THE ACADEMICS'
LITTLE HELPER

A writing guide

by Tanvi Mehta

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Reasons for manuscript rejection generally cluster into two categories: fatal flaws and communication barriers … The most important communication barrier to publishing otherwise sound research is the expositional qualities of the manuscripts. Frankly, it is appalling to see how badly so many of us write.

Richard J. Lutz (1990), "Editorial," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 17(December), i–iii.

The unavoidable reality is that writing effectively is not just a necessary condition for getting published. Better writing propels an academic's influence and reputation, and the finest writing is more often found among the most distinguished researchers.

David Mick (2005), "Inklings: From Mind to Page in Consumer Research," President's Column, Spring 2005 Newsletter of the Association for Consumer Research.

There are a few jerks out there who do write the perfect stuff the first time and who don't have to work hard to make their writing good. But I'm assuming that you don't belong to this class of disgusting individuals.

Marc H. Raibert (1985), "Good Writing," http://www.alice.org/Randy/raibert.htm.

Contributors

Tanvi Mehta

Tanvi is an academic editor, and a first-time author and publisher of this booklet. Tanvi has worked with many media, but has found her place as an editor of academic texts, attracted by working with words and highly complex, abstract ideas at the same time. She runs an academic editing company, and has clients worldwide.

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Thomas O'Guinn is Professor of Advertising, Professor of Business Administration, and the Research Professor and Assistant Director of Consumer Communications Studies at the Institute of Communications Research, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He received his Ph.D. in Communications and his M.A. and B.S. in Mass Communications from the University of Texas at Austin. He studies consumer behavior and its relationship to the mass media, and is particularly interested in the sociological aspects of this relationship.

Representative publications authored can be found in *Advances in Consumer Research*, *Journal of Advertising*, *Journal of Consumer Research*, *Journal of Consumer Policy*, *Journalism Quarterly*, and *Psychology and Marketing*. Professor O'Guinn has also written several books, some of which have been long-standing text books for students of advertising. He has also served as a reviewer for over 20 leading scholarly journals.

Alan Sawyer

Alan Sawyer is J.C. Penney Professor of Marketing at University of Florida. He earned his MBA at Northeastern University in Boston, and graduated from Stanford University with a Ph.D. in marketing in 1972.

Professor Sawyer has focused his published research on the effects of advertising, promotion, and pricing; market segmentation; and research methods. His research publications, which have been cited more than 1000 times by other academics, have appeared in many journals including the *Journal of Consumer Research*, the *Journal of Retailing*, the *Journal of Marketing*, the *Journal of Marketing Research*, *Management Science*, *Marketing Letters*, and *Marketing Science*. He has served as a member of several editorial boards, and has always worked as a marketing and research consultant to organizations and government.

Foreword

by Thomas O'Guinn

I always wanted to be a writer, and I was fairly serious about being one as far back as junior high. I won my first writing award when I was 15. It came as a real surprise because I didn't really try very hard. To tell you the truth, it came pretty easy. I wrote one-act plays, political satire, and humor, including scripts for student films. I was best at humor. If I had had more guts, I probably would have gone for it, tried to become a professional writer, maybe an essayist, maybe a comedy writer. But I didn't come from privilege, didn't drink quite hard enough, and wasn't all that comfortable with poverty.

My greatest literary moment was a one-on-one with Tennessee Williams. He was giving a lecture at the University of Texas and had gotten loose from his handler. I had just gotten off work at the college bookstore. I had a stack of Williams' plays under my arm. I had a couple of hours to kill; I sought a drink. I walked in a campus bar, and the only other guy in the place was none other than one of the greatest playwrights of the twentieth century. I sit down, introduce myself and spend the next hour or so talking about writing, or trying to talk about writing. Despite my best efforts, Mr. Williams kept asking me about my life, where I grew up, my neighborhood, my family. He would make note of what seemed to me the smallest things, details, and not the big sweep of my brief life. I came away from that evening with a pen (29 cent BIC; I still have it) he had written with that very day, and something even more valuable: good writers listen. Good writers hear others talk; great writers hear others think.

Probably the single best practical writing advice came from Professor Ambrose Gordon. Professor Gordon was one of my teachers at the University of Texas at Austin. He was a wonderful gentleman who taught me a great deal in a short amount of time. Even though the class was a literature course, he offered to help me with my writing. First, he told me that my writing was a bit undisciplined. I really

didn't care to hear this, but he was right. He took the time to work with me during his office hours. One day he told me that I should read every sentence I write aloud … by myself, to myself. Read it loud. Does it sound right? The things between the periods; do they sound right, good to the ear? I resisted, thought the whole thing a bit silly. But he insisted. I began the practice; I still do it today.

I also collect sentences, at least casually and inconsistently. When I'm reading, I'll come across a beautifully crafted sentence, and I underline it … think about it, study it. If you want to be a better writer, read good writing.

My grandmother, Tennie B. Chambers, was the best storyteller I ever heard. I learned storytelling from her. It's the thing I do best. I remember sitting in front of her big chair while she told tales. She used to draw a big crowd of the other boomer six-year-olds for her Wild West stories. I was so proud. I'll never be as good as her, but every now and again I write a sentence or tell a story that I think she would like. It makes me smile.

Academic writing is just plain weird writing. I don't particularly like it. It's some of the very worst writing on the planet. It's downright embarrassing. If you want to learn to write, for goodness' sake, don't ever emulate academic journal writers.

There are lots of reasons academic writing is so dreadful, but a lot of it simply has to do with who we write for, and why. It's not about communicating scholarship; it's about gaming a system. It's about doing an artful dance of stroking, ignoring, and making a big deal about what are (sorry) usually truly meaningless findings, thoughts that really should never have been shared, time stolen from the poor reader, time forever lost. If you want to get published, don't be too clear; seek optimal obfuscation instead, and then repeat this crime as often as you can—it works. But if you want to be remembered for good ideas well stated, then write to be understood, write to produce thought, not just to deliver it. Write to produce leaps of creativity and imagination in your reader. Good writers want to not only communicate their thoughts, but they also want to produce in their reader a point where their writing merges with their reader's thoughts, and imagination is set free ... readers think, they ponder, they wonder … and that magic moment that good writing produces is so good, so satisfying, you just have to keep doing it. That's what good writers do. ▪

Foreword

by Alan Sawyer

Concise Writing Pays Off[1]

Clear scientific writing is essential for research to be understood, published, and impactful. A recent *Journal of Marketing* article, titled "Readability and the Impact of Marketing" (Bauerly, Johnson, and Singh 2005), documented a steep decline in readability in the *Journal of Marketing* in the early 1970s when the focus of marketing academics became more scientific and specialized. This readability has remained low since that time. Moreover, good writing is essential "if marketers want to communicate across specializations, across functional areas, and outside the marketing discipline and if marketing science is to influence practice" (Bauerly et al. 2005).

The current Manuscript Evaluation Criteria for the *Journal of Marketing* state that in addition to the contribution and quality of the research of an article under review, readability is important. "All manuscripts are judged not only on the depth and scope of the ideas presented and their contributions to the field, but also on whether they can be read and understood." "Keep sentences short so the reader does not get lost before the end of a sentence. …The journal is designed to be read, not deciphered" (American Marketing Association 2005). Despite these frequent admonitions for clear writing, many marketing journal editors view writing in academic journals as difficult to decipher and badly in need of revision (Winer 1998; Lutz 1990). See also Holbrook (1986) and Sawyer (1988).

Recently, some colleagues and I (Sawyer, Laran, and Xu 2006) analyzed the readability of journal articles in marketing. Our prime research goal was to test the validity of the logical speculation that articles written by the most distinguished researchers are more readable. Readability is "the ease of understanding or comprehension due to the style of writing" (Klare 1963, 15) and "the extent to which (a group of readers) understand it, read it at an optimal speed, and find it

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1. This manuscript has the following readability scores: average reading grade = 13.7; Flesch Index = 47.3; and average sentence length = 22.0 words.

interesting" (Dale and Chall 1949, 19). No existing objective methods measure the many subtle aspects of good writing, but several formulas that have been validated and widely used are available to assess the basics (see DuBay 2004 for an excellent summary of this research). These indices involve the length of words and sentences. One example is the widely used Flesch score, which was used by Bauerly et al.

Articles which had won a major award in the *Journal of Marketing* and the *Journal of Marketing Research* published from 1990 to 2004 were used as the benchmark of distinguished research. These issues are available in html format and thus allowed us to copy each article into Word format. Then, each text was trimmed of the title and abstract, all headings and sub-headings, any mathematical equations, all extensive respondent quotations from qualitative interviews, and all tables, figures, and footnotes and uploaded to a website (Taylor 2004) that calculates many indices which use varying formulas to measure readability. For each award-winning article, a counterpart "non-winner" article in the same issue of the journal was chosen. The final sample of 53 award-winners included 32 articles from *Journal of Marketing* and 21 from *Journal of Marketing Research*. With the 53 non-winners, the sample totaled 106 articles. We also coded the sampled articles for their content and tested the relationship of various characteristics with readability.

This brief report of the results will emphasize three measures of readability. The first is the average of four scores designed to indicate the lowest *school grade* that would allow comfortable reading of the manuscript. The second is the *Flesch score,* and the third is the *average words per sentence.* Statistically, award-winning articles received significantly better reading scores on all indices. The mean reading grade of award-winners was lower than that of the non-winners ($M_{winners}$ = 15.5 vs. $M_{non-winners}$ = 16.2). The Flesch readability index was also better for award winners ($M_{winners}$ = 38.6 vs. $M_{non-winners}$ = 35.1), as were all other five individual indices. Consistent with the results for the various reading formulas, the award-winners averaged 1.2 fewer words per sentence (23.9) than the non-winners (25.1). However, winners and non-winners did not differ significantly in terms of word length. In addition to whether the article had won an award, more readable articles were likely to be empirical, methodological in nature, contain equations, analyze secondary data, and be co-authored.

Although the differences on several measures of readability between award-winners and non-winner articles in the *Journal of Marketing* and *Journal of Marketing Research* may not seem large, the explained variance is reasonably high for behavioral research. In addition, this result replicates a similar result in psychology (Hartley, Sotto, and Pennebaker 2002). Moreover, the finding of *any* significant differences is noteworthy because of the many other reasons why readability scores might vary. There was a strong possibility of no significant differences among articles within top-level academic journals. After all, winners were compared to non-winners, but the non-winners were not "losers." They were published in the two top American Marketing Association journals, each with rejection rates in the 90% range.

Interpretation of the practical size of the reading scores of the sampled articles is more difficult to understand. While it would be absurd to say that one should use shorter sentences and words to write award-winning articles, these basics are important ingredients of good writing that may, *ceteris paribus*, add to the impact of published research. Award-winners had an average of 5% fewer words per sentence across both journals, and sentences were 7.3% shorter when only *Journal of Marketing Research* was analyzed. This 5.0% advantage equals a reduction of 1.4 manuscript pages and nearly half of an average journal page. The 7.6% difference in words per sentence between winners and non-winners in the *Journal of Marketing Research* equals two manuscript pages and 63% of a *Journal of Marketing Research* page.

However, the goal of better writing is not merely shorter sentences and articles, but improved reading ease and comprehension. Taken literally, winners and non-winners differed by an average of less than a school grade. However, even if expert readers are able to read a manuscript, communication researchers find that small improvements in writing can help readers read faster, understand more, and remember more and thus add to the potential impact of the article. Moreover, marketing is an applied discipline. Many academics may not realize that 68% of *Journal of Marketing* subscribers are practitioners. Many people bemoan the lack of impact of academic research on marketing practice. Given that many otherwise worthwhile articles are difficult to read even for academics, the typically turgid

writing style of academic research articles in marketing may account for a significant amount of this communication gap.

Motivation and perspiration are important ingredients of good writing. The value of multiple drafts may be well known, but many authors underestimate what is needed to produce a well-written manuscript. Comments of colleagues about the positioning and content of a research draft are vital. Inevitably, copy editors can help. There is no existing marketing journal article or book that could not benefit significantly from the suggestions in this writing guide. Even after many drafts, one should take a "final" draft and try one more time to avoid the problems demonstrated in this booklet and simplify, shorten, and use better sentence structures, while using familiar, often shorter, words. The use of precise, short sentences will help readers, and although one should not simply write to maximize readability scores, they are a useful screen to assess readability. As Holbrook (1986) colorfully stated, "Remember that brevity is the soul of wit. In each section, paragraph, and sentence of your paper, shun excessive length as diligently as you would paying extra interest on your credit card. Say exactly what you need to say, no more, then stop. Like this." ∎

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Introduction

WHAT IS academic writing?

Academic writing is a written argument which seeks to convince readers, especially reviewers, of its strength. It is, in fact, the written version of what might have been an oral argument. Academic writing therefore assumes, at every step, the overbearing presence of an invisible co-debater trying to counter-argue, trying to foil the very unfolding of the argument. The academic writer takes into account this onerous presence in advancing the argument. Bold statements must immediately be backed up by authoritative claims to prevent the lurking shadow from intruding; statements must be clarified, leaving no room for doubt or debate; the inadequacy of opponents' research must be demonstrated gently to prevent retaliation.

Academic writing is, in sum, the written form of an imagined oral argument.

WHY IS academic writing?

The raison d'être of academic writing is to convince the reader about the validity of your theories and findings, and eventually to have your ideas accepted by the wider academic community. You have two tools for that: your argument, the weapon, and your words, the salve. You might get people to listen if you're waving a weapon, but you might find they are hard to convince. For that, you need to coax them, anticipate their wounds and then gently apply some soothing balm; in other words, you need words. The words that hold your ideas must tease the reader over to your side in this imagined debate. But before that happens, the reader must understand what you are saying. Comprehension before acceptance. Clarity before swashbuckling style.

Readability, over all.

WHY IS this booklet?

Thankfully, there's nothing natural about clarity. It's not a natural gift and can, hallelujah, be learned. In fact, it has to be wilfully implemented. And the tools for implementing clarity are what this booklet gives you. The booklet offers quick, practical tips that can be applied to your writing straight away to make it clear and readable, and then, therefore, with any luck, more convincing. Because the truth of the matter is that readers have got to understand what you mean before they can be convinced by your argument. If the reader has to read a sentence three times to understand your meaning, or skip back 14 pages to look up a long-forgotten point that you are referring to, they are destined to be annoyed. And if they're annoyed, they can't be convinced. And if they can't be convinced, you can't be published.

Which brings us back to clarity and this booklet's usefulness to you.

cautionary note

This booklet only imparts practical tips to make academic writing more fluid and comprehensible. To cultivate real style and verve, stop emulating the stodge in the journals and instead commit to memory the styles of some of the better academic writers like Stephen Brown, Morris Holbrook, Thomas O'Guinn, Russell Belk, John Sherry, and Linda Scott to name just a few.

noteworthy note

In a recent informal survey of marketing academics, I asked them who they believed were the three best writers—not researchers—in the field. The 24 respondents nominated between one and three academics. The results showed that the top three slots were taken by Stephen Brown, Morris Holbrook, and Russell Belk, in that order.

Enough said.

User's Manual

There are three levels at which the writer conveys meaning to the reader: at the structural level through information design, at the sentence level through choice of sentence structures, and at the word level, in the turn of phrase used. This booklet is divided into three sections along those lines: Cohesion, Sentence Grammar, and Phrases.

The first two sections, Cohesion and Sentence Grammar, are thought-provoking, literally. You will need to readjust your thinking glasses before you can apply the tips discussed. For best results, read and re-read these two sections, memorising the points and slowly moulding your writing to incorporate the tips.

The third section, Phrases, can be used as a reference guide. The umpteen examples, chosen from real academic articles, can be copied directly into your work for a nice coat of polish.

You can, of course,
choose to ignore all these instructions and
make your own path through this booklet.

Cohesion

The sheer length of the argument in academic writing has many implications for the reader: mainly, that getting lost in its winding ways is a common occurrence. As the argument flits from one idea to the next, sometimes rolling back on itself, occasionally jumping forward, the writer must ensure the reader is always abreast of the deft manoeuvres the argument is making. If the writer pays no heed to the reader's needs, the writer risks losing the reader, and once the reader is lost in the text, he/she is far from being convinced by the argument, a situation which runs counter to the very raison d'être of academic writing. So, to keep the reader's attention at all times, it is necessary to embed pointers in the writing to indicate the direction of your argument: where it's coming from, where it's going to, and where it's at right now.

In short, information design.

Information design is, surprise surprise, all about designing information. The good old days of expecting the reader to labor through page after inscrutable page of murky writing are over. These days the burden is on the writer to clearly signpost his/her argument to prevent the reader from getting lost, to guide him/her towards the conclusion of a compelling argument by weaving a tight, thick thread of meaning through the text.

The main principle used to weave this thread of meaning at the structural level is "cohesion." Ideas must cleave to each other along a thread that winds through the text. This thread weaves common meanings, takes readers directly back to the source of the argument, and eventually creates a cohesive and coherent text for the reader.

Below are some practical devices that make tangible this quite abstract idea.

Repetition

Repeat, Don't Replace

Repetition has been much maligned. We've come to consider writers who use it as unimaginative, and readers who read it as bored. Although it's true that some writing may benefit from the removal of repetitive words and phrases ("the economy crashed after the stock market crashed"), this is not so for academic writing where sentences can be long, and readers need reminding.

> *In fact, the purpose of repetition in academic writing is to create* **consistency** *and* **comprehension** *in the text.*

Academic writers often feel the need to substitute key constructs with synonyms to steer away from being labelled "unimaginative," the worst kind of mud you could fling at a writer. Although this practice of replacing key constructs with new and imaginative words or phrases is an admirable effort, it is disorienting for the reader who constantly has to keep track of the new words which describe the same old thing. Best to stick with the familiar, thereby imprinting your meaning on the reader's mind. Below are examples of how well repetition can work to maintain consistency for the reader.

Ex 1:   The operations and decisions of organizations are inextricably bound up with the conditions of their **environments** … The impact of the **environment** on organizations has been widely noted … Thompson (1967: ch. 3) has postulated that organizations attempt to manage their external dependencies or to control the **environment.** Also writing from an open systems perspective, Hawley (1950) recognized the tendency of organisms to attempt to control their **environments** …

  - Jeffrey Pfeffer (1972), "Merger as a Response to Organizational Interdependence," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 17 (September), 382.

While the author could easily have substituted "environment" with "surroundings," he chooses not to, thereby concretizing the concept for the reader.

Ex 2:   An important category of irreplaceable cherished possessions is objects given or bequeathed from an older to a younger generation, sometimes referred to as '**keepsakes**.' Inheritors of **keepsakes** often imply previous owners' qualities contaminate these items … **Keepsakes** are indexical symbols, items with an evidentiary function … researchers question whether **keepsakes** can and will be retained by future generations … research shows that older generations target gifts and bequests (especially irreplaceable cherished possessions) in the hope that these '**keepsakes**' will become inalienable—objects that stay in the family (Price et al. 2000).

  - Carolyn F. Curasi, Linda L. Price, and Eric J. Arnould (2004), "How Individuals' Cherished Possessions Become Families' Inalienable Wealth," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31 (December), 610.

The repeated use of the word "keepsake" over five consecutive sentences, instead of a substitute like "heirloom" or "object," marks the word and its special meaning that the researchers would like to convey to the reader.

Ex 3: **Variety seeking** behavior by consumers is receiving increased attention … The purpose of this paper is to present and discuss some of the major implications of **variety seeking** for … **Variety seeking** by consumers can have a significant impact upon several aspects of advertising … Empirical research and various behavioral theories (2) support the position that some people **seek variety** in the stimulation they receive. This **desire for variety** may be expressed …

- Elizabeth C. Hirschman and Melanie Wallendorf (1980), "Some Implications of Variety Seeking for Advertising and Advertisers," *Journal of Advertising*, 9 (2), 17.

The first three sentences of the paper all repeat the phrase "variety seeking" without change. Once the idea has taken root in the reader's mind, the authors play with the phrasing, being careful, however, never to wander too far afield: "seek variety," "desire for variety" etc.

Recap, Often

Recapping is an important aid to comprehension. A point made on page 8, referring to a point on page 1, should briefly recap the original point to jog the reader's memory, which can, in academic writing, be overburdened by the persistent onslaught of new ideas, terms, and phrases. Although recapping may seem like restating the obvious, it is unfair to assume that the reader, who is not familiar with your work, should instantly recall the original point on your saying "The eighth dimension is …"

Periodically recapping serves to engage the reader and guide him/her firmly through your text, which will demonstrate your confidence in creating a winning argument. Recapping also creates a kind of rhythm or drum beat, the striking of which takes the reader back to the point that was made. Examples follow.

Ex 1:   A primary purpose of the present work is to further examine and compare the validity of two sets of arguments about the **determinants of executive beliefs** regarding factors affecting organizational effectiveness. **The first set of arguments concerns** … **The second set of arguments concerning the determinants of beliefs** is related to …

- Prithviraj Chattopadhyay, William H. Glick, Chet Miller, and George P. Huber (1999), "Determinants of Executive Beliefs: Comparing Social Conditioning and Functional Determinants," *Strategic Management Journal*, 20 (August), 764.

Ex 2:   Moving from **Hypothesis 4, which dealt with an advertising-only condition**, this case presents a greatly enhanced information environment for the child.

- Elizabeth S. Moore and Richard J. Lutz (2000), "Children, Advertising, and Product Experiences: A Multimethod Inquiry," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 27 (June), 35.

Ex 3:   Contrast the situation depicted in Figure 1—**that is, the smoothly functioning barter economy, in which there was no need for marketing of any kind**—with that which characterizes a modern economy based on large-scale business involving the mass production of various manufactured goods (i.e., the sort of economy that prevailed at the time when McInnes (1964) wrote his much-neglected philosophical tract).

- Morris B. Holbrook and James M. Hulbert (2002), "Elegy on the Death of Marketing: Never Send to Know Why We Have Come to Bury Marketing but Ask What You Can Do for Your Country Churchyard," *European Journal of Marketing*, 36 (5/6), 708.

_Ex 4:_   The second hypothesis suggested that while ad exposure prior to product trial might be expected to influence older children's subsequent brand perceptions and attitudes, younger children would be less likely to integrate the two disparate information sources. As shown in Table 2, this hypothesis was generally supported.

- Elizabeth S. Moore and Richard J. Lutz (2000), "Children, Advertising, and Product Experiences: A Multimethod Inquiry," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 27 (June), 35.

_Ex 5:_   Initially, **29 items** were selected as potential candidates for use in a screening instrument … As a second step in the scale-development procedure, **the 29 items chosen to reflect important characteristics of compulsive buying** were entered directly into a logistic regression in order to develop the best predictive model.

- Thomas C. O'Guinn and Ronald J. Faber (1992), "A Clinical Screener for Compulsive Buying," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 19 (December), 462.

_Ex 6:_   However, **McCracken's description of the transfer process (pp. 78-79) implies a more direct and one-way phenomenon** than we believe is at work … **McCracken (1986) has suggested a theoretical framework between advertising and rituals. His one-way, direct model of meaning transfer suggests** advertising can influence possession, exchange, grooming, and divestment rituals.

- Cele Otnes and Linda M. Scott (1996), "Something Old, Something New: Exploring the Interaction between Ritual and Advertising," *Journal of Advertising*, 25 (Spring), 3334.

Transitions

Arguments twist and arguments turn. In making an argument, the academic writer may add, show cause and effect, compare, contrast, concede, emphasize, illustrate or summarize. But the reader is often bewildered by these changes because of a lack of signposting. In being so familiar with their own arguments, authors often assume that the reader is just as familiar with the subject matter, and thus leave out the transitional phrases that herald a change in the direction the argument is taking.

In other words, readers are often left to their own devices in figuring out how ideas are linked.

The table overleaf contains a non-exhaustive list of phrases that can be used to signal the various twists and turns of the argument.

EFFECT	REPLACEMENTS
Addition	again, also, and, and then, besides, equally important, finally, first, further, furthermore, in addition, in the first place, last, moreover, next, second, still, too
Cause and Effect	because, since, therefore, as a result, consequently, hence, thus, because of, due to
Comparison	also, in the same way, likewise, similarly
Concession	granted, naturally, of course
Contrast	although, and yet, at the same time, but at the same time, despite that, even so, even though, for all that, however, in contrast, in spite of, instead, nevertheless, notwithstanding, on the contrary, on the other hand, otherwise, regardless, still, though, yet, while, whereas, conversely, unlike
Emphasis	certainly, indeed, in fact, of course, on the contrary, as a matter of fact
Example or Illustration	after all, as an illustration, even, for example, for instance, in conclusion, indeed, in fact, in other words, in short, it is true, of course, namely, specifically, that is, to illustrate, thus, truly
Summary	all in all, altogether, as has been said, finally, in brief, in conclusion, in other words, in particular, in short, in simpler terms, in summary, on the whole, that is, therefore, to put it differently, to summarize

Sentence Grammar

The argument in academic writing is built cumulatively, sentence by sentence, by adding, refuting, negating, refining, contradicting, stressing, assimilating, proving etc., sometimes all within the space of one sentence. This places a tremendous burden on "the sentence" as the primary meaning-carrying unit of the argument, and academic writers often flog this beast of burden too hard: sentences typically become long as they are forced to carry many ideas all at once. Consequently, readers often get lost in the middle of the argument, frequently having to backtrack and re-read a sentence or passage to understand the author's meaning. To keep your meaning clear and your reader riveted, there are three practical devices that can be employed: right branching, keeping verbs close to their subjects, and parallelism.

Right Branching

A common misconception is that sentence complexity is a result of length. But it is, in fact, a result of poor design.

Good design is best understood in terms of a stem-branch analogy. Imagine the main idea of the sentence as the stem, and all peripheral information as branches.

If you present a branch first, the reader won't know which stem it belongs to, and will want to see the stem very quickly to understand what the branch is referring to.

> *Placing the branch at the start of a sentence makes the reader wait for the complete information.*

The reader is forced to keep in mind all the accumulating contributory information, or the branches, in order to get to the main idea, the stem. This forces the reader to work harder than he/she must, and you could lose the reader's attention. The term for such a sentence that offers a branch before the stem is "**left-branched**."

Now imagine you present the stem first, and add more information gradually, as you compare, contrast, emphasize, summarize, refute or concede. This kind of sentence seems more natural and akin to the habit of human thought. It is easier to read as the context,

or the main idea, is presented upfront, and the peripheral information comes later, building cumulatively as the reader progresses. This sentence design of stem-before-branch is known as "**right-branched**."

Below are some left-branched sentences picked from various academic articles. Each has been re-cast as a right-branched sentence and is, consequently, easier to read.

Ex 1:   Left Branch Example:

Schumpeter argued that once a leading market position is won by alert competitive action, a leading firm inevitably finds itself dogged by imitators.

- Walter J. Ferrier, Ken G. Smith, and Curtis M. Grimm (1999), "The Role of Competitive Action in Market Share Erosion and Industry Dethronement: A Study of Industry Leaders and Challengers," *Academy of Management Journal*, 42 (August), 373.

Right Branch Change:

Schumpeter argued that a leading firm inevitably finds itself dogged by imitators once the leading market position is won by alert competitive action.

Ex 2:   Left Branch Example:

It has been suggested that when the collective identity of one group of individuals contrasts with the collective identity of another group of individuals, ingroups and outgroups are formed (cf. Earley & Mosakowski, 2000).

- Willie E. Hopkins, Shirley A. Hopkins, and Michael A. Gross (2005), "Cultural Diversity Recomposition and Effectiveness in Monoculture Work Groups," *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 26 (December), 953.

Right Branch Change:

It has been suggested that ingroups and outgroups are formed when the collective identity of one group of individuals contrasts with the collective identity of another group of individuals (cf. Earley & Mosakowski, 2000).

_Ex 3:_   Left Branch Example:

Thus, informed by the findings that consumers use social relationship norms to guide their interactions with brands, and given the potential role of relationship types in influencing the particular information that people attend to, this research uses the relationship metaphor in a consumer-brand context to examine differences in consumers' strategies when processing brand related information.

- Pankaj Aggarwal and Sharmistha Law (2005), "Role of Relationship Norms in Processing Brand Information," _Journal of Consumer Research_, 32 (December), 453.

Right Branch Change:

Thus, we use the metaphor of the relationship in the consumer-brand context to examine the differences in consumers' strategies when they process brand-related information based on 1) findings that consumers use social relationship norms to guide their interactions with brands, and 2) the potential role of relationship types in influencing the particular information that people attend to.

Keep Verbs Close to their Subjects

… And everywhere that Mary went, her lamb was sure to go. Think of Mary and her lamb as subjects with their verbs. Just as too much distance between Mary and the lamb means they will lose each other, so for subjects and verbs—only, they don't lose each other, they lose the reader. Readability research agrees. Readers have a "pressing need for syntactic resolution [which can be] fulfilled only by the arrival of the verb" (Gopen and Swan 1990).

> *Meaning, readers expect to know what is happening straight away; they need to understand what the subject is **doing**.*

A large distance between the two means that not only are readers agitated in wanting to get to the verb, but that they treat everything in between as a distraction. As a result, you've just wasted your breath on saying something the reader is probably not going to retain. So why bother? Keep the verb with the subject and see how your text starts firming up. The examples below show how sentences become difficult to understand when the verb is distanced from the subject.

Ex 1: Multiattribute choice models, in which the alternatives are viewed as a collection of attributes as opposed to entities, are used to predict individual choices and the salience of the attributes influencing the choice distribution.

- Dennis H. Gensch and Rajshekhar G. Javalgi (1987), "The Influence of Involvement on Disaggregate Attribute Choice Models," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 14 (June).

Reworked: Multiattribute choice models are models wherein the alternatives are viewed as a collection of attributes, as opposed to entities. These models are used to predict individual choices and the salience of the attributes influencing the choice distribution.

Ex 2: First, the consumer, using previously acquired information from commercial and/or social sources, may expect certain nonprice store attributes to correlate highly with a store's price level and may base his/her price level judgment about a store on such perceived indicators (Brown and Oxenfeldt 1972).

- B. Kemal Buyukkurt (1986), "Integration of Serially Sampled Price Information: Modeling and Some Findings," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 13 (December), 357.

Reworked: First, the consumer may expect certain nonprice store attributes to correlate highly with a store's price level and may base his/her price level judgment about a store on such perceived indicators (Brown and Oxenfeldt 1972). The consumer's expectations are based on previously acquired information from commercial and/or social sources.

_Ex 3:_   The beneficial impact of increasing customer satisfaction on customer behaviors such as repurchase, word-of-mouth, and cross-buying from the firm's portfolio of offerings is now well documented (Bolton and Drew 1994, Oliver 1997, Reichheld 1996, Richins 1983, Westbrooks 1987).

- Vikas Mittal, Eugene W. Anderson, Akin Sayrak, and Pandu Tadikamalla (2005), "Dual Emphasis and the Long-Term Financial Impact of Customer Satisfaction," _Marketing Science_, 24 (Fall), 544.

Reworked: It is now a well documented fact that increasing customer satisfaction has a beneficial impact on customer behaviors such as repurchase, word-of-mouth, and cross-buying from the firm's portfolio of offerings (Bolton and Drew 1994, Oliver 1997, Reichheld 1996, Richins 1983, Westbrooks 1987).

Parallelism

Think of mirrors. Mirrors reflect the object in front of them; the two objects are similar, but not the same. Parallelisms are the literary equivalents of mirrors. Phrases that are similar in structure and sound, and which serve the same function, are written as mirror phrases. Parallelisms can lighten the reader's load in reading long, complex sentences by signalling that the two phrases similar in form are similar in meaning as well. Parallelisms are particularly well suited to academic writing as devices that can convey contrasts, comparisons, similarities, and additions.

_Ex 1:_   The emerging consumer culture was one in which **branded goods replaced unmarked commodities**, where **mass advertising replaced personal selling**, and where **the individual consumer replaced the communal citizen**.

- Albert M. Muniz Jr. and Thomas C. O'Guinn (2001), "Brand Community," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 27 (March), 413.

_Ex 2:_   In the conventional economic view, money is **a utilitarian commodity that acts as a medium of exchange, a unit of account, a store of value**, and **a standard of deferred payment** (Furnham and Lewis 1986).

- Russell W. Belk and Melanie Wallendorf (1990), "The Sacred Meanings of Money," *Journal of Economic Psychology*, 11 (March), 35.

_Ex 3:_   For example, **feeling** an urge or need to behave, **failure** to control this feeling, **increased arousal** prior to committing this behavior, **gratification** while committing the behavior, and **regret** or **depression** after engaging in the behavior are all considered to be common to a variety of impulse control disorders (Popkin 1989).

- Thomas C. O'Guinn and Ronald J. Faber (1992), "A Clinical Screener for Compulsive Buying," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 19 (December), 462.

Ex 4:   Consumer culture has had a key role to play in constructions of womanhood, as have advertisements.

- Lorna Stevens, Pauline Maclaran, and Stephen Brown (2003), "Red Time Is Me Time: Advertising, Ambivalence, and Women's Magazines," *Journal of Advertising*, 32 (Spring), 35.

Ex 5:   Thus, to the extent that individualism is associated with the goal of seeing oneself as independent of and more capable than others, an individualistic cultural orientation should predict a tendency to engage in SDE.

- Ashok K. Lalwani, Sharon Shavitt, and Timothy Johnson (2006), "What Is the Relation between Cultural Orientation and Socially Desirable Responding?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 90 (January).

Ex 6:   People learn about persuasion in many ways: from firsthand experiences in social interactions with friends, family, and co-workers; from conversations about how people's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors can be influenced; from observing marketers and other persuasion agents; and from commentary on advertising and marketing tactics in the news media.

- Marian Friestad and Peter Wright (1994), "The Persuasion Knowledge Model: How People Cope with Persuasion Attempts," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 21 (June).

Phrases

Noun Stacks

Academic writers prefer nouns to verbs for the same reason they prefer the passive voice to the active:

1) because they lend an air of formality to their writing; and
2) because they can be less direct about their claims.

This love for nouns often results in "noun stacks," a stack of nouns and their modifiers crammed into a small space. With no prepositions or verbs to clarify the relationships between a string of nouns, the reader is left befuddled about the writer's meaning in such phrases as "organizational employee creative capacity," or "position acquisition requirements." To nip this tendency in the bud, open out your sentences and let them breathe by injecting prepositions into the line up, and even turning nouns into verbs.

Here are some more examples of noun stacks that benefit from being unfastened.

_Ex 1:_   We have developed this alternative account by analyzing **masculine identity construction** as it moves through two moments of cultural production—**mass culture discourse** and **everyday consumption practice.**

- Douglas B. Holt and Craig J. Thompson (2004), "Man-of-Action Heroes: The Pursuit of Heroic Masculinity in Everyday Consumption," _Journal of Consumer Research_, 31 (September), 426.

Reworked: We have developed this alternative account by analyzing the **construction of masculine identity** as it moved through two moments of cultural production—the **discourse of mass culture** and the **practice of everyday consumption.**

_Ex 2:_   Within the **context** of **alliances, governance** concerns the **patterns** of **authority** and **influence** that determine the **deployment** of **alliance resources** and the **integration** of **alliance partner interests.**

- Unpublished paper

Reworked: **Governance** in **alliances** is concerned with **patterns** of **authority** and **influence** which deploy the **resources** of the **alliance** and integrate the **interests** of the **alliance partners.**

_Ex 3:_   The **sheer ubiquity** of **systemic risks** in a **technologically saturated world** necessitates that **consumers** exhibit a **substantial degree** of **tacit trust** in the **dominant cultural institutions** and the **regulatory-governance mechanisms** charged with **safeguarding** the **public welfare** (Giddens 1991).

- Craig J. Thompson (2005), "Consumer Risk Perceptions in a Community of Reflexive Doubt," _Journal of Consumer Research_, 32 (September), 235.

Reworked: Because **systemic risks** are ubiquitous in a **technologically saturated world,** consumers need to tacitly trust, to a **substantial degree,** the **dominant cultural institutions** and the **mechanisms of regulation and governance** that safeguard the **public welfare.**

Deadwood

Verbosity in academic materials means that:

1) it takes longer for the reader to get to your argument; and
2) your writing is made heavier and murkier with useless words.

Essentially, you are testing the reader's patience, which detracts from your purpose to convince. Read through your paper and prune it carefully. Replace long-winded phrases by shorter ones and redundant phrases such as "first priority" and "safe haven" by a single meaningful word. Below are a few examples that you can apply.

Replace Long Phrases by Shorter Ones

a majority of	most
a sufficient amount of	enough
according to our data	we find
accordingly	therefore, so
after the conclusion of	after
along the lines of	like

LONG PHRASE	SHORT PHRASE
as is the case	as is true
ascertain the location of	find
at such time as	when
at the present time	now
at this point in time	now
be deficient in	lack
be in a position to	can, be able
by a factor of two	two times, double, twice
by means of	by
come to a conclusion	conclude
despite the fact that	although
due to the fact that	because
during the time that	while
equally as well	as well, equally well
fewer in number	fewer
for the purpose of	to, for
for the reason that	because
for this reason	thus, therefore

LONG PHRASE	SHORT PHRASE
give consideration to	consider, examine
give indication of	show, indicate, suggest
happen(s) to be	am/is/are
has been proved to be	is
if conditions are such that	if
in a number of	several, many
in all cases	always
in case	if
in close proximity to	near
in excess of	more than
in large measure	largely
in many cases	often
in most cases	usually
in no case	never
in order that	so that
in order to	to
in some cases	sometimes
in terms of	in

LONG PHRASE	SHORT PHRASE
in the amount of	for
in the case of	for
in the event that	if
in the field of	in
in the near future	soon
in the neighborhood of	near, about, nearly
in the vicinity of	near
in this case	here
in view of the fact that	because, since
is capable of	can
is found to be	is
is in a position to	can
it has been found that	(nothing)
it has long been known that	(nothing)
it is a fact that	(nothing)
it is evident that	(nothing)
it is interesting to note that	note that
it is noted that	(nothing)

LONG PHRASE	SHORT PHRASE
it is our opinion that	we think
it is possible that	perhaps
it is well known that	(nothing)
it may be said that	(nothing)
make inquiry regarding	ask about, inquire about
manner in which	how
notwithstanding the fact that	although
on the basis of	from, because, by
on the order of	about, approximately
present in greater abundance	more abundant
prior to	before
provided that	if
put an end to	end
reach a conclusion	conclude
serves the function of being	is
subsequent to	after
the question as to	whether
the goal of this article is	this article

LONG PHRASE	SHORT PHRASE
there can be little doubt that	probably
utilize or utilization	use
with reference to	about
with the exception that	except that

Avoid Redundancies

adequate enough	adequate (or enough)
advance planning	planning
appear(s) to be	appear(s)
basic essentials	basics (or essentials)
close proximity	proximity
consensus of opinion	consensus
co-operated together	co-operated
definite decision	decision
elongate in length	elongate
first priority	priority
future predictions	predictions

REDUNDANCY	BREVITY
general rule	rule
green colored	green
increase in increments	increase
initial prototype (model)	prototype
joint co-operation	co-operation
major breakthrough	breakthrough
modern science of today	modern science
most optimum	optimum
necessary requirement	requirement
outside periphery	periphery
prior expectations	expectations
rate of speed	speed
resemble in appearance	resemble
true facts	facts
twelve in number	twelve
usual rule	rule
very unique	unique

Academic Stock Phrases

While it is important not to replace key phrases and constructs with synonyms, it is equally important to find new and elegant ways of introducing, summarizing, emphasizing, refuting, demonstrating etc. After the fourteenth use of the word "however," the text risks becoming dreary and threadbare. The following are graceful phrases picked from academic papers, which should be used liberally. The subsections echo some of the sections of an academic paper: introduction, literature review, and discussion, in particular.

Introducing a Problem

However, this theory/system/process/ideas/body of work has its problems.

However, there remains the issue of reliability.

Nevertheless, the problem remains as to how …

Nevertheless, few solutions have been found to …

Despite this, little progress has been made in …

Even so, this model has many limitations …

Even so, researchers still have to find a way to …

The question remains …

Introducing the Solution

Solutions to this problem are now widely discussed. One remedy is to …

One method to address this difficulty is to …

There are two possible ways of handling this problem. The first … The second …

Several options are available to address this obstacle. However, the best one seems to be …

A radically different design/model is needed to overcome this limitation.

Recently, researchers have made significant progress in overcoming this difficulty by …

The Literature Review

This school of thought …

Many recent studies document that …

While the link between … and … is not as clearly defined in the literature, it is suggested that …

A canvassing of the growing body of literature on …. suggests that two schools of thought dominate the extant thinking.

Seminal studies include …

Most researchers contributing to this body of work take the position that …

According to Peñaloza (1999) …

Chattopadhyay et al.'s 1998 paper on the determinants of executive beliefs discusses…

In Muniz and O'Guinn's article "Brand Community," …

Much of Stern's oeuvre is in this vein: she writes about imagery (1988, 1992), allegories (1990b) …

Venkatesh and Firat (1998) state that …
claim that …
argue that …
maintain that …
suggest that …
find that …
demonstrate that …
propose that …
show that …
are of the view that …

Reminder Phrases in a Long Summary in the Literature Review

The author goes on to say that …

The article further states that …

Fournier also states/maintains/argues that …

McCracken also believes that …

Penchman and Knight conclude that …

The author further argues that …

Similarities

This is in keeping with the ideas expressed by …

Like Ford (1980), Smith et al. (1990) hypothesize a five-stage model …

Consistent with past research, we thus predicted that …

As in Beyer et al.'s (1997) study, in our study …

Like x in Houghton and Newbaum's study, x in our study …

Markoczy (1997) found that … The same was true for x in our study …

This theoretical position is based to a considerable extent on the work of George, who argued that …

According to Hambrick and Mason (1984) … Similarly, Priem (1994) found that …

According to Hambrick and Mason (1984) … Likewise, Priem (1994) found that …

The conclusion that emerges from this study   is similar to that in …
                                                resembles that in …
                                                is comparable to …
                                                corresponds to …

Contrasts

Many recent studies document that … However, …

My own argument on x is … On the other hand, Mick and Buhl (1992) …

X study shows y … In contrast, z's study shows …

Unlike x, y believes that …

In Muniz and O'Guinn's article "Brand Community," …

Whereas x argues y, z argues a …

While x argues y, z believes a …

The conclusion in this study	differs from that in …
	contrasts with …
	is different from …

Claiming the Centrality of Your Work

The increasing interest in … has heightened the need for …

Of particular interest and complexity are …

Recently, there has been a growing interest in …

Interest in … has surged in recent years.

The possibility of … has generated wide interest in …

The development of … is a classic problem in …

The development of … has led to the hope that …

The … has become a favorite topic of analysis …

Knowledge of … has great importance for …

The study of … has become an important aspect of …

A central issue in … is …

… has been extensively studied in recent years.

Many investigators have recently turned to …

Many recent studies have focused on …

The relationship between … and … has been investigated by many researchers.

The topic of … has been discussed extensively in recent literature …

… adds to the compendium of knowledge in the area.

Other recent studies that link … to … are …

The strong emphasis on … is supported by the marketing literature.

Showing a Gap in the Literature

Although research on … exists, gaps remain.

There is little empirical research …

Some questions have been raised in the practitioner literature as to whether …

The research has tended to focus on …, rather than on …

These studies have emphasized …, as opposed to …

Although considerable research has been devoted to …, rather less attention has been paid to …

However, a gap remains in our knowledge regarding …

Given that only one of these studies directly examined …, it certainly seems that more research is needed in this area.

However, it remains unclear whether …

It would thus be of interest to learn how …

If these results could be confirmed, they would provide strong evidence for …

The findings suggest that this approach might be less effective when …

It would seem, therefore, that further investigations are needed in order to …

Previous research has not addressed … Moreover, research has not fully considered … Nor has it addressed if …

However,	little information …
	little attention …
	little work …
	little data …
	little research …
However,	few studies …
	few investigations …
	few researchers …
	few attempts …

The Discussion—Expressions of Generality

Overall …

In general …

On the whole …

In the main …

With … exception(s), …

The overall results indicate …

In general, the experimental samples resisted …

With one exception, the experimental samples resisted …

The Discussion—Expressions of Limitations

This study has been primarily concerned with …

This analysis has concentrated on …

The findings of this study are restricted to …

This study has addressed only the questions of …

The limitations of this study are clear …

We would like to point out that we have not …

However, the findings do not imply …

The results of this study cannot be taken as evidence for …

Further work is called for on …

Unfortunately, we are unable to determine from this data …

The lack of …. means that we cannot be certain …

The Discussion—Expressions of Modesty

Notwithstanding its limitations, this study does suggest …

Despite its preliminary character, the research reported here would seem to indicate …

However exploratory, this study may offer some insight into …

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Publisher's Note

As the owner of Tanvi Mehta Writing and Editing Services, I have edited many forms of academic texts: articles, conference papers, articles for the popular press, case studies, Ph.D. theses, course materials, and award presentations. As the number of clients grew, so did the genres of academic writing that I came across. And the more I edited, the more I found one thing common to all genres of academic writing: authors were oblivious of readers. The writing was hard to read, and it seemed as if authors felt obliged to knot the text into high-minded obfuscation.

As I spent hour after hour undoing these textual knots, I realized that academic authors could do with a little reminder about the reader's presence, the purpose of writing, and the need to KISS ("keep it simple, stupid"). Hence, this booklet was born. I decided that the only way to ease our collective pain was to publish a writing guide tailored for academic writing, which could be distributed philanthropically.

The contents of this guide were put together in view of the most common, recurrent problems that I saw in academic writing. The booklet is by no means encyclopedic, and merely highlights pedestrian problems. For help with specific problems, get in touch with a professional academic editor.

In the meantime, please use and share this booklet liberally.

Tanvi Mehta

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