Chapter 7

Writing Better Sentences

This chapter deals with improving the style of your sentences. What is style, and what does it have to do with workplace writing? Style is *how* you say what you say. It is how you sound when someone reads what you have written. Style is important because readers form an impression of you on the basis of how you come across in your writing. You want to appear straightforward, clear, concise, unpretentious, authoritative, and easy to understand—not pompous, unclear, and verbose.

Of course, style alone will not form the impression you make; the information you provide is critical. Yet style is important because if your readers don't like the way you sound, you'll never get an opportunity to impress them with the quality of your thinking.

All this talk about style isn't meant to suggest that you want to sound like someone you aren't; workplace writing is no place for affectation. In fact, the best style is invisible; your readers should not be aware of your presence as a writer. They should not notice that your sentences flow beautifully, even if they do. They should be

aware only of the information you are conveying. The reason for this is simple: people don't read workplace writing to appreciate style. They read it because they want to know what you have to say.

Determine the Appropriate Stylistic Guidelines

Before you start to write, it's a good idea to find out if there are any stylistic guidelines that you should follow. This way, you will cut down the time needed for revision. For instance, some companies discourage or forbid the use of the first person—"I" and "we"—in some kinds of documents. An organization's stylistic preferences might be defined explicitly in a company style guide or an outside style manual, such as the *Chicago Manual of Style.* Sometimes, the stylistic preferences are implicit; no style manual exists, but over the years a set of unwritten guidelines has evolved. If this is the case, the best way to learn the house style is to study the documents in the files and ask more-experienced coworkers for advice.

Use the Active and Passive Voices Appropriately

The two voices are active and passive. In an active-voice sentence, the grammatical subject is the person or thing that does the action expressed in the sentence:

Active voice: Smith Construction won the contract for the highway project.

In a passive-voice sentence, the grammatical subject is the recipient of the action expressed in the sentence:

Passive voice: The contract for the highway project was won by Smith Construction.

As you can see, the active voice focuses on the performer of the action, whereas the passive voice focuses on the recipient of the action. Although some books and style programs suggest that the

active voice is correct and the passive voice incorrect, it is not a matter of correctness; they just have different functions.

In general, the active voice is preferable. The active voice is always more concise than the passive voice, because the passive requires a compound verb phrase (*was won*) and generally requires a prepositional phrase (*by Smith Construction*). Also, the passive voice can be confusing. If, for instance, you write, "The building was inspected for radon," your readers might be unsure who did it—you or someone else.

But the passive voice is superior to the active voice in four cases:

- when the performer of the action is clearly understood

Example: Attendees are required to register for the conference by July 15.

In this sentence from a registration form for a professional conference, it is perfectly clear who is doing the requiring: the conference organizers. It would be unwise to write, "The conference organizers require that attendees register for the conference by July 15," for that would put the emphasis on "conference organizers," rather than on "attendees."

- when the performer of the action is unknown

Example: The comet was first described in an ancient Egyptian manuscript.

We don't know who wrote the manuscript.

- when the performer of the action is unimportant

Example: The materials for the next set of experiments were ordered in March.

It doesn't matter who ordered them.

- when a reference to the performer of the action would be embarrassing, dangerous, or in some other way inappropriate.

Example: Incorrect data were released to the press about the company's toxic emissions.

Your boss did it.

A number of computer programs on style can help you find the passive voice in your writing. With any word-processing program, however, you can search for *is*, *are*, *was*, *were*, and *be*, the forms of the verb *to be* that are most commonly used in passive-voice expressions. In addition, searching for the suffixes *-ed* and *-en* will isolate many of the past participles, which also appear in most passive-voice expressions.

Choose Appropriate Sentence Patterns

Good writers vary their sentence patterns, not only to keep their writing lively, but also to meet the needs of their subject and audience.

There are four basic kinds of sentences:

- simple (one independent clause)

Example: The manager tried to anticipate the problem.

- compound (two independent clauses, linked by a semicolon or by a comma and one of the seven coordinating conjunctions: *and*, *or*, *for*, *nor*, *so*, *but*, and *yet*)

Example: The manager tried to anticipate the problem, but he was unsuccessful.

- complex (one independent clause and at least one dependent clause)

  Example: Although the manager tried to anticipate the problem, he was unsuccessful.

- compound-complex (at least two independent clauses and at least one dependent clause)

  Example: Although the manager tried to anticipate the problem, he was unsuccessful, and he decided to halt the project indefinitely.

Two of these four types of sentences are most useful in workplace writing: the simple and the complex. The strength of the simple sentence is that it is clear, direct, and, in general, concise. However, it can communicate only fairly simple ideas. The complex sentence allows for more sophisticated ideas because it creates a single meaning out of two ideas.

The compound sentence, like the complex one, communicates two ideas, but it doesn't combine them into a single idea as effectively. For instance, in the compound sentence "The manager tried to anticipate the problem, but he was unsuccessful," you can see that the writer has created a balance between the two ideas. Sometimes, this can leave the reader confused about which idea is more important, especially when the link is the word *and.* As you are revising, when you see a compound sentence, consider whether you can sharpen it by making it a complex sentence, as in the following example:

Weak: People's taste buds diminish in sensitivity as they age, and processed-food providers monitor demographics carefully and adjust their spice levels accordingly.

Stronger: Because people's taste buds diminish in sensitivity as they age, processed-food providers monitor demographics carefully and adjust their spice levels accordingly.

The revision is stronger because it clarifies the relationship between the sentence's two ideas.

Compound-complex sentences are the most sophisticated kind, but their length and complexity make them inappropriate in many situations.

A basic rule for choosing sentence types is that shorter and less elaborate sentences work best when the subject is complicated or the readers are less knowledgeable about it. When the material is simpler and the readers more comfortable with it, you can accelerate the pace by communicating a greater number of ideas in each sentence.

Focus on the Real Subject

Make sure the subject of the sentence—what you are writing about—is clear and emphatic. Don't hide the subject in a prepositional phrase. Notice in the following examples how prepositional phrases smother the subjects. (The subjects of the sentences are underlined.)

Weak: The purchase of the new robot would improve quality control.
Strong: The new robot would improve quality control.

Weak: The presence of the unidentified gene was detected last week.
Strong: The unidentified gene was detected last week.

A second way to focus on the real subject of the sentence is to cut down on the use of expletives. The constructions—*it is . . .* , *there is . . .* , and *there are . . .* , as well as related forms of the *to be* verb—often can be removed without eliminating any useful information.

Weak: There are many factors that led to the motor damage.
Strong: Many factors led to the motor damage.

Expletives occur naturally in speech, and sometimes they are effective in writing. For instance, it would be hard to find a better way to say "It is raining."

(Notice that my last sentence contains the expletive *it would be.* The alternative, "For instance, finding a better way to say 'It is raining' would be hard," is more difficult to understand because the reader doesn't know where the sentence is going until after it gets there.)

The common culprits here are easy to find with the search function on your computer; most smothered subjects are seen in the vicinity of the preposition *of,* and the expletives can be found by looking for the different forms of the infinitive *to be.*

Focus on the Real Verb

The verb communicates the action in a sentence. Sometimes writers sap the strength of their sentences by turning their verbs into nouns. This process is called *nominalizing,* and the transformed verb is called a *nominalization.* (Did you notice that the word *nominalization* is a nominalization? People who think up these terms have too much time on their hands.) Once the original verb is changed into a noun, the writer has to create a new verb, because sentences need verbs. The new verb is almost always a disappointment. In the following examples, the nominalizations are underlined.

Weak: An analysis of the sample was undertaken.
Strong: The sample was analyzed.

Weak: An investigation of the different options was performed.
Strong: The different options were investigated.

Why do writers nominalize the verbs so often? Most people aren't aware that they are doing it; it's just the way they write when they sit in offices. Nominalizations are just one reflection of the general pomposity of bureaucratic writing. It sounds fancier to say "we performed a damage assessment" than "we assessed the damage." Nominalizations are useful in turning an occasional task into an ongoing project. Instead of just assessing the damage when necessary, you create a damage-assessment schedule, and pretty soon you have a Damage-Assessment Task Force with its own letterhead stationery, secretary, and budget. With any luck, there's a designated parking spot for the chair.

Most nominalizations can be spotted in two ways with the search function. First, they have characteristic suffixes, such as *-tion, -ment,* and *-sis.* Second, they are often seen right before *of.*

Use Modifying Elements Effectively

A modifier is a word or phrase that describes some other word in the sentence. For instance, in the phrase "the copier that we bought last year," the words "that we bought last year" modify "the copier"; they tell the reader which copier we're talking about. Workplace writing is full of modifiers, and your job as a writer is to make sure your reader understands whether they are *restrictive* or *nonrestrictive.* In addition, you have to ensure that your reader knows *what* the modifier modifies.

A *restrictive modifier* restricts the meaning of the word or phrase to which it refers. In other words, it identifies it by providing crucial information. In the following examples, the restrictive modifiers are underlined.

The missiles in the museum exhibits are exact replicas of the originals.
Please pay particular attention to the instructions in Part III.

A *nonrestrictive modifier,* on the other hand, just provides extra information about what it refers to. It does not provide crucial, identifying information.

The first mass-produced electric car, the Chevrolet Impact, was released in 1994.
As you leave, stop by the registration area, which is located in the main lobby.

Note that neither kind of modifier requires a pronoun, such as *that* or *which.* However, if you do use a pronoun, use *that* with restrictive modifiers and *which* with nonrestrictive modifiers.

Restrictive: The printer that we bought last week is a Hewlett-Packard.

Nonrestrictive: The printer, which we bought last week, is a Hewlett-Packard.

In this first sentence, the writer is identifying the printer; there must be other printers, at least some of which are not Hewlett-Packards. In the second sentence, the writer is saying two things about the printer: it was purchased last week, and it is a Hewlett-Packard. In other words, the restrictive sentence gives one main piece of information, whereas the nonrestrictive sentence gives two.

Note also that restrictive modifiers are not set off by commas, whereas nonrestrictive modifiers are. This difference suggests one way to tell them apart: say them out loud. If you pause before and after the modifier, it's nonrestrictive; if you don't pause, it's restrictive.

Another way to tell them apart is to cross out the modifier. If the sentence loses its meaning or becomes unclear, it's restrictive. For instance, look at the last set of examples. If you eliminate the restrictive modifier and write "The printer is a Hewlett-Packard," the sentence is unclear because the reader wouldn't know which printer you're referring to. But if you eliminate that phrase from the nonrestrictive sentence, the sentence retains its core meaning, because there is only one printer.

There are two common problems with modifiers: *misplaced modifiers* and *dangling modifiers.*

- A *misplaced modifier* is one that modifies the wrong part of the sentence.

Misplaced: The topic of the meeting is the future of hydroelectric energy in the Red Lion Motel.

Correct: The topic of the meeting in the Red Lion Motel is the future of hydroelectric energy.

In general, keep the modifier near the element it modifies.

- A *dangling modifier* does not refer to anything in the sentence.

Dangling: Analyzing the test report, the data sheet looked incorrect.

The introductory phrase dangles, because the sentence doesn't state who is doing the analyzing. Following are two ways to fix the problem.

Correct: As I was analyzing the test report, the data sheet looked incorrect.

Correct: Analyzing the test report, I thought the data sheet looked incorrect.

Keep Parallel Items Parallel

If you write "We need to order the scanner, purchase the computers, and meet with the network specialist," you have created a parallel list of items. All three tasks are presented the same way: order, purchase, and meet. If you write "We need to order the scanner, purchase the computers, and meeting with the network specialist," the parallelism is violated, because the grammar of the last item in the list does not match that of the first two items.

Parallelism, then, concerns the orderly presentation of logically related units in writing. Why is parallelism important? Sometimes an unparallel presentation can confuse or mislead readers. But mostly it's a matter of sound; you sound more organized and more in control of your information if you present parallel items in a parallel structure.

Parallelism is a general term that refers to many different aspects of writing. This section discusses the most common kinds of parallelism problems.

Lists present a special challenge because you have to line up a string of items. Sometimes it's not easy to make a list of six or eight items line up. Here, for instance, is a typical nonparallel list:

Nonparallel: This is the schedule we hope to follow:

1. writing of preliminary proposal
2. do library research
3. interview with Arway vice president
4. first draft of proposal
5. revision of first draft
6. after we get your approval, publication of final draft

This list is unparallel because the six items are a mixture of noun phrases (items 1, 3, 4, and 5), a verb phrase (item 2), and a noun phrase preceded by a dependent clause (item 6). Following is a parallel version of the same list:

Parallel: This is the schedule we hope to follow:

1. write preliminary proposal
2. do library research
3. interview Arway vice president
4. write first draft of proposal
5. revise first draft of proposal
6. publish final draft, after we get your approval

Don't worry about the grammatical terminology; your ear will tell you when the list is parallel. In this example, I have turned all the items into verb phrases. In general, verb phrases work best for this kind of list because they are concise and uncluttered; it sounds a lot better to write "do library research" than "doing of library research."

Parallelism problems don't appear only in lists; they can plague traditional sentences and paragraphs. Here are some common kinds of parallelism problems:

Unparallel voice: Place the new board in the slot. Then, the board should be pushed in gently until it clicks into place.
Parallel voice: Place the new board in the slot. Then, push the board in gently until it clicks into place.

Unparallel mood: The operator should follow the instructions in Part 2. Do not change the pin settings.
Parallel mood: Follow the instructions in Part 2. Do not change the pin settings.

Unparallel number: The supervisor should be sure they give the technicians plenty of time to ask questions.
Parallel number: Supervisors should be sure they give the technicians plenty of time to ask questions.

Unparallel enumeration: First, be sure to check. . . . Second, align the electrodes. . . . Then, cap the electrodes. . . .
Parallel enumeration: First, be sure to check. . . . Second, align the electrodes. . . . Third, cap the electrodes. . . .