

The NCWU Writing Center

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Style

Style refers to **how you write** and includes **tone** (the attitude conveyed through your writing) and **diction** (the words you choose and how you arrange them). The style you develop will be determined by the topic, purpose, and audience of your writing project, and utilizing an appropriate writing style ensures that your audience understands the meaning you are trying to impart. This handout covers important vocabulary and recommendations for building an effective academic writing style.

Writing Modes

Writing mode refers to the **type of writing** you are doing and its **purpose**. There are four major writing modes—**expository**, **descriptive**, **persuasive**, and **narrative**. In many cases, these modes are combined in a single piece of writing to create different effects.

Expository

Expository writing focuses on **explaining a topic** to the audience. This type of writing can be found in news articles, textbooks, and non-fiction books.

Example: Depictions and stories about dragons appear in mythologies around the world, including Norse and Chinese mythologies.

Persuasive

Persuasive writing focuses on **convincing** the audience to agree with a certain view. This type of writing can be found in academic articles, advertisements, and editorial pieces.

Example: Even if dragons were real, it would be impossible for them to fly. The mass of their bodies would be too heavy for their wings to lift off the ground.

Descriptive

Descriptive writing focuses on getting the audience to **feel an emotion** or **visualize the topic**. This type of writing can be found in novels, poetry, and travel writing.

Example: The dragon's hand-sized scales glistened in the sunlight, and it reared back its head to reveal its crimson underbelly.

Narrative

Narrative writing focuses on **telling a story**. This type of writing can be found in short stories, novels, journalistic writing, and biographies.

Example: The dragon snatched the farmer's sheep from the field and began to fly towards the mountain. Raising her sword into the air, the knight followed close behind.

Tone

Tone refers to the **attitude** conveyed through your writing. Depending on how you write, you may “sound” formal or informal, objective or subjective, sarcastic or serious, happy or angry. Before you begin, you need to determine what tone is appropriate for the type of writing you are doing.

Determining the Appropriate Tone

To determine the appropriate tone, consider the **writing context**:

- **Topic:** What is your paper about?
- **Purpose:** What is the paper trying to accomplish?
- **Audience:** Who is going to read the paper? What tone will they expect?

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For example, if your topic is dragon mythology, your purpose is to entertain, and your audience is children, then you will likely choose a light-hearted tone. If any element(s) of the writing context changes, the tone could also change. For example, if your topic is dragon mythology, your purpose is to explain, and your audience is college students, then your tone will become more serious. If the audience is scholars in the fields of history and mythology, the tone will become more formal.

Conveying Tone

- **Word Choice:** Word choice includes decisions about whether to use jargon, common language, or slang. **Jargon** refers to field-specific language (ex: cardiac surgeon, pathos, litigator). **Common language** refers to language used by laypeople (ex: heart surgeon, emotions, lawyer). **Slang** refers to informal language usually used in speech (ex: doc, the feels, ambulance-chaser). Word choice may also refer to the decision to use longer, more meaningful words instead of a series of short words (ex: remain vs. stay in place).
- **Sentence Length:** Short sentences can “sound” excited or angry. Long sentences can “sound” relaxed and self-assured.
- **Personal Pronouns:** The first person “I” is less formal than third person because it can make statements feel more like opinions. The second person “You” makes the reader feel as though they are being directly addressed. While this is great for creating connections, it can also feel manipulative. The more formal the writing, the less personal it becomes.
- **Consistency:** If the tone does not remain consistent throughout, your purpose and arguments may be unclear, leading to confusion.

Academic tone is the tone professors expect you to use in most course assignments.

This tone has the following characteristics:

- **Formal**
- **Impersonal**
- **Field-specific language**
- **Longer sentences**

Concision

Concision refers to the effective and efficient use of language. When your professor tells you that your writing is “too wordy,” this is what they mean. Below you will find suggestions for ways to improve concision in your writing.

Avoid Repetition and Redundancy

Repetition occurs when you use the same words, phrases, and sentences more than once. **Redundancy** occurs when you repeat information in slightly different language. To avoid these, consider the following as you write:

- Are you making use of variety in word choice and sentence structure?
Example Repetition: He ran through the store. She ran to meet him. They ran outside together.
Example Fix: He ran through the store, and she came to meet him. They left together.
(Adding variety to the verbs and creating a compound sentence make this more interesting.)
- Can you combine this sentence or idea with previous ones?
Example Repetition: The dog jumped the fence. The dog ran down the street.
Example Fix: The dog jumped the fence and ran down the street.
(Because the dog is the subject of both sentences, we can combine them.)

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- Are you restating an idea that you already fully covered?

Example Redundancy: The ornament was lovely. **It was truly beautiful.**

Example Fix: **The ornament was lovely.**

(The second sentence does not add new information. It just uses a different adjective that means the same thing, so it can be removed without affecting the meaning.)

- Is this statement too obvious?

Example Redundancy: **The conclusion** brings us to **the end** of the argument.

Example Fix: **(REMOVE)**

(This sentence would be written in the last paragraph of the paper which is enough to indicate the conclusion without announcing it. Additionally, the reader will know that “conclusion” means “end.”)

Cut Filler

Filler is **unnecessary language** added to bulk up a sentence. Filler includes words, phrases, or clauses that could be removed from a sentence without affecting its meaning. Some words that your professor might ask you to cut include “basically,” “just,” “essentially,” “very,” “that,” “really,” “kind of,” “sort of,” “so,” “in order to,” “with regard to,” “needless to say,” etc.

Example Filler: **For what it’s worth, I think that** you are **perhaps** the most wonderful person **that** I have **ever** met **in my entire life**, and **I just want to say that** you **really** need to meet **with** my sister because you have **so many things** in common.

Example Fix: **You are the most wonderful person I have met, and you need to meet my sister because you have a lot in common.**

Use More Meaningful Words

Rather than using long strings of short words, find a stronger synonym that encompasses their meaning. In English, verbs provide much of the meaning of a sentence, so replace weak verbs “to get,” “to be,” and “to do” with stronger ones.

Example 1: The shop keeper **shouted loudly about** her goods. (8 words)

Example 1: The shop keeper **hawked** her goods. (6 words)

Example 2: I **got tired** lifting those boxes. (6 words)

Example 2: Lifting those boxes **exhausted** me. (5 words)

Use Positive Forms

Writing in the negative requires more words and can be confusing.

Example: I **do not usually forget** to bring my book to class. (11 words)

Example: I **usually remember** to bring my book to class. (9 words)

Descriptions

The purpose of a description is to allow your reader to imagine the thing you are describing. This can be particularly useful when writing a narrative; however, even more formal writing can benefit from good descriptions. Just think about the last instruction manual you had to look at.

Use Nouns and Verbs

Limit your use of adjectives and adverbs when writing a description. While this may seem contradictory—adjectives and adverbs are “descriptive” words, after all—these words can be confusing to your reader.

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Consider this. What do you imagine when you read, “**The big cat ran through the house**”? Are you able to picture the cat in your mind? Maybe you are able to picture a cat, but what size did you picture? Your “big” may not be the same as your classmate’s “big.” Is the cat long or fat? It is difficult to tell from the description provided.

What happens if, instead, you read, “**The cat rolled through the house like a bowling ball**”? Now, you might be able to picture an obese cat rocking on its belly as it moves. This description creates a clearer picture that more readers will be able to share.

Nouns and verbs create stronger descriptions because they give us concrete ideas to work from. Nouns allow you to create comparisons between things the reader knows and the thing being described. Specific verbs (ex: rolled vs. walked) provide clearer explanations of actions and movements.

Avoid Purple Patches

A purple patch is a section of writing that **overdoes the description, distracts from the purpose, and seems out of place** with the surrounding information. For example, the following section would seem strange in a manual on how to build a table:

Example Purple Patch: Take the squirrel grey table leg and adhere it to the tabletop that is flat like a desert mesa.

That’s just weird! To fix a purple patch, simplify. Cut unnecessary description and be more direct.

Example Fix: Take the grey table leg and connect it to the table.

(The specific steps in the process are no longer obscured.)

Purple patches can also occur in writing that is supposed to be descriptive, such as narrative.

Example Purple Patch: Her eyebrows billowed above her azure eyes like storm clouds. The wild curls had never been assaulted by tweezers nor clippers, and she was quick to fend off any hand that dared tame them.

Unless this woman’s eyebrows play a major role in the story, the description feels like too much. The easiest fix is to remove the entire description. If the look of the eyebrows helps the overall description of the woman, a truncated version would be acceptable.

Example Fix: Her eyebrows were like storm clouds.

(The colors and wildness still come through, but they do not overwhelm the reader.)

Clichés

Clichés are **overused words and phrases** that no longer add meaning to your writing and can damage your credibility with your audience. Some students use clichés because they are not sure how to convey their thoughts. In this case, use the cliché as a marker, and come back to it once you have worked through your ideas. Some students use clichés to meet word count. Ironically, replacing the cliché with what you really want to say often does a better job of this.

Examples of Clichés

- In the beginning
- Since the dawn of time
- Good things come to those who wait
- Opposites attract
- Every cloud has a silver lining
- A bad egg
- Actions speak louder than words
- Ignorance is bliss
- Better safe than sorry
- Everything happens for a reason

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How to Fix a Cliché

There are two strategies for fixing a cliché, remove or replace.

- **Remove:** Some clichés can be removed without affecting the meaning of the sentence.
Example Cliché: *Since the dawn of time, dragons have been depicted in the mythologies of various cultures around the world.*
Example Fix: *Dragons have been depicted in the mythologies of various cultures around the world.*
- **Replace:** Others can be fixed by replacing them with more specific information.
 - What do you really mean?
Example Cliché: *Actions speak louder than words.*
Example Fix: *The governor claims to love the environment, but he still hasn't passed the environmental regulations put forward by the committee.*
 - What evidence could you use to replace the cliché?
Example Cliché: *John is a bad egg.*
Example Fix: *John often bullies other children.*

Active vs. Passive Voice

Voice refers to the relationship between the verb and the subject and object of the sentence. Passive voice should be used sparingly; however, it is preferred in fields such as the sciences and technology.

Active Voice

Active voice refers to a sentence that follows standard sentence structure where the subject is at the beginning of the sentence and is followed by the verb and the object.

Subject + Verb + Object

Example: *The dog jumped the fence.*

Example: *My mother watered the lovely little flower by the door.*

Passive Voice

Passive voice refers to a sentence where the object appears at the beginning of the sentence and is followed by a form of the helping verb “to be,” the main verb, and the subject. This form is often used to **emphasize the object** of the sentence or **minimize the subject**.

Object + to be + Verb + (Subject)

Example: *The fence was jumped by the dog.*

Example: *The lovely little flower by the door was watered by my mother.*

Example: *Two mL of water was added to the solution.*

Sometimes the subject of the sentence is left out. This is done when the **subject is not known** or if the writer wants to **keep the subject a secret to avoid blame**.

Example: *The money was stolen.*

Example: *The vase in the living room was broken when we played football in the house.*

(Even though the sentence continues past the verb, the person who broke the vase is not revealed.)

Unless you are using passive voice on purpose to utilize one of its effects, you should only use active voice.

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Sentence Variety

Variety is the spice of writing! If all your sentences are short and simple, your writing will feel jerky, child-like, or even aggressive. If all your sentences are three or more lines long, your reader may lose the thread of your idea. However, you can use your knowledge of sentence structure strategically to improve the flow of your writing and create rhetorically interesting rhythms.

Read the following paragraphs aloud and listen to how the flow and feel change when variety is added.

Example 1

Paragraph without Sentence Variety (all simple sentences)

Yesterday, I went to the beach. The sand was coarse. It was very hot. Waves crashed around my feet. It was like they were trying to drag me in. I jumped with excitement. I love that feeling.

Paragraph with Sentence Variety

Yesterday, I went to the beach. The sand was coarse and hot. Waves crashed around my feet, and it felt like they were trying to drag me in; however, I jumped with excitement because I love that feeling.

Example 2

Paragraph without Sentence Variety (all compound-complex sentences)

As I ran up the beach to meet my family, I noticed a seashell sticking out of the sand, and I stooped down to pick it up because it looked like a good candidate for my collection. When I flipped it over to inspect the other side, I jumped as there was a crab still living in it, so I put the shell back where I found it and continued on my way.

Paragraph with Sentence Variety

As I ran up the beach to meet my family, I noticed a seashell sticking out of the sand. I stooped down to pick it up because it looked like a good candidate for my collection. I flipped it over to inspect the other side, and I jumped. There was a crab still living in it. I put the shell back where I found it and continued on my way.