

How to make your writing clearer . . .

Why should academic writing be clear?

Many very smart people believe that they sound even smarter when they write long sentences that contain many long words. They are wrong. Unless you are William Faulkner (and you aren't—he's dead), you should never write a sentence that could in itself be a paragraph or a short story. Long, wordy sentences are more often a result of muddled thinking than of unstoppable brilliance. Writing shorter sentences will force you to think through and communicate your ideas more clearly. A good sentence expresses one idea and rarely includes more than one or two dependent clauses.

How can I make my writing clearer?

- Eliminate unnecessary words. Phrases like “there are,” “in order to,” “the fact that,” “the reason why is that,” “there is no doubt that,” say in many words what could be said in fewer. Try taking out words that do not add to the meaning of your sentence. For example:
“There is no doubt about the fact that Timothy McVeigh drove a truck full of explosives under the Murrah Building in order to demonstrate his anger over the Waco debacle.”
Could read:
“Timothy McVeigh drove a truck full of explosives under the Murrah Building to demonstrate his anger over the Waco debacle”
- Count the lines/count the commas/count the semicolons: Good, clear sentences are rarely more than two to three lines in length. If you have a sentence that extends beyond three lines or contains more than two commas (except in a list), try to shorten the sentence. For example:
“The French sought to eliminate the FLN by bombing the Casbah in Algiers, and then tortured members of the FLN because they wanted to maintain power in Algeria, even though many Algerians had begun to demand their independence.”
Could read:
Even though many Algerians had begun to demand their independence, the French wanted to maintain power in Algeria. As a result, they sought to eliminate the FLN by bombing the Casbah in Algiers and torturing FLN members.”
- READ YOUR WRITING OUT LOUD! Read to a friend, read to your dog, or read to yourself. If you have to take a deep breath in the middle of a sentence, you need to shorten the sentence. If you have to start over to understand what you were talking about in a given sentence, you need to shorten the sentence.

Practice:

Reword or divide the following sentences to make them clearer.

The “new terrorism” is a term that predates the events of September 11, 2001, and Bruce Hoffman defines it as a transnational phenomenon that transcends nation-state politics, although there is no doubt that there were forms of transnational terrorism even before the twentieth century, such as the example of the anarchist movement.

On December 25, 1984, anti-abortion activists bombed the Ladies' Clinic in Pensacola, Florida, which was the second time over the course of six months that anti-abortionists had bombed the clinic as a way of expressing their anger over what they described as the murder of unborn children, although most anti-abortion activists did not participate in terrorist activities but funneled their activism through protests and the court system.

Sources/resources:

William Strunk, Jr. and E. B. White, *The Elements of Style*