

## Clarity

“Clarity in writing depends on more than grammar. Clarity results at least as much from critical thinking, logical development, and exact diction as it does from correct grammar. However, grammatical slips can mar what would otherwise be clear writing.” – *Hodges’ Harbrace Handbook*

- **Go from old information to new information**
  - Introduce your readers to the "big picture" first by giving them information they already know. Then they can link what's familiar to the new information you give them. As that new information becomes familiar, it too becomes old information that can link to newer information.
- **Articles, conjunctions, or prepositions are sometimes necessary for clarity**
  - Omitting an article (*a*, *an*, or *the*) can confuse your audience.
    - The following sentence is ambiguous. It is unclear whether one or two people stand nearby.
      - (unclear) A friend and helper stood nearby.
      - (clearer) A friend and a helper stood nearby.
  - When conjunctions or prepositions are omitted, clarity suffers
    - In sentences like the following example, *of* is omitted in speech but never in writing.
      - (speech) We discussed a couple issues at the meeting.
      - (writing) We discussed a couple of issues at the meeting.
    - When a sentence has a compound verb (two verbs linked by a conjunction), you may need to supply a different preposition for each verb to make your meaning clear.
      - (incorrect) I neither believe nor approve of those attitudes.
      - (correct) I neither believe in nor approve of those attitudes.
- **Complete comparisons are needed to convey meaning if it is not provided by the context**
  - Comparisons can be completed by words or phrases later in the sentence, by other sentences in the paragraph, or by context.
    - He is taller than his brother.
    - Most people think television is more violent than it needs to be.
  - Occasionally, an incomplete comparison can be understood by readers.

- Craig is exercising more.
  - However, if there is any chance that a reader could misunderstand a comparison, be sure to make it complete.
    - Craig is exercising more than he did last season.
    - Craig is exercising more than the rest of the team.
- **The intensifiers *so*, *such*, and *too* require a completing phrase or clause**
  - My hair is so long that I must get it cut today.
  - Julian has such a hearty laugh that we all laugh, too.
- When writers approximate speech, they sometimes omit a completing phrase after the intensifier *so*, *such*, or *too* when it is used for emphasis. In academic and professional writing, *so* and *such* are usually considered too informal. Either omit these words or use another intensifier, such as *very*, *unusually*, or *extremely*.
- **Be careful of placement of subordinate clauses**
  - Avoid interrupting the main clause with a subordinate clause if the interruption will cause confusion.
    - (clear – subordinate clause at the end) Industrial spying is increasing rapidly because of the growing use of computers to store and process corporate information.
    - (clear – subordinate clause at the beginning) Because of the growing use of computers to store and process corporate information, industrial spying is increasing rapidly.
    - (unclear – subordinate clause embedded in the middle) Industrial spying, because of the growing use of computers to store and process corporate information, is increasing rapidly.
- **Use active voice**
  - Sentences in active voice are usually easier to understand than those in passive voice because active-voice constructions indicate clearly the performer of the action expressed in the verb. In addition, changing from passive voice to active often results in a more concise sentence.
    - (clear – active) The committee decided to postpone the vote.
    - (unclear – passive) A decision was reached to postpone the vote.
- **Avoid “noun strings”**
  - Try not to string nouns together one after the other because a series of nouns is difficult to understand. One way to revise a string of nouns is to change one noun to a verb.

- (unclear – string of nouns) This report explains our investment growth stimulation projects.
  - (clearer) This report explains our projects to stimulate growth in investments.
- **Avoid overusing the noun form of verbs (“nominalizations”)**
  - (unclear – use of nominalization) The implementation of the plan was successful.
  - (clearer) The plan was implemented successfully.
- **Avoid multiple negatives**
  - Use affirmative forms rather than several negatives to make a sentence easier to understand.
    - (unclear – multiple negatives, passive) Less attention is paid to commercials that lack human interest stories than to other kinds of commercials.
    - (clearer) People pay more attention to commercials with human interest stories than to other kinds of commercials.
- **Avoid unclear pronoun references!**
  - Be sure that the pronouns you use refer clearly to a noun in the current or previous sentence. If the pronoun refers to a noun that has been implied but not stated, you can clarify the reference by explicitly using that noun.
    - (unclear pronoun reference) With the spread of globalized capitalism, American universities increasingly follow a corporate fiscal model, tightening budgets and hiring temporary contract employees as teachers. This has prompted faculty and adjunct instructors at many schools to join unions as a way of protecting job security and benefits.
    - (clearer) With the spread of globalized capitalism, American universities increasingly follow a corporate fiscal model, tightening budgets and hiring temporary contract employees as teachers. This trend has prompted faculty and adjunct instructors at many schools to join unions as a way of protecting job security and benefits.