THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS *of* WRITING

THE FIRST DEADLY SIN:
Passive Voice

In most instances, put the verb in the active voice rather than in the passive voice. Passive voice produces a sentence in which the subject *receives* an action. In contrast, active voice produces a sentence in which the subject *performs* an action. Passive voice often creates unclear, less direct, wordy sentences, whereas active voice creates clearer, more concise sentences.

To change a sentence from passive to active voice, determine who or what performs the action, and use that person or thing as the subject of the sentence.

EXAMPLES

- **PASSIVE VOICE:** My first trip abroad will always be remembered by me.

  PASSIVE VOICE: My first trip abroad is one I will always remember.

  ACTIVE VOICE: I will always remember my first trip abroad.

- **PASSIVE VOICE:** On April 19, 1775, arms were seized by British soldiers at Concord, precipitating the American Revolution.

  ACTIVE VOICE: On April 19, 1775, British soldiers seized arms at Concord, precipitating the American Revolution.

- **PASSIVE VOICE:** Thomas Jefferson's support of the new Constitution was documented in a letter to James Madison.

  ACTIVE VOICE: Thomas Jefferson documented his support of the new Constitution in a letter to James Madison.

OVERUSE OF *TO BE* (a related problem)

Using forms of *to be* (e.g., *is, are, was, were*) leads to wordiness. Use an action verb instead.

- **Example:** It is the combination of these two elements that makes the argument weak.

  REVISED: The combination of these two elements weakens the argument.

THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS *of* WRITING

THE SECOND DEADLY SIN:

Incorrect Punctuation of Two Independent Clauses

(An independent clause has a subject and a verb and can stand alone as a sentence.)

Good writers know that correct punctuation is important to writing clear sentences. If you misuse punctuation, you risk confusing your reader and appearing careless. Notice how the placement of commas significantly affects the meaning of these sentences:

Mr. Jones, says Ms. Moore, is a boring old fool.
Mr. Jones says Ms. Moore is a boring old fool.

Writers often combine independent clauses in a single compound sentence to emphasize a close relationship between ideas. The punctuation of compound sentences varies depending upon how you connect the clauses.

RULES

(A) Separate independent clauses with a comma when using a coordinating conjunction (e.g., *and, but, or, for, nor, so, yet)*.

(B) Separate independent clauses with a *semicolon* when not using a coordinating conjunction.

(C) Separate independent clauses with a *semicolon* when using a conjunctive adverb (e.g., *however, therefore, thus, consequently, finally, nevertheless)*.

Examples of Correct Punctuation, Rule A:

We all looked worse than usual, for we had stayed up studying for the exam.

This room is unbelievably hot, and I think that I am going to pass out.

Monday is a difficult day for me, so I try to prepare as much as possible on Sunday.

Examples of Correct Punctuation, Rule B:

We all looked worse than usual; we had stayed up studying for the exam.

This room is unbelievably hot; I think I am going to pass out.

Monday is a difficult day for me; I try to prepare as much as possible on Sunday.

Examples of Correct Punctuation, Rule C:

We all looked worse than usual; nevertheless, we were relieved we had studied.

This room is unbelievably hot; therefore, I think I am going to pass out.

Monday is a difficult day for me; however, I have figured out how to prepare for it.

THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS *of* WRITING

THE THIRD DEADLY SIN:
Wordiness

Concise writing is key to clear communication. Wordiness obscures your ideas and frustrates your reader. Make your points succinctly.

As Strunk and White tell us in *The Elements of Style (4th ed.)*:
Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences….This requires not that the writer make all sentences short, or avoid all detail and treat subjects only in outline, but that every word tell. (23)

STRATEGIES FOR ELIMINATING WORDINESS

Use action verbs rather than forms of *to be* (e.g., *is, are, was, were*).

- **Wordy:** The reason that General Lee invaded Pennsylvania in June 1863 was to draw the Army of the Potomac away from Richmond.

  REVISED: General Lee invaded Pennsylvania in June 1863 to draw the Army of the Potomac away from Richmond.

- **Wordy:** *Tom Jones* is a novel by Fielding that comically portrays English society in the eighteenth century.

  REVISED: Fielding's novel *Tom Jones* comically portrays English society in the eighteenth century.

Make the real subject the actual subject of the sentence; make the real verb the actual verb.

- **Wordy:** In Crew's argument there are many indications of her misunderstanding of natural selection.

  REVISED: Crew's argument repeatedly demonstrates misunderstanding of natural selection.

COMMON SOURCES OF WORDINESS

- **Redundancies:** *My personal opinion, at the present time, the basic essentials, connect together*
- **Unnecessary Phrases/Clauses:** *The reason why is that, this is a subject that, in spite of the fact that, due to the fact that, in the event that, because of the fact that, until such time as, by means of*

THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS *of* WRITING

THE FOURTH DEADLY SIN:
Misuse of the Apostrophe

Apostrophes may indicate possession or mark omitted letters in contractions. Writers often misuse apostrophes when forming plurals and possessives. The basic rule is quite simple: **use the apostrophe to indicate possession, not a plural**. The exceptions to the rule may seem confusing: *hers* has no apostrophe, and *it's* is not possessive. Nevertheless, with some attention, you can learn the rules and the exceptions.

POSSESSIVES

Form the possessive case of a singular noun by adding *'s* (even if the word ends in *s*).

Examples: Hammurabi's code, Dickens's last novel, James's cello

Form the possessive case of a plural noun by adding an apostrophe after the final letter if it is an *s* or by adding *'s* if the final letter is not an *s*.

Examples: the students' books, the children's toys

REMEMBER: The apostrophe never designates the plural form of a noun. A common error is using the apostrophe to form a non-possessive plural: the two boy's.

COMPARE THE FOLLOWING CORRECT SENTENCES:

The *student's* book was missing. *(singular possessive)*

Several *students'* books were missing. *(plural possessive)*

The *students* searched for their missing books. *(plural)*

POSSESSIVE PRONOUNS, such as *yours, hers, its,* and *ours,* take no apostrophe.

Example: The decision is yours.

INDEFINITE PRONOUNS, such as *anyone, everybody, no one,* and *somebody*, use the singular possessive form.

Example: Somebody's dog stayed in our room last night.

CONTRACTIONS

The apostrophe is used to mark omitted letters in contractions.
Note that contractions are often considered too informal for academic writing.

AVOID THE DREADFUL *IT'S/ITS* CONFUSION:

It's is a contraction for "it is." *It's* is never a possessive.
Its is the possessive for "it."

As Strunk and White remind us in *The Elements of Style* (4th ed.),
"It's a wise dog that scratches its own fleas" (1).

THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS *of* WRITING

THE FIFTH DEADLY SIN:
Misplaced and Dangling Modifiers

Misplaced and dangling modifiers create illogical, even comical, sentences. We confuse our readers if we fail to connect modifiers (words that describe or limit other words) to the words they modify; be sure to place modifiers next to the words they modify.

See the illogic in this example: Walking back from the village, my wallet was lost.
(Does your wallet walk?)

REVISED: Walking back from the village, I lost my wallet.
(Your wallet doesn't walk, but you do.)

A MISPLACED MODIFIER is a word or phrase that, due to its placement, mistakenly refers to the wrong word. The modifier truly is misplaced.

To correct a misplaced modifier, move it next to or near the word it modifies:
A fine athlete and student, the coach honored the captain of the tennis team.
(The coach was not the fine athlete and student.)

REVISED: The coach honored the captain of the tennis team, who was a fine athlete and student.

A LIMITING MODIFIER (e.g., *only, almost, nearly, just*) is commonly misplaced.

To avoid ambiguity, place the limiting modifier in front of the word it explains:
Marsh reinforces the view that the artist only intended the images for a local audience.

REVISED: Marsh reinforces the view that the artist intended the images only for a local audience.

A DANGLING MODIFIER is a (usually introductory) word or phrase that the writer intends to modify a following word, but the following word is missing. The result is an illogical statement.

To fix a dangling modifier, add the missing word and place the modifier next to it:
Acting on numerous complaints from students, a fox was found on campus.
(The fox did not act on the complaint.)

REVISED: Acting on numerous complaints from students, security found a fox on campus.

Example: After reading the original study, the flaws in Lee's argument are obvious.
(The flaws did not read the study.)

REVISED: Reading the original study reveals obvious flaws in Lee's argument.

Dangling modifiers go hand-in-hand with wordiness and passive voice. Correct one and you correct them all!

THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS *of* WRITING

THE SIXTH DEADLY SIN:
Pronoun Problems

Pronouns are useful as substitutes for nouns, but a poorly chosen pronoun can obscure the meaning of a sentence. Common pronoun errors include:

UNCLEAR PRONOUN REFERENCE

A pronoun must refer to a specific noun (the antecedent). Ambiguous pronoun reference creates confusing sentences.

Example: A key difference between banking crises of today and of yesterday is that *they* have greater global consequences.
(Which crises have greater consequences, those of today or those of yesterday?)

If a whiff of ambiguity exists, use a noun: A key difference between banking crises of today and yesterday is that today's crises have greater global impact.

VAGUE SUBJECT PRONOUN

Pronouns such as *it, there,* and *this* often make weak subjects. Use a pronoun as subject only when its antecedent is crystal clear.

Example: Pope Gregory VII forced Emperor Henry IV to wait three days in the snow at Canossa before granting him an audience. It was a symbolic act.
(*To what does "it" refer? Forcing the emperor to wait? The waiting? The granting of the audience? The audience? The entire sentence?)*

AGREEMENT ERROR

A pronoun must agree in gender and number with its antecedent. A common error is the use of the plural pronoun *they* to refer to a singular noun.

Example: In the original state constitution, they allowed polygamy.
[*They* (plural) refers to *constitution* (singular).]

REVISED: The original state constitution allowed polygamy.

It is often better to use a plural noun and pronoun than to use a singular noun and pronoun. Note that indefinite pronouns such as *each* and *everyone* are singular.

Example: Each student must meet with their advisor.
(incorrect: singular noun, plural pronoun)

Example: Each student must meet his or her advisor.
(correct but awkward)

REVISED: Students must meet with their advisors.
(correct: plural noun and pronoun)

THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS *of* WRITING

THE SEVENTH DEADLY SIN:
The Dreaded Pet Peeves

Learning to write clearly and effectively is at the heart of Hamilton College's mission statement: "Hamilton students learn to think independently, embrace difference, ***write and speak persuasively,*** and engage issues ethically and creatively." We asked our professors to share some of their pet peeves (otherwise known as common writing errors).

PET PEEVES	EXAMPLES OF INCORRECT USAGE
utilize vs. *use*	Descartes *utilizes* the wax argument to show that we know physical objects with the mind, not the senses.
bloated diction	Once liberty is *actualized*, justice will burgeon.
inflated, imprecise words	The lifestyles of the majority of individuals were difficult due to what society utilized against them.
misuse of *prove/proof*	The results *prove* that our hypothesis was correct. (A study *supports* a hypothesis; it does not *prove* it.)
burying the subject	The significance of the study *is that there is*….
unnecessary subordinate clause and passive voice	There was one factor *that was ignored by the "con" side:* ….
use of *I* as object	They went with Dido and *I* to tour the Colosseum. The family came to see David and *I* perform.
loose vs. *lose*	Forecasters fear that stocks will *loose* value next year.
entitled vs. *titled*	My favorite song is *entitled* "Darwin Derby" by Vulfpeck. (*Entitled* means "a right to do or have.")
treating *data* as singular	The *data shows* that medication affects ADHD symptoms.
than vs. *then*	The data indicate that Americans work more hours *then* Europeans.
vacuous first sentences	Scientists have studied DNA for years.
affect vs. *effect*	We studied the *affect* of the angle on acceleration.
misuse of apostrophes	The 1920's marked the height of the Swing Era. (Apostrophes indicate omitted numerals: the '80s. Show plural by adding *s*.)
less vs. *fewer*	The incumbent received *less* votes than the challenger.
general sloppiness	My English professor cares to much about grammer and speling.