

A Brief Foray Into Style

Our academic journals radiate bad writing—I store my journals on the shelf farthest from my desk to avoid the fallout. But if you talk with the authors of these disastrously written articles, you'll find that they're enthusiastic about their work. Their spoken descriptions are often clear, lively, and interesting. What went wrong? This book is about writing a lot, not about writing well, but you should take the time to learn the principles of strong writing. People can write a lot after a mere week if they commit to following a schedule, but it takes much longer to learn how to write well—all the more reason to start now. This chapter provides a handful of tips for improving the quality of your writing.

DIAGNOSING THE PROBLEM

Academic writers are bad writers for three reasons. First, they want to sound smart. “If the water is dark,” goes a German aphorism, “the lake must be deep.”

Instead of using good words like *smart*, they choose *sophisticated* or *erudite*. I ought to have said, “Bodies of water characterized by minimal transparency are likely to possess significantly high values on the depth dimension ($p < .05$).” Second, academic writers never learned how to write well. Their role models during graduate school were probably bad writers, and their role models in the journals set the Geiger counters clicking. Finally, most academics don’t spend enough time writing to become good writers. As with any other skill, writing skill comes from many hours of deliberate practice (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993). People must learn the rules of good writing and spend hundreds of hours practicing those rules.

To solve the first problem, you must revise your mental model of academic writing. Some readers might think you’re smart if your writing is impenetrable, but you don’t want that undiscerning audience. Most scientists are impressed by good ideas and interesting findings, so don’t hide your ideas behind a wall of junk English. To solve the second problem, read this chapter and then buy some books about writing. At the back of this book is a list of references about style and grammar that you’ll find helpful (see “Good Books About Writing”). To solve the third problem, read those books and practice their suggestions during your scheduled writing time. It won’t be long before your sentences sound more like you and less like an anonymous, desiccated academic.

CHOOSE GOOD WORDS

Writing begins and ends with words. To write well, you need to choose good words. The English language has a lot of words, and many of them are short, expressive, and familiar—write with these words. Avoid trendy phrases that sound intellectual, and never use words that make you sound like an academic psychologist. Besides improving your writing, good words show respect for your many readers who learned English as a second, third, or fourth language. Foreign scholars often read articles with a dual-language dictionary at hand. If a word isn’t in that dictionary, your foreign readers won’t understand it. They’ll blame themselves for misunderstanding your writing, but you’re to blame for leaving them behind.

“But what about technical terms?” you might ask. “How can I write a paper about stimulus onset asynchrony without saying ‘stimulus onset asynchrony’?” Science coins words and phrases when it needs them—these technical terms do useful work. When defined with normal words, technical terms are easy to understand. We should keep our good science words and exclude the bad words that emigrate from business, marketing, politics, and warfare: We don’t need verbs like *to incentivize* or *to target*, and only window washers need adjectives like *transparent*. For coherence, use technical terms consistently. Varying terms for psychological concepts will confuse your readers:

Before: People high in neuroticism responded slower than people low in the tendency to experience aversive affective states.

After: People high in neuroticism responded slower than people low in neuroticism.

But some technical terms are terrible, so don't mindlessly write the words you see in professional journals. Developmental psychologists, content with neither path nor way, describe developmental pathways; in vaunted moments, these pathways are trajectories. Cognitive psychologists should clarify what disambiguate means. Clinical psychologists have clients who present with symptoms, presumably like depressed butlers carrying platters of "negative moods" and "poor sleep." And clinicians don't write manuals or follow manuals anymore; they develop and implement *manualized interventions*. Emotion psychologists, fearing their readers' ignorance of the meaning of *appraisal*, speak of cognitive appraisals, subjective appraisals, and—in case someone missed the point—subjective cognitive appraisals. Psychologists with interdisciplinary interests propose biosocial models, psychosocial models, psychobiological models, and even biopsychosocial models; a recent biopsychosocial spiritual model surpasses parochial models that are merely biopsychosocial.

Psychologists love bad words, although they call them *deficient* or *suboptimal* instead of *bad*. Psychologists like writing about the existing literature. Is there a nonexistent literature that I should be reading and referencing? Any psychologist who reads articles

should know that our professional journals are frighteningly real. *Extant literature* is a white-collar version of the same crime. Psychologists who write about a disconnect between two things have become disconnected from their dictionaries, where they'll find good words like *difference*, *distinction*, *separation*, and *gap*. And some individuals, when writing individual papers on various individual topics, refer to a person as an *individual* and to *people* as *individuals*. These people forget that *individual* is vague: Consider "We observed an individual _____." Should the blank be filled with a noun (e.g., rabbit) or with a verb (e.g., walking)? You don't say *individual* and *individuals* when discussing research with your friends, so why be so shoddy when describing it to the vast world of science? Were you attracted to psychology because you were interested in individuals and enjoyed individuals-watching? Choose good words, like *person* and *people*. The abomination persons should remain the property of small-town sheriffs on the hunt for "a person or persons unknown."

Speaking of people, I stopped writing participants when describing my research participants. I have friends who study birds, infants, rats, and school districts; their participants are nothing like mine. I study adult humans, so person and people are good words for my Methods sections. If this decision shocks you, fear not—unlike fashion, APA style lacks police. Participants is a vague word, so psychologists should choose better words. Some researchers, for example, study children by collecting data from children, teachers,

and parents. People in all three groups are participants, so the word is uninformative: Call them children, teachers, and parents. If you study cognitive processes in older and younger adults, why not describe your methods and results using *older adults* and *younger adults*? In the privacy of your own room, rewrite a Methods section by replacing the word *participants* with a better word. You'll feel better.

Abbreviations and acronyms are bad words. I've seen writers abbreviate short, familiar words like *anxiety* (ANX) and *depression* (DEP), add acronyms for simple phrases like *anxious arousal* (ANXAR) and *hedonic depression* (ANDEP), and then gleefully describe the differences between ANX, ANDEP, DEP, and ANXAR. Abbreviations and acronyms are useful only when they are easier to understand than the tortuous phrases they represent. SES and ANOVA are good; ANX and DEP are bad. Some writers believe that they're reducing redundancy by replacing common phrases with abbreviations. In a book about how to write a lot, for example, they would rather repeat WAL than *write a lot*. Readers find rereading abbreviations more tedious than rereading real words. By not writing tortuous phrases in the first place, you'll reduce the need for abbreviations.

Delete *very*, *quite*, *basically*, *actually*, *ex-tremely*, *remarkably*, *completely*, *at all*, and so forth. Basically, these quite useless words add virtually nothing at all; like weeds, they'll in fact actually smother your

sentences completely. In *Junk English*, Ken Smith (2001) called these words *parasitic intensifiers*:

Formerly strong words are being reduced to lightweights that need to be bulked up with intensifiers to regain their punch. To offer insight or to oppose a position now sound tepid unless the insight is *valuable* and the opposition *diametrical*. The intensifier drains the vigor from its host. (p. 98)

If you took to heart Strunk and White's (2000) command to "omit needless words" (p. 23) but can't tell which words are needless, parasitic intensifiers are basically begging to be totally eliminated.

WRITE STRONG SENTENCES

Now that you're self-conscious about your words—"Did I write *individuals* in my last paper?"—it's time to rethink how to write sentences. "All this time you have been writing sentences," wrote Sheridan Baker (1969), "as naturally as breathing, and perhaps with as little variation" (p. 27). By overusing a single type of sentence, bad writers sound like they're speaking in a discursive drone. English has three types of sentences: a simple, compound, and complex (Baker, 1969; Hale, 1999). Simple sentences have only one subject-predicate pair. Academic writers scorn clear, simple sentences. It's a shame. Compound sentences have two clauses, and each clause can stand alone. Sometimes a conjunction connects the independent clauses;

sometimes a semicolon does the trick. Unlike simple and compound sentences, *complex* sentences contain dependent and independent clauses. Complex sentences, if written well, give your writing a crisp, controlled tone.

In egocentric moments, I believe that parallel sentences were invented for psychologists. We write about relationships, contrasts, and comparisons: people high in extraversion and people low in extraversion, the control condition and the experimental condition, what happened at Time 1 and what happened at Time 2. Good writers use parallel sentences because parallel structures easily express relationships; bad writers avoid them because they think that parallel structures are repetitive. Instead, bad writers create skewed sentences by varying their terms and sentence types:

Before: People in the dual-task condition monitored a series of beeps while reading a list of words. Some other participants in a different group read only a list of words without listening for sounds ("control condition").

After: People in the dual-task condition monitored a series of beeps while reading a list of words. People in the control condition read a list of words.

Some parallel sentences use a *criterion-variant structure*: They describe what is shared and then describe the variations.

Better: Everyone read a list of words. People in the dual-task condition monitored a series of beeps while reading the words, and people in the control condition only read the words.

Better: Everyone viewed a set of 20 pictures. In the control condition, people merely viewed the pictures. In the evaluation condition, people rated how much they liked each picture.

Many people are estranged from the semicolon, a good but neglected friend to writers of parallel sentences. Like their dislike of jocks and the yearbook club, many writers' distrust of semicolons is a prejudice from high school. Work through this—you need semicolons. Semicolons must connect independent clauses; each part of the sentence must be able to stand alone. Unlike a period, a semicolon implies a close connection between the clauses. Unlike a comma followed by *and*, a semicolon implies a sense of balance, of weighing one and the other. Semicolons are thus ideal for coordinating two parallel sentences:

Before: At Time 1, people read the words. At Time 2, they tried to remember as many words as possible.

After: At Time 1, people read the words; at Time 2, they tried to remember as many words as possible.

Before: People in the reading condition read the words, and people in the listening condition heard a recording of the words.

After: People in the reading condition read the words; people in the listening condition heard a recording of the words.

While you're rebuilding your relationship with the semicolon, reach out and make a new friend—the

dash. Good writers are addicted to dashes. Technically called *em dashes*—they’re the width of a capital M—dashes enable crisp, striking sentences. Dashes have two common uses (Gordon, 2003). First, a single dash can connect a clause or phrase to the end of sentence. You’ve read a lot of these in this chapter:

- Our academic journals radiate bad writing—I store my journals on the shelf farthest from my desk to avoid the fallout.
- Work through this—you need semicolons.
- While you’re rebuilding your relationship with the semicolon, reach out and make a new friend—the dash.

Second, two dashes can enclose a parenthetical expression. You’ve read these, too:

- Now that you’re self-conscious about your words—“Did I write *individuals* in my last paper?”—it’s time to rethink how to write sentences.
- Technically called *em dashes*—they’re the width of a capital M—dashes enable crisp, striking sentences.

Try using dashes for your next Participants and Design section:

Okay: Forty-two adults participated in the experiment.
There were 12 women and 30 men.

Better: Forty-two adults—12 women and 30 men—participated in the experiment.

The em dash has a lesser known cousin, the en dash. The width of a capital N, the en dash coordinates two concepts. It’s a clean way of expressing *between*. Few writers use en dashes properly; they use hyphens instead, often with embarrassing results. Developmental psychologists interested in *parent-child behavior* probably don’t mean that parents act like babies sometimes—they mean *parent-child*, a shorthand for “behavior between parents and children.” Good writers know the difference between a *teacher-parent conference* (hyphen), *en dash* and a *teacher-parent conference* (*en dash*). A researcher on my campus posted flyers for an “infant-parent interaction study.” (Forget teen pregnancy—let’s stop infant pregnancy.) Now is a good time to thank the valiant copyeditors who have silently corrected en dash errors in your published papers.

You can write strong sentences by experimenting with appositional phrases. Because the positions of phrases in a sentence imply relationships, you can eliminate words that connect and coordinate parts of the sentence.

Before: Counterfactual thoughts, which are defined as thoughts about events that did not occur, demonstrate the intersection of cognition and emotion.

After: Counterfactual thoughts, defined as thoughts about events that did not occur, demonstrate the intersection of cognition and emotion.

Better: Counterfactual thoughts—thoughts about events that did not occur—demonstrate the intersection of cognition and emotion.

Before: The study of facial expressions is a popular area within the study of cognition and emotion, and it has settled old conflicts about the structure of emotions.

After: The study of facial expressions, a popular area within the study of cognition and emotion, has settled old conflicts about the structure of emotions.

Finally, you can diagnose weak sentences by checking for two common maladies that strike academic writing. The first, the *such that* virus, afflicts writers who fear simple sentences. To avoid writing a simple sentence, they use *such that* to connect a flabby first clause with the second clause that they meant to write. Never write *such that* again. Use your word processor's search function to stamp out this pestilence. If you find it, there are three cures: delete the clause preceding *such that*, replace *such that* with a colon or dash, or write a better sentence.

Before: We created two conditions such that people in one condition were told to be accurate and people in another condition were told to be fast.

After: People in one condition were told to be accurate; people in another condition were told to be fast. (Dropped the preceding clause, used a semicolon to create parallel clauses.)

Before: We created two conditions: People in one condition were told to be accurate, and people in another condition were told be to fast. (Replaced *such that* with a colon.)

Before: People were assigned to groups such that the assignment process was random.

After: People were randomly assigned to groups. (Wrote a better sentence.)

The second malady, the *wobbly compound syndrome*, afflicts writers who erroneously believe that commas should mark pauses in speech. Our journals are battling a pandemic of wobbly compound syndrome. Some examples of casualties follow:

- Positive moods enhance creative problem solving, and broaden thinking.
- Experiment 1 demonstrated strong effects of planning on motivation, and clarified competing predictions about how planning works.

Recognize the symptoms? Know why these are wrong? Compound sentences require two independent clauses. In wobbly compounds, the second clause can't stand alone because it lacks a subject. What broadens thinking? What clarified predictions? It's easy to fix these sentences. You can add a subject to the second clause ("and they broaden thinking," "and it clarified competing predictions") or you can omit the comma ("Positive moods enhance creative problem solving and broaden thinking.")

AVOID PASSIVE, LIMP, AND WORDY PHRASES

All books about writing urge people to write in the active voice. People think actively and speak actively, so active writing captures the compelling sound of everyday thought and speech. Passive writing, by hiding

the sentence's doer, strikes people as vague and evasive. Writers who want to sound smart drift toward the passive voice; they like its impersonal sound and its stereotypical association with scholarly writing. Passive writing is easy to fix. Read your writing, and circle each appearance of the infinitive *to be*. Can you think of a better verb? Nearly all verbs imply being, so you can usually replace *to be* with dynamic verbs. Change at least one third of your original uses of *to be*. With vigilance and practice, you'll write fewer passive sentences. To revive enervated sentences, negate with verbs instead of with not. People often miss not when reading and thus misunderstand your sentence. This trick shortens your sentences and expresses your points vividly.

Before: People often do not see not when reading and thus do not understand your sentence.

After: People often miss not when reading and thus misunderstand your sentence.

Some of psychology's common phrases are aggressively, proudly passive. In any journal, you'll find psychologists "ivving it up": Their results are indicative of significance, the theory is reflective of its historical context, the data are supportive of the hypothesis. This is passive writing at its most flamboyant and unapologetic: The writer chose an awkward, passive form instead of a common, active form. Why not say the results indicate, the theory reflects, the data support? Delete all *to be _____ive* of phrases by rewriting the verb:

- to be indicative of = to indicate
- to be reflective of = to reflect
- to be supportive of = to support
- to be implicative of = to imply

I have a memory of reading *is confirmative of*—a false memory, I hope.

Only vigilance will stop wordy phrases from slithering into your sentences. I recently read an article that claimed that attitudes are emotional in nature. If attitudes are emotional in nature, what are they like in captivity? Will they reproduce like captive pandas? Psychologists who write *in nature* probably saw the movie *Out of Africa* too many times during their formative years. Unless you plan to submit your article to *National Geographic*, avoid *in nature*. Adjectives describe the natures of things, so *in nature* is always implied in an adjective. After this rant, I needn't describe why in *a _____ manner* is bad. Use adverbs—"people responded rapidly" instead of "people responded in a rapid manner"—to avoid a tragedy of manners.

Even active sentences can be limp and lifeless. Psychologists often start a sentence with "Research shows that . . .," "Recent studies indicate that . . .," "Many new findings suggest that . . .," or "A monstrous amount of research conclusively proves that . . .". These phrases add little to your meaning, and citations at the end of the sentence will show that research bolsters your point. You'll need these phrases

occasionally—I use them in this book to contrast empirical facts with personal opinions—but avoid them when possible.

Writers hobble strong sentences by starting with lumpy phrases like “However . . .,” “For instance . . .,” and “For example . . .” Move however into the first joint of the sentence:

Before: However, recent findings challenge dual-process theories of persuasion.

After: Recent findings, however, challenge dual-process theories of persuasion.

Relocate *for example* and *for instance* as well, but (in informal writing) keep *but* and *yet* at the start of the sentence. As an aside, remember that a poorly punctuated *however* can turn a compound sentence into a glorious run-on.

Before: High self-efficacy enhances motivation for challenging tasks, however it reduces motivation if people perceive the task as easy.

After: High self-efficacy enhances motivation for challenging tasks; however, it reduces motivation if people perceive the task as easy.

Write actively, but don’t feel overwrought when you write passive sentences. Like all scientific writing, psychological writing involves impersonal agents such as concepts, theories, constructs, and relationships. We often have weak agents, such as *past research*, *cognitive dissonance theory*, or the cognitive approach to anxiety

disorders. When readers can’t easily form a mental image of the subject and its action—a theory making predictions, a concept correlating with another concept, a tradition influencing modern research—active sentences lose their punch. One solution to weak subjects—one favored by writers on a misguided quest to avoid anthropomorphism—is to replace impersonal agents like cognitive dissonance theory with researchers, as in researchers studying cognitive dissonance theory. I doubt that this helps. Vague subjects like researchers and people interested in are equally abstract, impersonal, and hard to imagine. And this approach can be misleading: Sometimes we’re writing about cognitive dissonance theory, not about people who study it.

WRITE FIRST, REVISE LATER

Generating text and revising text are distinct parts of writing—don’t do both at once. The goal of text generation is to throw confused, wide-eyed words on a page; the goal of text revision is to scrub the words clean so that they sound nice and make sense. Some writers—invariably struggling writers—try to write a pristine first draft, one free of flaws and infelicities. The quest for the perfect first draft is misguided. Writing this way is just too stressful: These writers compose a sentence; worry about it for 5 minutes; delete it; write it again; change a few words; and then, exasperated, move on to the next sentence. Perfectionism is paralyzing. Furthermore, writing sentence by sentence

makes your text sound disjointed. The paragraph, not the sentence, is the basic unit of writing.

Master the rules of style, but don't let those rules paralyze you when you sit down to write. Revising while you generate text is like drinking decaffeinated coffee in the early morning: noble idea, wrong time. Your first drafts should sound like they were hastily translated from Icelandic by a nonnative speaker. Writing is part creation and part criticism, part id and part superego: Let the id unleash a discursive screed, and then let the superego evaluate it for correctness and appropriateness. Rejoice in writing your gnarled and impenetrable drafts, just as you rejoice in later stamping out your fuzzy phrases and unwanted words.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter sought to make you self-conscious about your writing. Many individuals display inaccurate self-assessments of their deficient writing skill levels—or to borrow Zinsser's (2001) simple sentence: "Few people realize how badly they write" (p. 19). Strong, clear writing will make your work stand out from the crowd of shoddy, obtuse, pretentious, and mediocre manuscripts and grant proposals. People respect good writing. Reviewers of grant proposals know that clear writing requires clear thinking; journal editors appreciate a clean description of a good idea. Read some of the books listed in the back of this book, practice the principles of good writing when you generate and revise text, and never write individuals or such that again.

6

Writing Journal Articles

Psychology journals are like the mean jocks and aloof rich girls in every 1980s high school movie—they reject all but the beautiful and persistent. Writing a journal article combines all the elements that deter motivation: The probability of success is low; the likelihood of criticism and rejection is high; and the outcome, even if successful, isn't always rewarding. Doing research is fun; writing about the research is not. Despite this, we must write journal articles because science communicates through its journals. Conferences are great for meeting old friends and seeing what fellow researchers are doing, but conference presentations are neither peer reviewed nor archived. Publication is the natural end point of the process of research. The field's file cabinets are full of unborn articles. I know many researchers who have a shameful backlog of data; some have unpublished data from the 1980s that they "hope to publish someday." Sure, they will. Because psychology venerates journal articles above other forms of publication, the field has good resources