people really feel nostalgic about has little to do with the internal structure of 1950s families. It is the belief that the 1950s provided a more family-friendly economic and social environment, an easier climate in which to keep kids on the straight and narrow, and above all, a greater feeling of hope for a family's long-term future, especially for its young. (Coontz 34)

In these two sentences, the character is a belief rather than a person or thing. However, the passage is still clear to the reader because it keeps the character consistent and explains what that character does (creates nostalgia) and to whom (people at large). Imagine if the author wrote this instead:

> People feel nostalgic not about the internal structure of 1950s families. Rather, the beliefs about how the 1950s provided a more family-friendly economic and social environment, an easier climate in which to keep kids on the straight and narrow, and above all, a greater feeling of hope for a family's long-term future (especially for its young) are what lead to those nostalgic feelings.

This second version says substantially the same thing, but it's tedious to read because the character changes abruptly from "people" to "beliefs" (which works against cohesion), and one has to get to the end of the sentence to learn how these beliefs fit in. The key point is this: one of the best things you can do to revise for greater clarity is to recast a passage so that the characters are the grammatical subjects and the key actions are the verbs.

Concision

Concision is important in all types of writing: every word and sentence should be doing some significant work for the paper as a whole. Sometimes that work is more to provide pleasure than meaning—you needn't ruthlessly eliminate every rhetorical flourish—but everything in the final version should add something unique to the paper. As with clarity, the benefits of concision are intellectual as well as stylistic: revising for concision forces writers to make deliberate decisions about the claims they want to make and their reasons for making them.

Michael Harvey notes that fluffy, wordy prose does not necessarily result from an underdeveloped writing process. Sometimes it reflects the context of academic writing:

> Many of us are afraid of writing concisely because doing so can make us feel exposed. Concision leaves us fewer words to hide behind. Our insights and ideas might appear puny stripped of those inessential words, phrases, and sentences in which we rough them out. We might even wonder, were we to cut out the fat, would anything be left? It's no wonder, then, that many students make little attempt to be concise—[and] may, in fact, go out of their way not to be. (1)

Effortful thinking is something most people naturally try to avoid most of the time. It's both arduous and anxiety provoking to go beyond existing knowledge and assumptions to venture into unknown territory. In some ways, too, the general structure of education conditions students to approach papers as blanks to be filled rather than open-ended problems to explore. When students actively avoid concision, it's often because they want to avoid the hard thinking concision requires, they assume that writing is all about expressing opinions rather than undertaking a rigorous thought process, or they fear that they can't adequately perform and communicate an ambitious analysis.

Many writing guides describe editing strategies that produce a vivid, satisfying concision. Most of the advice boils down to a few key moves:

1. Look for words and phrases that you can cut entirely. Look for bits that are redundant ("*each and every,*" "*unexpected* surprise," "predictions *about the future*"), meaningless ("*very* unique," "*certain* factors," "*slightly* terrifying"), or clichéd ("as far as the eye can see," "long march of time").
2. Look for opportunities to replace longer phrases with shorter phrases or words. For example, "*the way in which*" can often be replaced by "how" and "*despite the fact that*" can usually be replaced by "although." Strong, precise verbs can often replace bloated phrases. Consider this example: "The goal of Alexander the Great *was to create a united empire across a vast distance.*" And compare it to this: "Alexander the Great sought to *unite a vast empire*."
3. Try to rearrange sentences or passages to make them shorter and livelier. Williams and Bizup recommend changing negatives to affirmatives (130). Consider the negatives in this sentence: "School nurses often do not notice if a young schoolchild does not have adequate food at home." You could more concisely and clearly write, "School nurses rarely notice if a young schoolchild lacks adequate food at home." It says the same thing but is much easier to read, which makes for a happier and more engaged reader.

Good parallelism can also help you write shorter text that better conveys your thinking. For example, Stacy Schiff writes this in her best-selling biography of Cleopatra: "A goddess as a child, a queen at eighteen, a celebrity soon thereafter, she was an object of speculation and veneration, gossip and legend, even in her own time" (1). Imagine if, instead, Schiff wrote this: "Cleopatra was seen as divine when she was a child. She became the sovereign ruler at eighteen, and she became well known throughout the ancient world early in her reign. People speculated about her, worshipped her, gossiped about her, and told legends about her, even in her own time." The second version says the same thing, but the extra words tend to obscure Schiff's point. The original ("a goddess as a child, a queen at eighteen, a celebrity soon thereafter") effectively uses parallelism to vividly convey the dramatic shifts in Cleopatra's roles and her prominence in the ancient world.

Concision as Clarity

There is less tolerance for academese than there used to be in scholarly communities; however, a lot of landmark texts were written in a time when there wasn't such a high value placed on clarity and concision. In your studies, then, you will probably have to engage with important texts that violate almost all the advice given here.

Consider the following example from Talcott Parsons and Edward Shils, a sociological theorist noted for both his intellectual force and his utterly impenetrable writing style. In reading this passage, imagine "ego" and "alter" as two people interacting:

> Communication through a common system of symbols is the precondition of this reciprocity or complementarity of expectations. The alternatives which are open to alter must have some measure of stability in two respects: first, as realistic possibilities for alter, and second, in their meaning to ego. This stability presupposes generalization from the particularity of the given situations of ego and alter, both of which are continually changing and are never concretely identical over any two moments in time. When such generalization occurs, and actions, gestures, or symbols have more or less the same meaning for both ego and alter, we may

> speak of a common culture existing between them, through which their interaction is mediated. (Parsons and Shils 105)

Here's a version after edited for concision using the three moves described above:

> Reciprocity, or complementary expectations, depends on a common system of symbols. The symbolic alternatives for alter must be stable, in that they are both realistic for alter and meaningful to ego. That is, actions, gestures, or symbols must have a shared and persistent meaning for ego and alter even though ego and alter are in different situations and are constantly changing. When meanings are shared and persistent, we may say that the interaction between alter and ego is mediated by a common culture.

The revised version is about 30% shorter, and it demonstrates how concision makes one's points come through more clearly. You will almost certainly have to read works of authors who did not prioritize clarity and concision (or even cohesion and coherence), and that's a drag. But knowing how wordiness interferes with clarity can help you distill essential meanings from challenging texts. In many ways, writing well and reading incisively are two facets of the same cognitive skill set.

Grace

Academic writing is not wholly utilitarian. An elegant and apt turn of phrase is satisfying both to write and to read. While you can't often summon elegance out of nowhere, you can learn a few structures that are pleasing to the reader's ear because they harmonize *what* you're saying with how you're saying it. Here are two rhetorical tricks that you can use to reinforce your points.

Trick #1

Balance

Readers often find balanced sentences and phrases pleasing. The Cleopatra example above ("a goddess as a child, a queen at eighteen, a celebrity soon thereafter") illustrates parallelism, which is one kind of balance: using parallel structures to convey a parallel idea. This parallelism not only helps Schiff be powerfully concise but also quickly and vividly conveys the idea that Cleopatra led a remarkable life. Williams and Bizup offer another example of an elegant sentence in which the two parts are balanced in their structure: "A government that is unwilling to listen to the moderate hopes of its citizenry must eventually answer to the harsh justice of its revolutionaries" (171). The same sentence with the parallel parts marked: "A government that is unwilling to listen to the *moderate hopes* of its *citizenry* must eventually answer to the *harsh justice* of its *revolutionaries*." The balanced structure and contrasting language reinforce the author's either/or point: "listen" *or* "answer"; "moderate hopes" *or* "harsh justice"; "citizenry" or "revolutionaries." The balanced structure adds rhetorical force to the argument.

Trick #2

Emphasis

Read these sentences from Michael Moss's book *Salt Sugar Fat* (328) out loud, or imagine yourself doing so:

> *Version 1:* But far and away, the largest weight-inducing food, out-stripping all others, was the potato chip
> *Version 2:* But far and away, the potato chip was the largest weight-inducing food, out-stripping all others.

The first version places a particular rhetorical emphasis on "the potato chip" because it comes last in the sentence after a three-part buildup. The second version says the exact same thing, and it isn't hard to see that "potato chip" is the key part of the sentence. However, the rhetorical emphasis on "the potato chip" is somewhat weaker. This common rhetorical trick is to put the part you want to emphasize at the very end of the sentence.

These are just two rhetorical structures that scholars have identified. You can find others (Google "rhetorical device") that you can bring into your repertoire. Most people can't set out to write elegantly per se, and you certainly shouldn't spend your writing time crafting elegantly balanced sentences that have little to do with your argument or analysis. But the more familiar you are with these rhetorical structures, the more often you can recognize and use them.

The original chapter, Clarity and Concision by Amy Guptill, is from Writing in College: From Competence to Excellence

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