

Improving Your Writing Style: Conciseness, Cohesion, and Coherence

Designed by
Duke University's
Writing Studio

Main characteristic of good style: **Clarity**

“Have something to say, and say it as clearly as you can. That is the only secret of style.”

— Matthew Arnold

“And how is clarity to be achieved? Mainly by taking trouble; and by writing to serve people rather than to impress them.”

— F. L. Lucas

Three Principles of a Clear, Effective Style

1. Conciseness
2. Cohesion
3. Coherence

Why Are Conciseness, Cohesion, and Coherence So Important?

- Conciseness spares your readers from having to reread what they already know
- Cohesion allows us to make multiple references to people, things, and events without reintroducing them at each turn
- Coherence focuses the reader's attention on the specific people, things, and events you are writing about

Conciseness, Cohesion, and Coherence

For example:

Original:

John Smith arrived early at the hall. There was no one else around at the hall. John Smith tried to open the door of the hall. The door was unlocked. John Smith opened the door. John Smith went through the door. John Smith shut the door behind John Smith. Suddenly there was a loud noise. The loud noise made John Smith jump.

Conciseness, Cohesion, and Coherence

Revised:

John Smith arrived early at the empty hall, approached the unlocked door, and entered. The hall door closed loudly behind him and made him jump.

1. Conciseness

“I believe more in the scissors than I do the pencil.”

— Truman Capote

“Some of my dearest and most beloved bits of writing have gone with a very quick slash, slash, slash....Because something was heavy there. Cutting leads to economy, precision, and to a vastly improved script.”

— Paddy Chayefsky

Conciseness: Repetition and Redundancy

- Delete unnecessary words.
- Delete words that repeat the meaning of other words.
- Delete words implied by other words.
- Replace a phrase with a word.
- Change negatives to affirmatives.

Conciseness: Repetition and Redundancy

A. Cut repetition and redundancy.

Original: TV “reality” shows, because they have an appeal to our fascination with real life conflict because of our voyeuristic impulses, are about the most popular shows that are regularly scheduled to appear on TV.

Revision: “Reality” shows are the most popular shows on TV because they appeal to our voyeuristic tendencies.

Conciseness: Repetition and Redundancy

A. Cut repetition and redundancy.

Original: Productivity actually depends on certain factors that basically involve psychology more than any particular technology.

Revision: Productivity depends on psychology rather than on technology.

Conciseness: Delete unnecessary modifiers

Original: Of the areas of science important to our future, few are more promising than genetic engineering, which is a new way of manipulating the elemental structural units of life itself, which are the genes and chromosomes that tell our cells how to reproduce to become the parts that constitute our bodies. <underlining added>

Revision: Many areas of science are important to our future, but few are more promising than genetic engineering. It offers a new way of manipulating the elemental structural units of life itself, the genes and chromosomes that tell our cells how to reproduce to become the parts constituting our bodies.

Conciseness: Passive voice

- Choose between the active or passive voice, depending on the situation and on discipline-specific conventions.

Conciseness: Passive voice

To find passive voice, look for any combination of the verb *to be* and a past participle.

is, are

was, were + ...ed,...t,...d,...en

am, be

being, been

Conciseness: Passive voice

To change from passive to active voice, ask yourself *Who's doing what?* or *What's doing what?* The *Who* or *What* is the grammatical subject of the sentence. Place this subject in front of the main verb.

Passive: The twenty-foot wave was surfed by the adventurous cow.

Active: The adventurous cow surfed a twenty-foot wave.

Conciseness: Passive voice

- **Passive:** A census is taken by the government every ten years so that proportional representation in Congress can be determined.
- **Active:** The government takes a census every ten years in order to determine proportional representation in Congress.

Should we use the passive?

- The collapse of a dead star into a point perhaps no larger than a marble creates a black hole.
- A black hole is created by the collapse of a dead star into a point perhaps no larger than a marble.

2. Cohesion

- Cohesion refers to the sense of sentence-by-sentence flow by which we move easily through a passage.
- Cohesion allows us to make multiple references to people, things, and events without reintroducing them at each turn.

Cohesion: Which passage is cohesive?

1. Some astonishing questions about the nature of the universe have been raised by scientists studying black holes in space. *The collapse of a dead star into a point perhaps no longer than a marble creates a black hole. So much matter compressed into so little volume changes the fabric of space around it in puzzling ways.*
2. Some astonishing questions about the nature of the universe have been raised by scientists studying black holes in space. *A black hole is created by the collapse of a dead star into a point perhaps no larger than a marble. So much matter compressed into so little volume changes the fabric of space around it in puzzling ways.*

Cohesion

- The sentence with the passive voice caused the paragraph to *flow* better.
- It connected easily to the sentence that preceded it and the sentence that followed.

The First Principle of Cohesion: Old First

- Begin your sentences with information familiar to your readers.

This can be information you've recently introduced within the text.

This can be anything assumed to be part of the audience's general knowledge.

The Second Principle of Cohesion: New Last

- End your sentences with information your readers cannot anticipate – the new information you are trying to convey.

“But then my point will be lost!”

- Ending sentences with new and important information is counter-intuitive.
- We want to put the new information first, to “highlight” it.
- But if readers don’t understand its importance, placing it first will not help.
- Besides, we remember what’s last anyway.

The Principle of Cohesion as a Law of Cognition

- The principle of old-before-new is built into our perception of time and story.
- The principle forms the conceptual basis of the *introduction* or *background* sections of an essay.

What Readers Remember from Sentences

- First: the sentence ending
- Second: the sentence beginning
- Last: the sentence middle

Topic and Stress

- The beginning of your sentence is its **topic**: it's what the sentence is about.
- The end of the sentence is its **stress**: it's what the sentence delivers.

What Cohesion Means for Your Sentence Beginnings

- Don't begin a sentence with a bit of new information.
- Don't begin a sentence with a bit of technical information (unless you've already defined or explained it).
- Use your openings to refer back to previous material or gently introduce a new topic.

What Cohesion Means for Your Sentence Endings

- Don't end a sentence with old information.
- Put the new, technical, and difficult information at the end of the sentence.
- Clearly signal when the end of a sentence begins.

3. Coherence

- Coherence refers to the overall sense of unity in a passage.
- Coherence focuses the reader's attention on the specific people, things, and events you are writing about

Coherence

As a reminder, please promptly return the lecture notes you borrowed. Slide the notes under my door if I am not there. I may become agitated if you are late, much like my uncle Chester after several egg nogs on Christmas Eve. Most Christmases I liked to stay up and open my stockings after midnight. Staying up late was exciting and would be repeated a week later at New Year's. So would Uncle Chester's disgraceful behavior.

Cohesion Vs. Coherence

- The previous example is cohesive.
 - Each sentence connects with the next and the previous.
 - Sentences begin with familiar information.
 - Sentences end with new information.
- But the previous example is incoherent.
 - The *topic* of each sentence is different from the previous.
 - Thus, the paragraph lacks focus.

How Coherence is Destroyed

- [you] return the lecture notes. . . .
- [you] slide the notes under my door. . . .
- I may become
- Most Christmases I liked
- Staying up late was exciting
- Uncle Chester

Coherence is Established in Two Ways

- Readers identify the topics of individual sentences clearly.
- Topics of sentences come in a *paragraph*: a coherent group of sentences all clearly related to one point.

“Sometimes I will stay up in my room for a day trying to get two sentences that will flow, that will seem as if they were always there.”

— Maya Angelou

Summary of Key Points

1. Conciseness: Cut repetition.
2. Cohesion: Connect sentences by moving from old to new.
3. Coherence: Create thematic continuity in passages.

The End

“Nobody should suppose that good writing – the kind that says what it means while being pleasant to read – has ever been easy.”

— Jacques Barzun

Resources

- Schedule regular Writing Studio appointments.
- Check “Resources ” at our website, www.uwp.aas.duke.edu/wstudio, for helpful links on style and a list of relevant books in our library.

Books

- *Revising Prose* by Richard Lanham
- *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*
by Joseph M. Williams
- *Style: The Basics of Clarity and Grace*
by Joseph M. Williams
- *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk
and E.B. White

Interested In A More In-Depth Experience?

To sign up for a workshop, go to “Schedule An Appointment” and “Workshop/Group Sign Up” on the Writing Studio’s website:

<http://uwp.aas.duke.edu/wstudio/>