

Unit 4: Academic Style 2 – Improving Readability

Turk and Kirkham (*Effective Writing*, 1989, Chapter 7) argue that, ‘writing that makes excessive demands on the reader is not effective writing’. The purpose of academic writing should be to communicate clearly and accurately. However, as a result of restricting itself to passive, roundabout, impersonal constructions, academic writing may stretch the readers’ patience and decoding skills, and clarity may not be achieved. This unit continues the work on academic style started in Unit 3. In particular, it considers factors that influence readability.

First ask yourself, are you writing to impress or to communicate? Your aim should be to transfer your ideas and information to other people. If they cannot understand your writing easily, then you are failing in your task. As Matthew Arnold famously recommended: ‘Have something to say and say it as clearly as you can. That is the only secret of style’. (Quoted in Russell, G.W.E., *Collections and Recollections*, London: Smith, Elder & Co, 1898, Chapter 13).

Efficient writing makes reading as easy as possible. This unit looks at several factors which increase the readability of a text, and which you should be aware of. However, you should also be aware of the stylistic conventions of your department/subject area, and of any journals in which you intend to publish your work.

1. Signposting

A good writer will help the reader by making use of headings, words and expressions as markers which can indicate what will (or will not) come next in the text, where certain aspects of the work can be found, and if the text is divided into a number of points.

Example:

This article will attempt to analyse the period 1956-1969, and show just how the history of statistics can be used to analyse the business of governance.

Example:

The final section of the article then sets out a case study of the Iranian Revolution.

Example:

In the concluding section, we discuss the implications of the findings for government and for future research.

Example:

One part of the assumption of rationality, discussed in Chapter 1, was that people tend to have reasonably simple objectives.

Example:

With reference to the experience over the last thirty years of the European Development Funds (EDF) in promoting livestock production in Africa, a number of

*conclusions can be drawn. **First**, despite huge investment by the EDF and other donors, developing countries in Africa are more dependent on imports than ever before. **Second**, this is due more to the implementation of inappropriate policies than to lack of funding. **Third**, the technical knowledge that already exists has not been applied to the extent that it should have been.*

2. Breaking up long sentences and varying the length of sentences.

1. Sentence length and complexity: too much information

A reader can only absorb a certain amount of information in a single unit. It is therefore essential not to overwhelm the reader by introducing too much information in each sentence. Information is more readable and easy to assimilate if it is presented as several units.

2. Long sentences, short sentences, sentences of varying lengths

A common feature of academic writing is the joining of strings of ideas of approximately equal weight to form long compound sentences. This sometimes produces unmanageable chunks that readers cannot absorb comfortably. Better readability is produced by the use of comparatively simple sentences, of varying lengths, and consisting of a main statement plus one or two qualifications. However, going to the other extreme of producing a staccato effect of short, simple sentences is also undesirable.

3. Information load: subjects separated from verbs

We must always keep in mind the information load that our readers will be able to accept in each sentence. Since academics are trained to be cautious in their observations, they tend to attach conditions and reservations to statements. This may result in complex sentences with subjects well-separated from main verbs. Readers may not be able to hold comfortably in mind the amounts of interrelated information they are given in single statements.

In summary, if sentences are overlong, the reader's short-term memory cannot retain all of the words. Therefore, the reader will need to go back to the beginning of the sentence to start again. If all of your sentences are long, this puts great strain on the reader. This often results in incomplete understanding of the text, or incorrect understanding of the content. It may also result in your work not being read.

Example:

*Until relatively recently, the idea of focusing on the concept of 'citizenship' in a British context would have seemed rather eccentric to both historians and political theorists alike, for in the immediate post-war decades, in the 1950s and early 1960s, despite the publication in 1950 of arguably the most famous and influential of all British works on the subject (T. H. Marshall's *Citizenship and Social Class*), politicians and intellectuals largely avoided the term, mainly because of the perceived unity and homogeneity of British society that seemed to be the lasting legacy of the Second World War, and which many saw as being guaranteed by (relatively) full*

employment and a welfare state that offered genuinely universal benefits for the first time. (118 words)

This sentence above is a poorly constructed sentence. Although the content of the sentence is not difficult to understand, the problem is that the reader's short-term memory cannot retain all of this information. Therefore, when the reader comes to the end of the sentence they have to reread the first part again. Too many such sentences cause strain on the reader and result in impenetrable text.

The following example shows what can be done to make the sentence more reader-friendly.

Example:

*Until relatively recently, the idea of focusing on the concept of 'citizenship' in a British context would have seemed rather eccentric to both historians and political theorists alike. For, in the immediate post-war decades, in the 1950s and early 1960s, despite the publication in 1950 of arguably the most famous and influential of all British works on the subject (T. H. Marshall's *Citizenship and Social Class*) politicians and intellectuals largely avoided the term. This was mainly because of the perceived unity and homogeneity of British society that seemed to be the lasting legacy of the Second World War, and which many saw as being guaranteed by (relatively) full employment and a welfare state that offered genuinely universal benefits for the first time. (120 words)*

This is better. We now have three sentences of varying length (28, 43 and 49 words respectively). However, the third sentence is still quite long and it would be possible to divide this information into two sentences:

Example:

This was mainly because of the perceived unity and homogeneity of British society that seemed to be the lasting legacy of the Second World War. Many saw these features as being guaranteed by (relatively) full employment and a welfare state that offered genuinely universal benefits for the first time. (25 and 24 words)

Although the information in the versions of this text remains the same, a cumbersome and overlong sentence of 118 words has been broken down into four separate sentences of 28, 43, 25 and 24 words.

3. Avoiding excessive nominalisation

Avoiding excessive nominalisation means that you should try to reduce the number of abstract nouns (things that are not physical objects), such as 'investigation', 'calculation', and 'interpretation'. When appropriate, you should replace these nouns with their verb form. Too many nominalisations result in overuse of the passive (see 4 below). This often produces text which is dull and which contains overlong sentences. Even though it may sometimes be useful to use nouns to express ideas concisely and to link sentences in academic writing, it is better style to avoid *excessive* use of nouns as this makes the text more difficult for the reader to process.

Example:

A recommendation has been made by the Student Union that the grant be accepted.

Change the noun 'recommendation' to the verb 'recommend':

The Student Union has recommended that the grant be accepted.

Example:

The conclusion that the writing had some connection with the church at Edessa was published by Sellers (1945).

Change the nouns to verbs

Sellers (1945) concluded that the writing was connected with the church at Edessa.

Example:

Publication of the recordings selected from the archives is undertaken by the English Folk Dance and Song Society.

Change to:

The English Folk Dance and Song Society publishes the recordings selected from the archives.

Example:

Researchers undertaking the analysis of qualitative research data using a computer need to describe what the program does in the analysis process.

Write:

Researchers analysing qualitative research data using a computer need to describe what the program does in the analysis process.

Excessive use of nouns often accompanies overuse of weak, general purpose verbs, such as 'accomplish', 'conduct', 'occur' or 'perform'. Whenever possible, you should try to avoid general purpose verbs.

Example:

The installation of the new NHS computer system will be accomplished in three weeks' time.

Change to:

The new NHS computer system will be installed in three weeks' time.

Example:

Prior to repeating the survey, it was necessary for us to conduct a check on the availability of all the volunteers.

Change to:

Before we repeated the survey, it was necessary to check the availability of all the volunteers.

4. Avoiding unnecessary use of the passive

Using passive structures means that the common order of a sentence is reversed; the subject and the object of the original (active) sentence change places, or the subject disappears.

Examples:

For this survey, fifty subjects were recruited using email advertisements requesting full-time students from different language groups. This is a passive sentence.

For this survey, the authors recruited fifty subjects using email advertisements requesting full-time students from different language groups. This is an active sentence (impersonal).

For this survey, we recruited fifty subjects using email advertisements requesting full-time students from different language groups. This is an active sentence (personal).

Note: Personal Forms

In much academic writing, the passive voice is preferred to the active as it depersonalises the writing. It removes 'I', 'we', 'you' and focuses the reader on the information rather than on the subject carrying out the action: emphasis is placed on the process. However, in some journals it is now acceptable to use personalised language such as 'we' or 'our'.

Important note:

In your thesis your supervisors may tell you not to use 'I' or 'my'. However, in some disciplines the use of 'I' appears to be acceptable in articles and the introductory sections of dissertations.

Examples:

In this article, we study patterns of intergenerational mobility in modern China. We use data from the Social Structure in Modern China Survey, which was conducted in 1988 among urban and rural populations of two municipalities and four provinces in mainland China.

Yuan Cheng and Jianzhong Dai, Intergenerational Mobility in Modern China, *European Sociological Review* (1995), 11, 17-35.

In this paper, we attempt to model the effects of real wage resistance, comparative wage justice and profit-sharing principles, using unit record data from household surveys in Australia from 1989 to 2000.

Fry, T. R. L. and Webster, E., Conflict inflation: estimating the contributions to wage inflation in Australia during the 1990s, *Cambridge Journal of Economics* (2006), 30 (2), 227-234.

I should make it clear, however, that this is neither an evaluation, nor an overview of a development project. It is not a commentary on appropriate approaches or strategies, solutions to problems, success or failure. I am not concerned here with 'best practice' or lessons for replication. Rather, my concern is with the relationship between policy models of all kinds and the practices they are supposed to generate.

Mosse, D., Is Good Policy Unimplementable? Reflections on the Ethnography of Aid Policy and Practice, *Development and Change*, (September 2004), 35 (4), 639-671.

The main problem with the passive is that it can lead to overlong and imprecise statements. If many sentences in a text are overlong and imprecise then the whole text becomes difficult to read. You should also be aware that changing from one structure to another changes the focus of the sentence.

Example:

Leonardo da Vinci's posthumous reputation is discussed by Turner (1993). (passive, 9 words– Leonard's posthumous reputation).

Turner (1993) discusses Leonardo da Vinci's posthumous reputation. (active, 7 words – emphasis on Turner).

Also, changing from one structure to another can change the meaning.

Example:

I do not accept X's view that....(A clear, active statement.)

One cannot accept X's view that.... (An active sentence, but this suggests that both the writer (and others) cannot accept the view)

X's view cannot be accepted....(by whom?)

You should use an active form rather than a passive form if you can do so without changing the meaning or emphasis of what you want to say. However, this does not imply that you have to use 'I', 'we', or 'you'.

Example:

The Nigerian export/import data for 1996 are shown in Table 1.

Passive

Table 1 shows the Nigerian export/import data for 1996.

Active

Example:

None of the relevant literature is addressed in this study and most of the important topics are ignored.

Passive.

This study addresses none of the relevant literature and ignores most of the important topics.

Active.

Example:

It has been argued by Descartes and Gilbert Ryle that the existence of minds other than our own is dubious.

Passive.

Descartes and Gilbert Ryle have argued that the existence of minds other than our own is dubious.

Active.

5. Avoiding excessive use of impersonal expressions

Some forms of the verb 'be' produce weak sentences. Again, this is often because they result in passive sentences (see above). Other forms are used with the meaningless subjects 'it' and 'there' at the beginning of clauses/sentences. You can frequently rewrite any sentence which begins 'It', 'There is/are', 'There was/were' to make it clearer and more reader-friendly.

Example:

It is fair to say that setting up a system of teaching and research that is better able to produce more original and creative researchers and research results is, alongside teaching innovations, one of the pillars of university reform.

The style used here can be improved.

Setting up a system of teaching and research that is better able to produce more original and creative researchers and research results is, alongside teaching innovations, one of the pillars of university reform.

This is an improved style.

Example:

There clearly exists a culture of continuous improvement throughout the higher education sector.

The style used here can be improved.

A culture of continuous improvement clearly exists throughout the higher education sector.

This is an improved style.

Example:

In addition to the importance of data on families and households at a national level, in recent years there has been an increasing interest in the international comparability of social statistics.

The style used here can be improved.

In addition to the importance of data on families and households at a national level, in recent years interest has increased in the international comparability of social statistics.

This is an improved style.

Example:

There is no evidence supporting the hypothesis that the world economy was in any way integrated prior to 1492, despite the claims made in this article.

The style used here can be improved.

Despite the claims made in this article, no evidence supports the hypothesis that the world economy was in any way integrated prior to 1492.

OR:

No evidence supports the hypothesis that the world economy was in any way integrated prior to 1492, despite the claims made in this article.

This is an improved style.