Write With Style and Rhythm

Step 3

Overview

Strengthen your style with true subjects and powerful verbs.

Keep your rhythm with text that’s balanced, ordered, and separated.

Enhance flow by varying sentence openers, structure, and length.

Insert transitions to unify ideas.

“Get that rhythm!” It’s great advice for singers, musician, dancers—and those who write everything from novels and poetry to activity reports and internal emails. The more your text flows with a natural rhythm, the more readers will pay attention and understand what you’re saying. And the easier it’ll be for you to create a cohesive, well-organized email or other document.

Rhythm starts with a strong writing style, which will enliven your text and subtly communicate to the reader that you mean business and can quickly convey your influential points. Style is defined as the conscious and unconscious decisions you make while planning and writing documents. These include sentence structure and length, paragraph type and length, organization, and use of graphic elements like boldface, underline, and italics.

Some of these choices are subjective and depend on factors such as your organization’s culture, your readers’ preferred style, and your personal preference. But other style choices are more black and white and can reveal the quality of your writing. These choices can range from using precise language and sentences with the appropriate length (both addressed in step 2) to avoiding excessive qualifiers like very to alternating between using he and she instead of exclusively he. (The other option is to use the singular they.)

Two of the most common style faux pas are using there instead of the true subject and choosing passive verbs or weak nouns instead of active verbs, addressed in the next two examples.

Don’t Go There

Avoid using there when it’s a false subject and replace it with the true subject. Compare these two sentences:

There (false subject) are four more candidates who need to be interviewed before we hire a new procurement manager.

Four more candidates (true subject) need to be interviewed before we hire a new procurement manager.

Unleash Verb Power

The verb is the most powerful part of speech in the English language. Strong active verbs, as opposed to weak passive verbs or hidden verbs (verbs disguised as nouns), will energize your text. Let’s look at some examples:

Weak: Most managers are in agreement that more dollars should be allocated to mobile marketing.

Strong: Most managers agree that more dollars should be allocated to mobile marketing.

The first sentence uses the weak verb are with the hidden verb agreement. In the rewritten sentence, the active verb agree replaces both of them.

Weak: They are all of the belief that online learning modules can boost the performance of first-year reps.

Strong: They all believe that online learning modules can boost the performance of first-year reps.

Here the passive verb are combines with the hidden verb belief. You can strengthen the first sentence by replacing are of the belief with the active verb believe.

Weak: New hires should have an understanding of benefits after two months on the job.

Strong: New hires should understand their benefits after two months on the job.

Here the passive verb have joins the hidden verb understanding. The active verb is understand.

Weak: Please take the account coordinators’ suggestions under consideration.

Strong: Please consider the account coordinators’ suggestions.

Here the hidden verb is consideration combined with the passive verb take. The active verb is consider.

Weak: The security manager needs to perform an analysis of potential cyber threats to our online retail operations.

Strong: The security manager needs to analyze potential cyber threats to our online retail operations.

Here the verb phrase perform an analysis contains the hidden verb analysis. The active verb is analyze.

If those examples seem overly simple, that’s because they are! Your challenge is to look closely at what you’ve written, find the weak and hidden verbs, and replace them with the corresponding active verbs. Then your message will come across more clearly and forcefully. Tool 3-1 will help you identify verbs hidden in nouns and replace them with active verbs.

Tool 3-1

Turn Hidden Verbs Into Active Verbs

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Verbs Hidden in Nouns | Active Verbs |
| are in agreement | agree |
| conduct a study | study |
| give a presentation | present |
| give a promotion | promote |
| give a recommendation | recommend |
| give a response | respond |
| give permission | permit |
| have a preference for | prefer |
| have a tendency to | tend to |
| have the ability to | can |
| have an understanding of | understand |
| make a choice | choose |
| make a decision | decide |
| make an announcement | announce |
| make changes to | change |
| make modifications to | modify |
| make reductions to | reduce |
| perform an analysis | analyze |
| provide a summary of | summarize |
| take action | act |
| take into consideration | consider |

Balance Your Text

You can immediately spot when something is out of balance: a crooked painting on the wall, a table missing one leg, or a man wearing one blue sock and one brown sock. And your readers can easily recognize out-of-balance text, although they may not be able to identify the cause. Still, they know they’ve been thrown off course and may stop reading or give less credibility to your message.

Pointer

Repeat key words and phrases to focus readers on your central messages.<end>

One of the ways to achieve balance is through repetition, which is often misconstrued as always being a bad thing. In fact, some repetition can be effective. For example, using two clauses with similar structure or repeating words creates symmetry and a pleasing rhythm. This balance makes a sentence more readable. Consider these examples:

We prefer songs with a pleasing beat, and we prefer text with a pleasing rhythm.

QY Partners won’t improve its operations without hiring five new managers, and it won’t invest in new staff without a leadership development program in place.

You also can use a balanced, consistent structure with two consecutive sentences, creating a natural bridge from one thought to the next:

Last year’s audit revealed that YK Industries was on solid financial grounds. But this year’s audit revealed several gaps in its accounting methods.

The components of a sentence are considered balanced (and parallel) when the same word forms are used or when certain words or phrases are repeated, usually in a sequence. Here’s an example:

Unbalanced: All senior managers must work to improve productivity, expense reduction, and address customers’ needs.

In that example, the three things that senior managers must work on are not stated in a parallel manner. Improve and address are verbs. The second item in the list (expense reduction) is a noun phrase, so the list is not parallel. When you see the error, it can be easy to fix:

Balanced: All senior managers must work to improve productivity, reduce expenses, and address customers’ needs.

Changing the noun phrase expense reduction to reduce expenses makes all three items parallel.

Balance also applies to the consistent use of adjectives:

Unbalanced: The new division head is thorough, fair, and displays honesty.

Balanced: The new division head is thorough, fair, and honest.

Unbalanced: Lois doesn’t like long meetings or conference calls that are unproductive.

Balanced: Lois doesn’t like long meetings or unproductive conference calls.

Unbalanced: We should recruit associates who are energetic, flexible, and have the motivation to succeed.

Balanced: We should recruit associates who are energetic, flexible, and motivated to succeed.

To create balance, sometimes an extra word is needed to improve readability:

**Unbalanced:** On April 10, the chief information officer explained the new software program, training schedule, and the most critical cybersecurity issues.

One of the three items, training schedule, is missing the. When the is inserted and repeated before each of the topics discussed, the meaning doesn’t change, but the sentence flows better and becomes easier to understand:

Balanced: On April 10, the chief information officer explained the new software program, the training schedule, and the most critical cybersecurity issues.

Lastly, one of the most common ways business writers wreck parallelism is with lists. They treat each bulleted or numbered item as its own entity, ignoring whether its format is consistent with the others in the group and how it flows from the lead-in sentence (more on that later). See how to balance bulleted text in Example 3-1.

Example 3-1

Use Parallel Structure for Bullet Points

Consider this bulleted list and see if you can identify what’s not parallel:

To improve communication, I suggest:

meetings conducted once a week

hold webinars each month

I’d recommend status reports to be produced every quarter.

The first item in the list begins with a noun (meetings), the second item begins with a verb (hold), and the third item is a complete sentence. And neither the second nor third item flow grammatically from the introductory phrase I suggest.

You can make this example parallel in just two steps. First, identify the type of word that must follow the introductory phrase. In this case, it can be a noun or a verb with an -ing ending. Second, write the bullet points so each begins with a noun (meetings, webinars, and status reports) or with an -ing verb (conducting, holding, and producing). Here’s the parallel version using nouns:

To improve communication, I suggest:

weekly meetings

monthly webinars

quarterly status reports.

And here’s the parallel version using -ing verbs:

To improve communication, I suggest:

conducting weekly meetings

holding monthly webinars

producing quarterly status reports.

For more on creating effective bulleted and numbered lists, see step 4.

Vary Sentence Openers, Structure, and Length

While repetition through parallel structures can create a natural flow between phrases and sentences, too much of it will quickly turn off readers. Here’s an example of unwanted repetition in a paragraph, in which all the sentences begin the same way:

During the first quarter, the absenteeism rate rose 12 percent, compared with the first quarter of last year. During this period, absenteeism was highest in the days immediately before holidays. At a time when keeping customers happy is critical, we need to reduce the number of unexcused absences. By developing a solution to this problem, our company will be able to improve client satisfaction.

How annoying! Beginning each sentence with the same type of phrase produces an unpleasantly repetitive rhythm. It’s even worse when all the sentences begin with the same word—like “I”:

I completed the external audit on June 20. I feel that XN Enterprises was not prepared to handle LZ Technology’s shipping. I discovered that XN has no experience in the computer hardware industry and uses an archaic billing system. I think we need to conduct an online search for a supplier that has a track record in the computer hardware industry and an efficient billing system. I would be happy to answer any questions if you call.

Now let’s enhance the flow by varying the sentence openers:

In the external audit completed June 20, I found that XN Enterprises was not prepared to handle LZ Technology’s shipping. XN has no experience in the computer hardware industry and uses an archaic billing system. We should search online for a supplier that has a track record in the computer hardware industry and that uses an efficient billing system. Please call me if you have any questions.</extract>

The revised version covers all the same points that the rough draft included, but the reader isn’t pounded with “I-I-I.” The information flows from sentence to sentence and carries the reader along with it.

Writing a continuous string of short, choppy sentences also produces an irritating rhythm that drains your reader’s energy. Read this out loud to feel its staccato and annoying beat:

The annual meeting was held on June 10. Lois Ross is the president of our overseas division and spoke. She unveiled her marketing plan. She discussed several innovative social media strategies. The feedback on Laura’s marketing strategies is due by July 1. We should meet to discuss various strategies. This should ideally be scheduled some time between June 20 and June 22.

Pointer

Listen to the sounds of your words to help determine how well your text flows.

It sounds like a 21-gun salute! This paragraph needs sentences of varied lengths and different arrangements of words (something other than subject-verb-object), and it needs transition phrases to blend the separate points into a cohesive whole that draws in the reader. An improved version has sentences that differ in structure and flow, offering the reader a comfortable rhythm:

At the June 10 annual meeting, Lois Ross, president of our overseas division, unveiled her marketing plan. She outlined several innovative social media strategies. Since we need to submit feedback on her plan by July 1, let’s meet to discuss between June 20 and 22.

In the second version, six short, choppy sentences were combined to form three sentences. The first and third sentence use prepositional phrases: at the June 10 annual meeting and since we need to submit feedback on her plan by July 1. Between those sentences is a shorter sentence that varies the tempo.

While a string of short sentences distracts readers, a paragraph with only long sentences of the same structure is equally difficult to read:

After six months of analysis, we have found that most first-line managers lack critical supervisory skills. According to the report, we see that 65 percent of these managers didn’t adequately handle subordinates’ complaints. From the report, we find that 50 percent couldn’t explain their subordinates’ daily tasks. Given these results, we need to develop an online training course for these managers. With this said, we should schedule a meeting on February 20 to explore some training options.

Each of those five sentences begins with a prepositional phrase. Let’s see how variety enhances readability and interest:

After six months of analysis, we have found that most first-line managers lack critical supervisory skills. Our report revealed that 60 percent of them didn’t adequately handle subordinates’ complaints and that 50 percent couldn’t explain their subordinates’ daily tasks. We need to develop an online training course for these managers, so let’s meet on February 20 to explore some options.

The first sentence remained the same, the next two ideas (the statistics) were combined into one sentence, and the paragraph closed with a specific call to action—to provide a natural flow for the reader.

So, which is better—short or long sentences? In some instances, short sentences are more effective, such as when you want to convey urgency:

The client is livid! Nobody has replied to her email in four days. We won’t survive with this type of service. Call her in the next 15 minutes.

But as we’ve seen, too many consecutive short sentences can feel choppy and disjointed. Longer sentences enable you to convey more information right away and let you combine data to reveal similarities or differences. Be careful, though, not to lose readers with sentences that are too long. Choose sentence length based on your message, the tone you want to set, and your own style.

Let’s look at a paragraph, taken from a performance review, with long and short sentences, a variety of structures, and transition words and phrases that move the reader smoothly from point to point:

In three years as a customer service specialist, Nick has handled product inquiries efficiently, written comprehensive monthly reports, and trained hundreds of entry-level employees. He’s a true asset to our team. Plus, everyone on the team likes Nick and seeks his advice on many issues. Given his consistently high performance, I recommend promoting Nick to senior account manager.</extract>

Don’t Interrupt Sentence Flow

If the main idea of your sentence is interrupted by a divergent thought, readers may get confused, as in this example:

Interrupted: The accounting department found several discrepancies in our budget, in the May 1 meeting, which could short-circuit the entire project.

In this sentence, the prepositional phrase in the May 1 meeting calls the reader’s attention away from the writer’s point. The writer wants to tell the reader when the discrepancies were discovered, but putting that information in the middle of the sentence may derail the reader. If that information is placed at the start of the sentence to give the message context, however, the reader’s attention remains on the writer’s key point—discrepancies that could disrupt the project:

Uninterrupted: At the May 1 meeting, the accounting department found several discrepancies in our budget that could short-circuit the entire project.

Here’s another example:

Interrupted: The marketing director recommended several new tactics, which were all well received by the CEO and the executive team, including content redistribution, discussion engagement, and online contests.

Again, the phrase which were all well received by the CEO and the executive team interrupts the flow and diverts the reader’s attention. In this case, move this information to the end of the sentence to create a more natural rhythm.

Uninterrupted: The marketing director recommended several new tactics, including content redistribution, discussion engagement, and online contests, which were all well received by the CEO and the executive team.

When you’ve written the first draft of a message, or when you’re organizing your thoughts before writing, decide what is primary and what is secondary information. Then construct your sentence in a way that presents the information smoothly.

Don’t Put Unrelated Ideas in the Same Sentence

This guideline needs no explanation. See how the unrelated ideas (set in italics) take the reader off track in the following examples:

We need to recruit more experienced customer service specialists for the southeast division, which just celebrated its second year at the new building.

The marketing team, which has moved two floors up to a quieter location, doesn’t understand the subtleties of our new product.

YBS Enterprises, founded in 1949 in a Kansas City garage, complained about our technical support five times this month.

In the context of your message, who cares about the anniversary of the building, on what floor the marketing department resides, or where and when YBS was founded? If you’ve got a reason to convey each of these facts, start a new sentence or paragraph and explain the relevance. Don’t risk losing your readers’ attention or confusing them.

Use Transitions to Unify Text

Within an email or document, each sentence and paragraph is not an island but part of a larger set of thoughts that need to be connected. Transition words and phrases—connectors—bridge one sentence to the next and one paragraph with the next, creating a logical flow of text that helps keep readers’ attention. They include words and phrases that typically are used to connect thoughts (see Tool 3-2) and that provide natural connections when they’re repeated throughout the document.

Tool 3-2.

Words and Phrases Commonly Used as Transitions

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Purpose | Word or Phrase |
| To contrast | although, but, conversely, except, however, on the other hand, otherwise, still, whereas |
| To indicate results | as a result, consequently, so, thus |
| To indicate time or sequence | after, before, during, finally, first, later, soon, subsequently, then, until |
| To introduce another point | also, besides, if, in addition, plus, with |
| To prove a point | because, for the same reason |
| To give an example | for example, for instance, in this case, such as |

First, let’s insert some typical transition terms to see how they improve a choppy paragraph that’s trying to convey one idea with unconnected sentences:

Choppy: You should try writing like you speak to write better. You can do it when you start your next email. You should imagine that your boss is phoning from the airport and has only one minute to find out what you’re about to write. This type of demand would force you to be concise and immediately state the most important points. This is how you should approach every document. It’s true that most people who read your text don’t have to board planes in 60 seconds. They’re just impatient.

Unified and flowing: If you’d like to write as well as you speak, try this: Before starting your next email, imagine that your boss is phoning from the airport with only one minute to find out what you’re about to write. Now, you’re forced to be concise and immediately state the most important points—and that’s how you should approach every email. Although most people who read your text don’t have to board planes in 60 seconds, they’re still impatient.

Pointer

Use transition words and phrases to unify the sentences, paragraphs, and sections of your document.

By repeating certain words and phrases, you keep readers focused and remind them of your key messages. In the following paragraphs, taken from a service proposal, three key points recur throughout (set in italics and accompanied by a bracketed number to help you connect them from paragraph to paragraph). Although these phrases aren’t identical in each paragraph, they convey the same points.

The ABC Association plays a critical role in the insurance industry and offers outstanding value [1] to its members—but many people don’t know this. The association needs to convey this and related critical messages [2] to members, prospects, legislators, and other key audiences. These targeted groups must understand the member benefits [3] that are available.

With its extensive experience working for the insurance industry, XYZ Marketing can craft the association’s key messages [2] and help convey the exceptional value [1] that ABC Association offers. Among the member benefits [3] we would highlight are the association’s legislative initiatives, educational programs, job training, and networking.

By integrating tactics such as email blasts, social media marketing, and search engine optimization, we will deliver these vital messages [2] about the association’s industry prominence and the many benefits of membership [3]. In the end, this will help build a powerful brand for an association that offers superior value [1] to its members.</extract>

Your Turn

To develop rhythm in your writing, notice when you read text with a pleasing flow from those you consider to be superior writers, including journalists, authors, bloggers, or even co-workers. Analyze what they’ve done to create that smooth stream of ideas and consider adopting some of that style in your own writing. And try these exercises:

Edit these sentences to create a balanced structure:

Every quarter, the chief procurement officer meets with her staff to explain the purchasing protocol, supplier selection process, and the best cost-cutting strategies.

The chief financial officer told the division heads to reduce expenses, to develop cost-savings measures, and that their unnecessary travel should be eliminated.

The art director was asked to create mobile ads that were engaging, relevant, and projected emotional appeal.

Revise the order of ideas in this paragraph so the flow isn’t interrupted:

The social media manager recommended many new tactics for next year, which were all well received by the vice president of marketing and the CEO. These included brand advocacy, cross-channel campaigns, and native advertising.

Insert transition words into this paragraph to help unify the text.

Wiring money is a relatively simple procedure. Many of Main Street Bank’s customers had for several years been making errors that delayed the completion of their transfers. Mixing up the routing and account numbers was an example of the common mistakes they made. The bank emailed one-page wire transfer instructions to customers two years ago. It found that 30 percent fewer errors were made by customers since the guidelines were introduced.

The Next Step

Writing sentences with a pleasing rhythm makes it easier for readers to move through your text and understand your message. To further help readers grasp information quickly in emails and documents of varied length, you need to organize the content in a logical structure from start to finish. That’s what we’ll cover in step 4 (Organize to Promote Understanding).