Eliminate Common Clarity Errors

Three other common issues that affect clarity are choppy sentences, wordiness and redundancy, and strings of nouns. Learn to identify and change these issues in your drafts.

Avoid Strings of Choppy Sentences

A string of short sentences results in choppiness. Because each idea appears as an independent sentence, the effect of such a string is to deemphasize the more important ideas because they are all treated equally. To avoid this, combine and subordinate ideas so that only the important ones are expressed as main clauses.

Choppy	Both models offer safety belts. Both models have counterbalancing. Each one has a horn. Each one has lights. One offers wing-sided seats. These seats enhance safety.
Clear	Both models offer safety belts, counterbalancing, a horn, and lights. Only one offers wing-sided seats, which enhance safety.

Avoid Wordiness and Redundancy

Generally, ideas are most effective when they are expressed concisely. Try to prune excess wording by eliminating redundancy and all unnecessary intensifiers (such as *very*), repetition, subordinate clauses, and prepositional phrases. Although readers react positively to the repetition of keywords in topic positions, they often react negatively to needless repetition.

Unnecessary subordinate clause	I found the site *by the use of keywords that are* nanotechnology and innovation
Revised	I found the site using *the keywords* "nanotechnology" and "innovation."
Redundant intensifiers plus unnecessary subordinate clause	It is made of *very* thin glass *that is milky white in color.*
Revised	It is made of thin, milky white glass.
Redundant	The tuning handle is a metal protrusion that can be easily grasped *hold of by the hand* to turn the gears.
Revised	The tuning handle is a metal protrusion that can be easily grasped to turn the gears.
Unnecessary repetition plus over use of prepositions	*This search* was done by a *keyword search* of the *same words* using the *search function* of different *search engines.*
Revised	This investigation used the same keywords in different search engines.

Copyright 2012 Cengage Learning. All Rights Reserved. May not be copied, scanned, or duplicated, in whole or in part.

Avoid Noun Clusters

Noun clusters are three or more nouns joined in a phrase. They crop up everywhere in technical writing and usually make reading difficult. Try to break them up.

Noun cluster	Allowing *individual input variance* of *data process entry* will result in *higher keyboarder morale.*
Revised	We will have higher morale if we allow the keyboarders to enter data at their own rate.

Exercises

Choppiness

1. Eliminate the choppiness in the following sentences.
   - XYZ has introduced an LCD monitor. The monitor is 17 inches. The monitor has a Web camera. Web conferencing applications can use the Web camera.
   - Numerical control exists in two forms. CNC is one form. CNC is Computer Navigated Control. DNC is Distributed Numerical Control.
   - On-line registration is frustrating. It should make it faster to register. The words on the screen are not self-explanatory. Screen notices say things like "illegal command." Retracing a path to a screen is difficult.

Wordiness and Redundancy

2. Revise the following sentences, removing unnecessary words.
   - Due to the fact that we have two computer platforms connected together, we must pay attention to basic fundamentals when we send a document such as an e-mail attachment.
   - This project will be presented in Web format with links to the resource sites as well as other links that are associated with the sites and links that are associated with the topic of researching a report.
   - In fact many sites are available on the Web where the viewer can have the actual experience of purchasing equipment, new and used, from the site.
   - In the printing business there are two main ways of printing. The first is by using offset and the second is by using flexography.

Write Clear Paragraphs for Your Reader

Put the Topic Sentence First

An easy way to achieve a clear paragraph is to use the top-down strategy. Put the topic sentence first and follow it by several sentences of explanation.

Copyright 2012 Cengage Learning. All Rights Reserved. May not be copied, scanned, or duplicated, in whole or in part.

The *topic sentence* expresses the paragraph's central idea, and the remaining sentences develop, explain, and support the central idea. This top-down arrangement enables readers to grasp the ideas in paragraphs more quickly (Slater). In addition putting the topic idea in the first sentence makes it possible for readers to get the gist of your document by skimming over the first sentences.

Consider this example:

Topic sentence Supporting details	The second remarkable property of muskeg is that, like a great sponge, it absorbs and accumulates water. Water enters a muskeg forest through precipitation (rain and snow) and through the ground (rivers, streams, seeps). It leaves by evaporation (chiefly of vapor transpired by the plants) and by outflow through or over the ground. However, input and output are not in balance. Water accumulates and is held absorbed in the accumulating peat. One of the commonest plants of muskeg is sphagnum moss, otherwise known as peat moss; alive or dead, its water-holding capacity is renowned, and is what gives peat its great water-retaining power. (Pielou 97)

In a coherent paragraph each sentence amplifies the point of the topic sentence. You can indicate coherence by

arranging sentences by level
repeating terms in a new/old sequence,
placing key terms in the dominant position,
indicating class or membership,
using transitions (Mulcahy).

Arrange Sentences by Level

Here is another way to think about the top-down method—think of each sentence as having a "level." On the first level is the topic sentence. The second level consists of sentences that support or explain the topic sentence. The third level consists of sentences that develop one of the second-level ideas. Four sentences, then, could have several different relationships. For instance, the last three could all expand the idea in the first:

1 First level
2 Second level
3 Second level
4 Second level

Or sentences 3 and 4 could expand on sentence 2, which in turn expands on sentence 1:

Copyright 2012 Cengage Learning. All Rights Reserved. May not be copied, scanned, or duplicated, in whole or in part.

1 First level
2 Second level
3 Third level
4 Third level

As you write, evaluate the level of each sentence. Decide whether the idea in the sentence is level 2, a subdivision of the topic, or level 3, which provides details about a subdivision. Consider this six-sentence example:

Hydraulic pumps are classified as either nonpositive or positive displacement units. Nonpositive displacement pumps produce a continuous flow. Because of this design, there is no positive internal seal against leakage, and their output varies as pressure varies. Positive displacement pumps produce a pulsating flow. Their design provides a positive internal seal against leakage. Their output is virtually unaffected as system pressure varies.

The sentences of this paragraph have the following structure:

(1) Hydraulic pumps are classified as either nonpositive or positive displacement units.
(2) Nonpositive displacement pumps produce a continuous flow.
(3) Because of this design, there is no positive internal seal against leakage, as their output pressure varies.
(2) Positive displacement pumps produce a pulsating flow.
(3) Their design provides a positive internal seal against leakage.
(3) Their output is virtually unaffected as the system pressure varies.

Globalization and Style

When writing for an audience whose first language is not English, you need to be as clear and concise as possible. You do not need to "dumb down" your style, but in order for your document to be effective, you will need to think about the way in which you write (Dehaas).

An important aspect of communicating with other cultures is understanding their way of "categorization": how they divide and perceive the world. Lakoff states that "Categorisation is not to be taken lightly; there is nothing more basic than categorization to our thought, perception, action, and speech." (Lakoff 5). In other words some cultures see it as a virtue to go "astray and revert" and pursue the central idea, whereas other cultures see it as virtue to follow a clear and narrow line of thought from beginning to end.

However, some guidelines for good writing can be given irrespective of the deeper levels of thought.

Put only one idea in each sentence.

Focus on making the subject and the action clear—you can accomplish this by keeping your sentences in natural order: subject first, verb in the middle,

(Continued)

Copyright 2012 Cengage Learning. All Rights Reserved. May not be copied, scanned, or duplicated, in whole or in part.

and predicate last, as shown in the first sentence in the following example below. If you use a subordinate clause, put the clause where it makes the strongest focus and makes the best cohesive link, as in sentences 2 and 3 in the following example. Avoid too many subject holders and antecedents, which are pronouns; write the word for the real subject instead. In sentence 2, replace "they" with "the modules" and in sentence 3, replace "they" with "modules" or "power supply." By doing so, you avoid ambiguities in the sentences.

Our electronic circuit protection modules provide the preferred solid-state protection for secondary circuits of switched mode power supplies. Faster than the self-protection of the power supply, they are designed to accommodate inductive and capacitance loads, avoiding nuisance tripping. When they do trip, an indicator shows which of four circuits caused the fault, saving troubleshooting time. (Rockwell)

Stay away from examples that require readers to understand metaphors outside of their experience. For instance, the sentence "That approach hit a home run" depends for its meaning on the ability to translate "home run" into "very successful." Examples linking up with a certain culture often call for localized translations to other cultures, which take a lot of effort and time and thus add to the costs!

Consider your word choice. You can cause confusion without ever being aware of it. By using the word *outlet*, meaning a place into which an electric plug is inserted, readers from another culture might be unfamiliar with the American usage, asking "Is 'outlet' a door or window?" (The UK word is *socket,* for instance).

Use consistent vocabulary. Once you use a word for an object, continue to use the same word. If you use "screen," do not suddenly switch to a synonym, for example, to "page" or "Web page." English often has many words for the same object or phenomenon, and writers often like to vary their language, but variation in the specific vocabulary is confusing. Variation should be confined to common-core language and function words.

Use an adequate mix between the active voice and the passive voice. Use "The manager accepted the proposal" instead of "The proposal was agreed to by the manager." The choice of active and passive voice, however, depends on the genre. In some situations, for instance, a document that explains how a machine performs a certain action, it is sometimes difficult to avoid the passive form. Likewise, in legal writing, it is sometimes not desired to have an agent in the sentence.

Write words in full instead of using contractions, especially in negative statements. Say "Do not use" rather than "Don't use"; the use of the separate word *not* gives the statement more emphasis. However, consider revising the sentence to state the issue positively. For instance, avoid instructions like this: "Do not put away your old freezer without ruining the lock. Children might use it to play hide and seek and die from lack of air, because the lock can only be opened from the outside." A positive instruction would be phrased

Copyright 2012 Cengage Learning. All Rights Reserved. May not be copied, scanned, or duplicated, in whole or in part.

like: "Always ruin the lock of a freezer before putting it away to prevent accidents." Another example is: "Do not smoke cigars or a pipe near the lawn mower." The ironical question then is "Well, can you then smoke pot near a lawn mower"?

Use –ing and –ed forms carefully. These forms cause difficulty in understanding. Consider this sentence: *The car body is spray-painted by a robot passing through a room.* Notice that the subject of the sentence (*car body*) is not the subject of the –ing form "passing;" *robot* is. That slight change can make your sentences difficult to translate. The sentence can be revised so that the agent performs both acts: *Passing through a room, the car body is spray-painted by a robot.* Although the sentences contain exactly the same words, shifting of –ing form to the beginning from end solves the problem. The car body passes through, and it is spray painted (Mousten).

For further reference, check out these websites:

IBM "Guideline B: Writing for an International Audience" <http://www-01.ibm.com/software/globalization/guidelines/guideb.html> has articles on writing, communicating, and presenting for an international community. You'll find tips on writing style as well as articles on cultural sensitivity issues. A complete list of its guidelines for writing for global audiences can be found at "Guidelines Quick Reference" http://www-01.ibm.com/software/globalization/guidelines/outline.html>

Repeat Terms in a New/Old Sequence

Sentences in a paragraph can follow an alternating sequence of supplying new information, which in turn becomes old information as the next sentence add more new information. In the following example, notice that the *new* information, *collided* (sentence 1), becomes *old* information, *collision* (sentences 2 and 3), and that *mountain range* is *new* information in sentence 3 but *old* information in sentence 4.

> Subduction stopped when the continent *collided* with the island arc along its northern margin. This *collision* resulted in extensive deformation of the island arc as well as deformation of the sedimentary rocks on the continental margin described earlier. The *collision* produced a *mountain range* across northern Wisconsin. This ancient *mountain range* is called the Penokean Mountains. The eroded remnants of these *mountains* constitute much of the bedrock of Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Michigan. (LaBerge 111)

Use the Dominant Position

Placing terms in the dominant position means to repeat a key term as the subject, or main idea, of a sentence. In the earlier paragraph notice that

Copyright 2012 Cengage Learning. All Rights Reserved. May not be copied, scanned, or duplicated, in whole or in part.

in sentences 2 and 3 *collision* appears first in sentences 2 and 3. The repetition returns readers to the same topic where they find it developed in another way.

Maintain Class or Membership Relationships

To indicate class or membership relationships, use words that show that the subsequent sentences are subparts of the topic sentence. In the following sentences, *distributed media* and *online systems* are members of the class *paradigm. Notice that the two terms also appear in the dominant position and that, if you indicated their level, they would both begin level 2 ideas.*

> Interactive multimedia follows one of two paradigms. Distributed media, such as CDs, are self-contained and circulated to audiences in the same manner as books or audio recordings. Online systems, such as intranets and the Web, resemble broadcasting in that the content originates from one central location and the use accesses it from a distance. (Bonime and Pohlman 177)

Provide Transitions

Using transitions means connecting sentences by using words that signal a sequence or a pattern. The common transitions such as *first/second, not only/but also, however, therefore, and, and but* are well known. For easy reading stay consistent. If you say "first" follow later with "second." While the paragraph might not read quite as elegantly as one that used less obvious transitions, the clearly indicated sequence will keep your reader from getting lost. It is fine to begin a sentence with *but.* However, that position makes the word quite emphatic, calling attention to the oncoming sentence as very important.

Choose a Tone for the Reader

The strategies discussed thus far in this chapter make your documents easy to read. These strategies, however, assume that the reader and the writer are unemotional cogs in an information-dispensing system. It is as though reader and writer were the cut-and-paste commands in a word processing program. Create the idea on this page (the writer), cut and paste to a new page (the reader), and the new page has the information in exactly the same form as the old page.

Writing situations are not that predictable. The tone, or emotional attitude implied by the word choice, can communicate almost as much as the content of a

Copyright 2012 Cengage Learning. All Rights Reserved. May not be copied, scanned, or duplicated, in whole or in part.

Focus on Ethical Style

Use Unambiguous Language

Suppose, for instance, that you are writing a manual for a machine that has a sharp, whirling part under a protective cover. This dangerous part could slice off a user's fingers. When you explain how to clean the part, you inform the reader of the danger in a manner that prompts him or her to act cautiously. It would be unethical to write, "A hazard exists if contact is made with this part while it is whirling." That sentence is not urgent or specific enough to help a user prevent injury. Instead write, "Warning! Turn off all power before you remove the cover. The blade underneath could slice off your fingers!"

However, the need for unambiguous language appears in other much less dramatic situations. Take, for instance, the phrase "When I click the 'Submit' button, it doesn't work." This phrasing is so imprecise that it does not allow another person to act in a helpful way. How can someone fix it if he or she does not know what is not working? But that phrasing also indicates a moral stance—"I am not responsible. It is your job. I will not take the time and effort to right this, whatever inconvenience it may cause you." This kind of ambiguous use of language certainly is not dangerous, the way the previous example was, but it is a refusal to take responsibility in the situation. As such, the language does not help other people achieve their goals. It is wrong, not just because it is imprecise, but because it does not help the stakeholders.

Use Direct, Simple Expression

Say what you mean in a way that your reader will easily understand. Suppose you had to tell an operator how to deal with a problem with the flow of toxic liquid in a manufacturing plant. A complex, indirect expression of a key instruction would look like this:

If there is a confirmation of the tank level rising, a determination of the source should be made.

A simple, direct expression of the same idea looks like this:

Determine if the tank level is rising. Visually check to see if liquid is coming out of the first-floor trench.

Clarity is the gold standard for all communication. Jargon, shop talk, or technobabble that marginalizes or excludes the reader or audience is not only confusing, it is unethical. It is both reasonable and desirable to create prose, be it technical or otherwise, that is written for its intended audience. Unfortunately, sometimes it is all too easy to slide into a vernacular that is common among those in-house. To use terms that are unique to a particular discursive community can create a boundary between the document and its intended audience. If you must use jargonistic terms, include a glossary, or define the term the first time you use it in the text. If your language can be misconstrued, it can cause problems. A good general rule is to guard against any use of terms that are common in-house when the audience for the document is "out of house." This is not only good practice; it is the ethical thing to do.

Copyright 2012 Cengage Learning. All Rights Reserved. May not be copied, scanned, or duplicated, in whole or in part.

message (Fielden). To communicate effectively, you must learn to control tone. Let's consider four possible tones:

- Forceful
- Passive
- Personal
- Impersonal

The *forceful* tone implies that the writer is in control of the situation or that the situation is positive. It is appropriate when the writer addresses subordinates or when the writer's goal is to express confidence. To write forcefully,

- Use the active voice.
- Use the subject–verb–object structure.
- Do not use "weasel words" (*possibly, maybe, perhaps*).
- Use imperatives.
- Clearly indicate that you are the responsible agent.

I have decided to implement your suggestion that we supply all office workers with laptops and eliminate their towers. This suggestion is excellent. You have clearly made the case that this change will reduce eyestrain issues and will greatly enhance the flow of information in the department. Make an appointment with me so we can start to implement this fine idea.

The *passive* tone implies that the reader has more power than the writer or that the situation is negative. It is appropriate when the writer addresses a superior or when the writer's goal is to neutralize a potentially negative reaction. To make the tone passive,

- Avoid imperatives.
- Use the passive voice.
- Use "weasel words" (*very, several people, quite, fairly*).
- Use longer sentences.
- Do not explicitly take responsibility.

The proposal to implement laptops in our department has not been accepted because of a number of very difficult issues. To our surprise several people have indicated that the ergonomic benefits of the screens are not seen as not quite offsetting the potential disruption that will be caused by the migration of files to the new machines. The large footprint of the docking station has also been suggested as a possible problem for our employees due to their fairly restricted desk space. Because the need for action on computer replacement is necessary, a meeting will be scheduled next week to discuss this.

Copyright 2012 Cengage Learning. All Rights Reserved. May not be copied, scanned, or duplicated, in whole or in part.

Compare this to a forceful presentation:

> The steering committee and I reject the laptop proposal. You have not included enough convincing data on morale or work flow, and you have not dealt with work flow disruption and the large size of the docking station. Make an appointment to see me if necessary.

The *personal* tone implies that reader and writer are equal. It is appropriate to use when you want to express respect for the reader. To make a style personal,

- Use the active voice.
- Use first names.
- Use personal pronouns.
- Use short sentences.
- Use contractions.
- Direct questions at the reader.

> Ted, thanks for that laptop suggestion. The steering committee loved it. Like you, we feel it will solve the eyestrain issue and will facilitate data flow. And we think it will also raise morale. I'd like you to begin work on this soon. Can you make an appointment to see me this week?

This tone is also appropriate for delivering a negative message when both parties are equal.

> Ted, thanks for the laptop suggestion, but we can't do it this cycle. The steering committee understands the ergonomic issue you raise, but they are very concerned about the disruption that migrating all those files will cause. In addition, they feel that we need to work out the entire issue of footprint—the model you suggested would cause a number of problems with current desk configurations. I know that this is a disappointment. Could we get together soon to discuss this?

The *impersonal* tone implies that the writer is not important or that the situation is neutral. Use this tone when you want to downplay personalities in the situation. To make the tone impersonal,

- Do not use names, especially first names.
- Do not use personal pronouns.
- Use the passive voice.
- Use longer sentences.

> A decision to provide each employee with a laptop has been made. Laptops will reduce the eye fatigue that some employees have experienced, and the laptops will increase data flow. Ted Baxter will chair the implementation committee. Donna Silver and Robert Sirabian will assist. The committee will hold its initial meeting on Monday, October 10, at 3:00 P.M. in Room 111.

Copyright 2012 Cengage Learning. All Rights Reserved. May not be copied, scanned, or duplicated, in whole or in part.

Worksheet for Style

- ☐ **Find sentences that contain passive voice. Change passive to active.**
- ☐ **Look for sentences shorter than 12 or longer than 25 words. Either combine them or break them up.**
- ☐ **Check each sentence for coordinate elements. If they are not parallel, make them so.**
- ☐ **Read carefully for instances of the following potential problems:**
  - Nominalizations
  - Sexist language
  - Too frequent use of *there are*
  - Choppiness
  - Incorrect use of *you*
  - Wordiness
- ☐ ***Sentences.* Look for four types of phrasing. Change the phrasing as suggested here or as determined by the needs of your audience and the situation.**
  - The word *this.* Usually you can eliminate it (and slightly change the sentence that is left), or else you should add a noun directly behind it. ("By increasing the revenue, this will cause more profit" becomes "Increasing the revenue will cause more profit.")
  - The words *am, is, are, was, were, be,* and *been.* If these are followed by a past tense (*was written*) the sentence is passive. Try to change the verb to an active sense (*wrote*).
  - Lists of things or series of activities. Put all such items, whether of nouns, adjectives, or verb forms, in the same grammatical form (*to purchase, to assemble,* and *to erect*—not *to purchase, assembling,* and *to erect*). This strategy will do more to clarify your writing than following any other style tip.
  - The phrases *there are* and *there is.* You can almost always eliminate these phrases and a *that* which appears later in the sentence. ("There are four benefits that you will find" becomes "You will find four benefits.")
- ☐ **Use the top-down principle as your basic strategy.**
- ☐ **Make sure that each paragraph has a clear topic sentence.**
- ☐ **Check paragraph coherence by reviewing for**
  a. Repetition of terms
  b. Placement of key terms in a dominant position
  c. Class or membership relationships
  d. Transitions.
- ☐ **Evaluate the sentence levels of each paragraph. Revise sentences that do not clearly fit into a level.**

Copyright 2012 Cengage Learning. All Rights Reserved. May not be copied, scanned, or duplicated, in whole or in part.