

## Introduction

Learning to communicate effectively and efficiently is extremely important for your current role as a student and for your future career. With few exceptions the first things a potential employer sees from you are your résumé and cover letter. How effectively you communicate your abilities and potential will determine whether you're hired or not. A major part of effective communication is efficiency, which is what the following lessons cover.

## Getting to the Point

You've all been told that businesspeople are very busy and don't have time to extrapolate your intended meanings—they want you to get to the point! A good friend of mine, a software sales rep, claims that he doesn't read e-mails over four lines. Another friend of mine won't read any memos that are more than a page. Is there something wrong with these two friends? No. They're just busy professionals who don't have the time to work through dense prose.

As students you have the wonderful opportunity to slow down and absorb lots of information from the various textbooks and readings you're assigned. You can, for instance, sit back in the tub with a copy of *I, Robot* and contemplate life, the universe, and everything...well, almost. Anyway, the prose lessons I have for you are guidelines and aren't unbreakable rules. Remember, context is going to be a major factor in any revision (or writing) that you do.

## Plain Language

Don't think of these revisions as "proper" or "grammatically correct"; they're part of a style. Plain language is just what it says it is: language that's straightforward. When an audience reads a plain language style, they immediately understand the point of a communication. They don't have to labor over each word or phrase in order to *try* to come up with the author's point—it's plain; it's obvious.

Plain language is such a popular topic that there's even a movement to bring more plain language to communication. In fact, there was a law passed in the late 1970s that pushed to have all government documents written in a plain language style. Obviously, the law wasn't observed very closely.

One thing to understand is that plain language doesn't mean "no detail." Your prose doesn't become telegraphic or devoid of important information when you use the style. Instead, your prose becomes more efficient—you can communicate in fewer words.

## Why Prose Revision

Being able to write efficiently and effectively is one of the most important skills to have as a future professional. Managers and supervisors have been complaining for quite some time that college graduates just can't write well. Now, it's typical of the older generation to claim that "things were much better in the past," but surveys show that they think more time should be spent on writing.

This section deals with making your prose move faster. I assume that you have a good foundation in Standard Edited American English—proper grammar and syntax. The goal is to help you write with your audience in mind. Of course, you should always write with your audience in mind, but what I mean is write so that they don't have to struggle to find the meaning of your communications. Remember, the best thing you can hope for when you write a bad message (aside from the audience reading your mind) is that the receiver will contact you and ask for clarification. Carrying out your assumed (but false) message may actually be worse than doing nothing at all.

Often discussions of Plain Language come around to writers claiming that their language will suffer if they can't "say what they want the way they want to say it." I'll let you in on a little secret: rarely does a writer, like a novelist or poet, sit down and write without some editor coming in and *pruning* his or her work. Writers consider their words to be their children—precious little beings that they can't abort unless the welfare of the writer is at stake. Long-windedness has been the downfall of many a writer. Don't look at the following examples as destroying your authorial voice; look at it as enhancing your prose or clarifying your communications.

Unclear: It is of the utmost importance that you, the reader, a Mr. Johann G. Vonstrügum, take the time to inquire about your recent credit card purchases in order to determine the validity of numerous transactions that may not have been authorized.

Clearer: We suspect an unauthorized user made recent purchases with your credit card.

Normally, I give the example and go through the revision step by step before offering the revision in its entirety. However, I want to show you this lesson's goal immediately with an actual example. The original example is an enormous 41-word sentence, and the revision is a nice, efficient 11-word statement that gets right to the point. Before we go into the revision, think about which *sounds* better? Some people believe the original is better because an over-affected style signals a writer's learnedness. Also, the original seems to follow legal writing (often called *legalese*), which has the tendency to be longwinded prose using big, scary words.

The revision may not appeal to some because it's, well, too efficient. It comes right out and quickly states its intentions—"someone has used your credit card!" Because philosophers and other long-winded writers, who are considered the greatest minds ever, use big words and complex syntax, readers often feel that good prose is difficult prose. That isn't always true. For instance, philosophers like Michel Foucault or Jacques Derrida aren't just writing about simple

ideas in complex ways; they're writing about very complex issues (in a language other than English sometimes) that are just hard to understand. Some issues are just difficult to comprehend, so, of course, they're difficult to describe. This difficulty shouldn't be a part of your writing. Unless your business is an existential detective firm (like the one in *I ♥ Huckabees*), you shouldn't be writing about the meaning of life or other overly complex philosophical matters.

Let's start with the basics of prose revision. The following is a list of ways to eliminate an overly verbose style:

- 1) Change passive to active voice: put the agent in its correct place.
- 2) Limit prepositional phrases: don't add prepositions that drag a sentence on unnecessarily.
- 3) Get to the point: get rid of useless opening phrases or appositives.
- 4) Limit to be verb forms: use action verbs instead of stale *am, is, are, was, were* terms.
- 5) Avoid nominalizations: free the perfectly good verbs hidden in *-tion* nouns.

### Passive Voice

Sentences in passive voice aren't as lively as active voice sentences. In a passive voice sentence, the action is killed by having the agent of a sentence eliminated or added in with a preposition to the end of the sentence. In order to understand passive voice, we need to reexamine the basic structure of a sentence. All sentences have a subject and a predicate. The predicate contains the verb and everything else in the sentence. For instance,

Congress raised taxes.

is a complete sentence. The subject, *Congress*, performed an action, *raised*, on the direct object, *taxes*. Since *Congress* performed the action, it is considered the agent of a sentence—the thing doing the doing. Active voice sentences always have the agent in the subject position. Take a look at the alternative passive voice construction of the above sentence:

Taxes were raised by Congress.

Notice that the subject is no longer *Congress* but *taxes*—the thing “raised.” Technically, this is a grammatically correct sentence, but passive voice constructions aren't always the most efficient sentences. Although you should avoid these passive voice constructions, you should also know when they're appropriate. If we remove the agent from the sentence, here's what we have:

Taxes were raised.

By whom? Well, that's the benefit of passive voice—you can have agentless prose. Obviously, Congress (or anyone raising taxes) would like the passive voice because it can shield them from blame. There are times when passive voice isn't a form of chicanery, though. What if the agent isn't important or unknown? In that case using passive voice is your best option.

Consider a much longer passive voice sentence:

The file was delivered to the office of Mr. Harrison by Jerome.

Hmmm...wouldn't this be better:

Jerome delivered the file to the office of Mr. Harrison.

It certainly is. But what if we don't care about Jerome's delivery, and we just want to emphasize that *the file* got delivered? After all, *the file* is the most important piece of information in the sentence, so

The file was delivered to the office of Mr. Harrison.

is perfectly fine. The passive voice also comes in handy if you're trying to communicate that something should be done, but you don't know or don't want to say who should do it. For instance,

The database should be updated weekly.

By whom? Well, if you don't know, you very well can't include that bit of information. Your goal should just be to eliminate all unnecessary passive voice constructions.

### Limiting Prepositional Phrases

In an effort to have more efficient prose, we'll want to limit the number of prepositional phrases tacked onto our sentences. Let's return to a sentence from earlier:

The file was delivered to the office of Mr. Harrison by Jerome.

Let's care about Jerome in this example; he'll be accountable for the delivery. First of all, we need to get Jerome into the natural agent position as the sentence's subject. It's an easy move and makes the sentence active:

Jerome delivered the file to the office of Mr. Harrison.

The *by Jerome* in the previous example was just added to the sentence as opposed to having Jerome the main player. The best sentences (excluding artistic, poetic styles, which can't be taught and aren't exactly necessary for professional writing) have the subject and verb as close together as possible; we can't get closer than *Jerome delivered*. However, we still have a lengthy phrase—*the office of Mr. Harrison*. Can't we just say

Jerome delivered the file to Mr. Harrison's office.

If we weren't meant to use possessives in English, they wouldn't have given us 'ses. Sometimes readers think that lengthening prose with prepositional phrases sounds better. I'm not exactly

sure why, but it may have something to do with ornate, ceremonial prose we hear at special occasions. For instance, the following is a graduation style:

I hereby declare at this Noon hour on the eighth day of the fifth month in the year of nineteen hundred ninety-eight that the students before us by the recommendation of the faculty and by the power of the Board of Regents are to have the degree of Bachelor from our school.

Yikes! Remember, graduations (and Presidential Inaugurations) are where we hear long-winded prose. There is no reason May 8<sup>th</sup>, 1998 should take 15 words to say.

### Get to the Point

Readers don't want to read unnecessary openers or useless phrases when they're looking for information. The key here is *useless*, not *all* or *every* opening or transitional phrase. Opening phrases and transitional adverbials have their place. For instance, the transitional phrase *for instance* tells the reader that an example is about to come—it has its place. What we want to avoid are the openers that just delay a communication's important information. Here are a few examples:

This letter I am writing to you is in reference to...

I would like to take the time to write you a letter about...

It is important that I contact you in order to solve...

The above delayed-entry openers do nothing for your prose. They may look harmless enough all by themselves with plenty of white space around them, but they're really nasty little creations. The first two openers are obviously in a letter. Well, why mention you're writing a letter in the opening of a letter that you've addressed to a person (assuming you've used a proper business letter or memo format)? If the reader is reading a letter, doesn't the reader know it? Get right to the point:

I am writing in reference to the available accountant position advertised in last week's...

I recently bought a plasma TV from your University City store...

The third example above might be in any type of communication. Instead of saying what you're doing, get right to why you're writing. It's hard sometimes to state immediately what we want because it seems rude to be so direct (yet many people with that belief still order servers and other service employees around as if they were royalty who demand attention). Only in rare cases, which we'll discuss later, do we not want to be direct. Most professional communication should be direct and to the point.

Other phrases have their place, too, even though they don't support the action of a sentence. For instance, appositives are words or phrases that describe something in an aside fashion:

Frank-n-Furter, the alien leader, who kidnaps Brad and Janet, is not really a bad guy.

Above we have an appositive for Frank-n-Furter—*the alien leader*. Depending on the context of our communication, we may or may not want to include appositives. Use appositives when you think your audience will need the extra information. For instance,

George W. Bush, the 43<sup>rd</sup> president of the United States, will be in Charlotte on Friday, which will cause major traffic delays.

If you are writing for a history textbook, mentioning that George W. Bush is the 43<sup>rd</sup> president would probably be warranted. However, in the context of the above sentence—a sentence warning commuters to call in sick on Friday—the appositive is unnecessary.

### Limit to be Verb Forms

I want to stress that there is no universal way to get rid of *to be* verbs, so you shouldn't think that you have to eliminate all of them. You mainly want to remove them if a better active verb is available. The worst ones are those that follow *this*, *that*, and *there*:

This is the time to mention that there are important things to discuss.

That is the place where we will be filming.

There are normally supposed to be six guards on duty at all times.

Let's consider how necessary the underlined *to be* forms are. The entire first example is probably unnecessary. Why not just get right to what's important. If the time's now, then get to it! The second example would be ok if the speaker were pointing to a location, but, as written communication, it's not needed. The third example can be revised many ways depending on the context, but the *there are* can easily be cut out. The *to be*, however, seems to work. Here are the possible revisions for the three examples:

We should discuss some important things.

We'll start filming Friday at the Studio.

Normally, six guards need to be on duty at all times.

Remember, you don't have to remove all *to be* forms, so use your best judgment. The above revisions might not seem that important when viewed out of context, but they will help speed up long communications with multiple sentences.

## Avoid Nominalizations

Finally, in an effort to strengthen verb-driven prose, we need to free verbs that are trapped in nouns. A nominalization is a verb that has been changed into a noun; in other words, a writer limited the action of a perfectly natural verb by hiding it in a noun. Nominalizations usually have the suffix *-tion*. Again, sometimes they're appropriate, but try to limit them. Too many nominalizations make your prose seem overly technical and too full of jargon. The following examples are sentences with nominalizations:

Cliff made the interpolation that his not having a job is that no one will hire such an old man.

There needs to be a determination made on our financial problems for our investors.

I've come to the realization that I am not compatible with this company.

The underlined words above are all nominalizations that have trapped perfectly good verbs. The first example has Cliff *making* an interpolation. Couldn't he just interpolate? How about *rationalize* or *think*? The second example is typical; for some reason most people have to *make* a determination instead of just *determining* or *doing*. Also, the sentence is passive, but we can assume the speaker is part of the group that needs to determine a course of action. The last example hides the verb *realize*. Freeing the trapped verbs improves the examples:

Cliff thinks no one will hire him because he's too old.

We must determine what we'll do about our financial problems.

I realize I don't want to work here anymore.

Remember, you can't get rid of all nominalizations, but limiting them will greatly improve your prose. It takes time to alter your style especially if you've been writing in an officious non-Plain Language style. However, don't give up. Consider all the revision techniques above each time you revise, and eventually they may come automatically.

## Euphemisms

These are polite (or ridiculous) ways of saying things that may offend others. They may also be terms that exaggerate or muddle a subject. For instance, the following are a small selection of typical euphemistic expressions:

Euphemism	Meaning
Collateral damage	Civilian casualties
Unintended landing procedure	Plane crash
Passed away	Died
Alternative lifestyle	Relationships contrary to heteronormative ones