

Writing Good Sentences

Consider Sentence Structure

- Place the message in the powerful places of the sentence: subject, verb, and object (completer)
 - Topic = the subject (noun)
 - Action = the verb
 - Object = the completer (noun)

Avoid: In reference to Seventh Day Adventists, their animal fat consumption is less than that of other Americans.

Revision: Seventh-Day Adventists consume less animal fat than other Americans.

Avoid: The patient showed no change in symptoms.

Revision: The patient's symptoms did not change.

- The subject should be followed closely by the verb

Avoid: The importance of concomitant antiplatelet therapy in patients undergoing coronary thrombolysis was emphasized by the results of the ISIS-2 trial.

Revision: The ISIS-2 trial showed the importance of concomitant antiplatelet therapy in patients undergoing thrombolysis.

Avoid Nominalizations

- Nominalizations are nouns made from verbs. Watch out for nouns with endings such as -tion, -ment, -ence, and -al
 - Measurement
 - Assessment
 - Occurrence
 - Removal

Consider Verb Voice

Active voice

- Subject performs the action
 - We found that...
- More vigorous than passive voice

- Expresses confidence in your research
- Preferred in scientific writing when possible

Passive voice

- Subject is acted upon
 - It was found that...
- Use when the recipient of the action is more important
 - The patient was injected with the test drug.
- Use when it does not matter who performed the action
 - The patient was transported to the hospital by ambulance.

Ensure Subject-Verb Agreement

- The subject and verb must agree in number
 - Singular subject (does not end in “s”)/singular verb (ends in “s”)
 - Plural subject (ends in “s”)/plural verb (does not end in “s”)
- Ignore intervening phrases
 - The factor that affected the study results was...
- Treat collective nouns as singular, unless the individual members are emphasized
 - Twenty percent of her time is spent...
 - The team responds to emergency calls.
- Compound subjects (joined by “and”) require plural verbs
 - The patient with the Jarvik 2000 and the patient with the HeartMate II run 2 miles per day.
- Compound subjects joined by “or” or “nor” can be singular or plural, depending on the nearest element
 - Neither the hospital nor the physicians were responsible.
 - Neither the physicians nor the hospital was responsible.
- Indefinite pronouns (some, any, none, all, and most) can be singular or plural, depending on referents
 - Some of the values are correct.
 - Some of the meat is rancid.
 - Most of the manuscript was written by 1 author.
 - Most of the patients were men.

Convey One Idea at a Time

- Inappropriately overpacked sentences can impede readability and often lack clarity

Avoid: To study the mechanisms involved in the beneficial effects of hydralazine on ventricular function in patients who have chronic aortic insufficiency, a radionuclide assessment of ventricular function was performed in 15 patients with pure aortic insufficiency, functional class I or II, at rest and during simple treadmill exercise.

Revision: We assessed the mechanisms involved in the beneficial effects of hydralazine on ventricular function in patients who had chronic aortic insufficiency. For this assessment, we performed radionuclide studies of ventricular function in 15 patients at rest and during treadmill exercise. All patients had pure aortic insufficiency and were in functional class I or II.

What changed?

In the revision, the ideas are separated into 3 sentences. The first sentence conveys the objective; the second sentence describes the methods; and the third sentence provides additional information about the study group.

Eliminate Wordiness

- Long, wordy sentences are difficult to read—unless they are very well written
- Aim for 25 to 30 words or less per sentence
- Include only 1 idea per sentence
- Expendable phrases
 - it goes without saying
 - needless to say
 - it is important to note that
 - it may be said that
 - it was found that
 - it was demonstrated
 - there are many statistics that show
- Replaceable phrases
 - due to the fact that (because)
 - an increased number of (more)
 - during the time that (while)
 - the majority of (most)

- as the result of (because)
- at this point in time (now)
- in regard to (about)
- have an effect on (affect)
- in order to (to)

Put the Action in the Verb

- The action in the sentence should usually be conveyed by the verb
 - Action inappropriately placed in the subject

Avoid: An increase in heart rate occurred.

Revision: The heart rate increased.

Avoid: Measurements of blood pH were made.

Revision: Blood pH was measured.

- Action inappropriately placed in the object

Avoid: The drug caused a decrease in the patient's heart rate.

Revision: The drug decreased the patient's heart rate.

Use Transitions to Indicate Relationships

- Transitions are important for the logical flow of sentences and paragraphs
- Use transitions to indicate how sentences and paragraphs are related
- External transitions (not integral to the sentence)
 - For conclusions: therefore, thus
 - In a sequence: first, second, then, finally
 - To contrast: however, in contrast
 - Others: for example, in addition
- Internal transitions (a part of the sentence that connects it to the previous sentence)
 - Individual residues in the repeated-sequence blocks had diverged. Despite this divergence, the patterns of amino acids were identical.