The Writing Center
Online Help Series

Style Makeover:
Taking your writing to the next level

Mary Noggle
Caldwell Community College & Technical Institute
Hudson, North Carolina
What is style?

- Using clear, effective guidelines
- Personal style

Style comes from Revision
Style through Word Choice

Use concrete, specific words

– Use *Powerful* verbs

– Use *Specific* nouns

– Use *adjectives and adverbs sparingly*

The nouns and verbs should carry the weight of meaning.
Eliminate unnecessary words

I think...
I believe...
I feel ... the best way to end prejudice is through education.
Cut qualifiers/intensifiers

No "a lot," "really," or "very"

Susan gave me a lot of money. Susan gave me twenty dollars.

Tom was really hungry. Tom was famished.

Ann is very pregnant. Ann is pregnant.
Avoid "There is," "There are," "There was," "There were"

There are many sentences that can be strengthened with little effort.
Avoid "is when," "is where"

- **S+LV+PN**
  (Subject, Linking Verb, Predicate Noun)

  Spring is my favorite season.

- **S+LV+PAdj**
  (Subject, Linking Verb, Predicate Adjective)

  Spring is beautiful.

- **S+LV+ADV**
  (Subject, Linking Verb, Adverb)

  Spring is when the flowers bloom.

  Flowers bloom in the spring.
Avoid "is when," "is where"

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  (Subject, Linking Verb, Predicate Noun)
  
  \[\text{Spring is my favorite season.}\]

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  (Subject, Linking Verb, Adverb)

  Spring is when the flowers bloom.

  Flowers bloom in the spring.
Be careful using "this," "that," "these," and "those" without a noun following

This is magic.

I can’t go for that.

These are made for walking.

Those kept me alive.
Be careful using "this," "that," "these," and "those" without a noun following.

This moment is magic.

I can’t go for that behavior.

These boots are made for walking.

Those nights kept me alive.
Use “that” for things and “who” for people

The man who repaired the car that I bought said to sell the clunker.
Avoid "thing" in all forms "anything, something, everything"

I packed everything in my suitcase for the trip.
I packed my clothes in my suitcase for the trip.

We feared something had gone wrong with the plane.
We feared the engine had failed on the plane.

I was so afraid that I couldn’t think of anything to say.
I was so afraid that I couldn’t think of the words to say.
Watch that dirty little word "it"

It said in the travel log that it crawled out of the ocean carrying it in one hand while stroking the water with it in the other hand.
Watch that dirty little word "it"

It said in the travel log that it crawled out of the ocean carrying it in one hand while stroking the water with it in the other hand.

The captain said in his travel log that the sea monster crawled out of the ocean carrying the lifeless body in one hand while stroking the water with a piece of the broken ship in the other hand.
Avoid Jargon, Clichés, and Inflated language

• **Jargon:** The specialized language of a professional, occupational, or other group, often meaningless to outsiders.
  
  – *Example:* medical jargon - Bilateral probital hematoma  
  layman's term - Black eye

• **Clichés:** a trite, stereotyped expression; a sentence or phrase, usually expressing a popular or common thought or idea, that has lost originality, ingenuity.
  
  – *Example:* Cut to the chase

• **Inflated Language:** puffed-up, important sounding word or words to give commonplace things an elevated appearance or description.
  
  – *Example:* negative patient care outcome = the patient died.
Style through Word Choice

Never use a long word when a short one will do. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.

–George Orwell
Use shorter words rather than longer ones

**Instead of:**
- make adjustments
- give instructions to
- make mention of
- in order to
- in the majority of cases
- is reflective of
- can be compared to
- is capable of

**Try:**
- Adjust
- Instruct
- Mention
- To
- Usually
- Reflect
- Resembles
- Can
Style through Sentences

*Add variety of sentence length*

- **Short** sentences have the *greatest impact* especially when *surrounded* by *long* sentences.
- Avoid a series of short, choppy sentences
- Avoid a series of long, rambling sentences
Style through Sentences

*Vary your sentence openers*

- Open with a descriptive word (a modifier)
  
  *Angrily,* he retorted a quick “No.”
Style through Sentences

*Vary your sentence openers*

• Open with a descriptive phrase (a modifier)

  *As the evening grew dim, the scene was barely visible.*
Style through Sentences

*Vary your sentence openers*

- Open with a dependent clause (a word group with a subject and verb that cannot stand alone as a sentence)

*When the two awoke the next morning, the dog was gone.*
Style through Sentences

*Vary your sentence openers*

- Open with to and the verb (an infinitive)

To assure the children were safe, we locked all the doors to the cabin.
Style through Sentences

Vary your sentence openers

• Open with the subject.

*John and Michael* are best friends.
Style through Sentences

*Vary the placement of transitions*

• **Beginning**
  – Example: *Accordingly*, the government’s health care plan has caused controversy among its citizens.

• **Middle**
  – Example: Canada, *on the other hand*, has had a government-run health care system for years.

• **End**
  – Example: Many US citizens remain fearful of the change, *however.*
Limit your use of "be" verbs--"am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been

1. Get rid of them.
Oftentimes, the construction is + ing is unnecessary progressive tense.

(no) The company is manufacturing overseas.

(yes) The company manufactures overseas.
Limit your use of "be" verbs--"am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been

2. Change the verb.

(no) Good communication skills is an asset to the company.

(yes) Good communication skills benefit the company.
Limit your use of "be" verbs--"am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been

3. Flip the sentence.
Make the predicate the subject (be sure to include the “who”).

(no) Recognition is given by the supervisor for quality workmanship.

(yes) The supervisor gives recognition for quality workmanship.
Limit your use of "be" verbs--"am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been

4. Make the predicate adjective an adjective for the subject and add to the sentence.
(sometimes done by joining preceding or seceding sentences).

(no) The company is top-notch.

(yes) The top-notch company provides many benefits for its employees.
Limit your use of "be" verbs--"am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been

5. Make the predicate noun an appositive and add to the sentence (sometimes done by joining preceding or seceding sentences).

(no) Microsoft Corporation is a fortune five hundred company.

(yes) Microsoft Corporation, a fortune five hundred company, continues to reel in the profits.
For more information...

The Writing Center
writingcenter@cccti.edu

Caldwell Campus
828.726.2722

Watauga Campus
282.297.2185 ext. 5292

Online Writing Center
828.726.2376

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