

## Style

### What this handout is about

This handout will help you recognize potential problems in your writing style and learn to correct them.

### What do we mean by style?

Have you ever wondered what your instructors mean when they write “wordy” or “awk” in the margins of your paper? Do you sometimes sense that your sentences could be stronger, clearer, shorter, or more effective? Do you often feel that you know what you mean but do not know how to say it? If you sometimes get feedback from your instructors that you need to “tighten your prose” or “look at your word choice,” you may need to work on your writing **style**—the way you put together a sentence or group of sentences.

Part of the problem with style is that it’s subjective. Different readers have different ideas about what constitutes good writing style, and so do different instructors and different academic departments. For example, passive voice is generally more acceptable in the sciences than in the humanities. You may have an instructor who keeps circling items in your paper and noting “word choice” or “awkward” and another who comments only on content. Worse yet, some of what readers identify as writing problems may technically be grammatically correct. A sentence can be wordy and still pass all the rules in the grammar handbooks. This fact may make it harder for you to see what’s wrong, and it may make you more likely to think that the instructor is picky or out to get you when you read her comments. In fact, the instructor probably just cares about your development as a writer. She wants you to see what she thinks interferes with your argument and learn to express your ideas more directly, elegantly, and persuasively.

### Say what you mean

First, remember that your goal in academic writing is not to sound intelligent, but to get your intelligent point across. You may be reading complicated textbooks and articles, and even when they don’t make sense to you, they all sound smart. So when you have to write a paper, you may try to imitate this type of writing. But sometimes when you imitate the style, you miss the most important goal—communicating and being understood. Your instructor can’t read your mind—she can only read your paper. And if she can’t understand what you are saying, she’s going to have trouble giving you credit for it. Remember that the most important goal in every paper is to get your point across as straightforwardly as possible. (See our handout on argument if you need more help understanding why getting your point across is important.)

### Say it in the appropriate tone

Beware too of the opposite problem: writing exactly like you speak to your friends over lunch at Lenoir. We’ve written this pamphlet in a chatty, friendly style, hoping that you’ll read it and think, “This isn’t such a painful way to learn about style.” Ours may not be the appropriate style for an academic paper. Some instructors may think it’s okay to say “capitalism is so lame” or “the awesome thing about the Balkans is...,” but most won’t. When in doubt, be conservative, and don’t think that because a discipline is “artsy” or “out there” that instructors in that discipline want you to write like that.

This caution doesn’t mean you should write all your sentences in a choppy, obvious, “see Jane run” style. It just means that you should make sure that your instructor isn’t distracted from what you are trying to say by how you are saying it.

### How to improve

If you learn how to recognize matters of style in your writing, you will have more control over your writing—the way someone reads your paper will be a result of choices you have made. If those choices are deliberate, you’ll have more control over how the reader reacts to your argument. So let’s look at what instructors often perceive as the biggest style “crimes.” You probably don’t have trouble with all of these, so focus your attention on those issues most relevant to your own writing. First we’ll explain some common, style-related writing problems, then we’ll show you some handy tips for finding them, and finally we’ll work on correcting them in your revision process. (That’s right: at first you may have to include a revision devoted entirely to style in your writing process, at least until you get used to recognizing and correcting these issues as you write.)

## Wordiness

This term is used to cover a couple of style problems that involve using more words than you absolutely need to say something. Especially when we talk, we use a lot of little “filler” words that don’t actually have anything to add to the meaning of our sentences. (The previous sentence has several examples—see if you can take five words out of it without losing any of its meaning.) In writing, these filler words and phrases become more obvious and act as delays in getting the reader to your point. If you have enough delays in your sentence, your readers might get frustrated. They might even start skimming your paper, which seems a shame after all of your efforts to communicate with them.

Your wordiness may derive from a problem unrelated to your writing style: uncertainty about your topic, lack of a developed argument, or lack of evidence. If you're not sure what you want or have to say, you may have trouble saying it. As you struggle to find what you mean or play with a vague idea or concept, you may write garbled or rambling sentences. If this happens to you, it doesn't mean that you are a "bad" writer or that you have a "bad" writing style or "bad" ideas. It simply indicates that you are using writing as a way to think—to discover your point. It's okay to let yourself think on the page and write to discover precisely what you mean. Taking thirty minutes (or more) to let yourself write and clarify your point for yourself may save you lots of time later. Write to yourself until you can quickly explain to a friend what you are writing about, why you believe it, and what evidence supports your position. Then, sit down to write your paper with your reader in mind. Note: Some writers, in an effort to make a page limit, will be wordy on purpose—this tactic will be obvious to the reader, and most instructors will be less than impressed. If you find yourself struggling to meet length requirements, see our handout on how to read an assignment for some tips. If you are still way off on page length and our handout hasn't helped you, you may want to talk to your instructor. (If that seems too daunting a task, take a look at our handout about asking for feedback.)

Wordy constructions such as clichés, qualifiers, and redundant pairs are easy to fix once you recognize your tendency to use them. **Read several of your old papers and see if you can locate any of these tendencies or consider whether they have become a habit for you in your writing:**

1. **Problem:** Clichés

**Example:** France bit off more than it could chew in Vietnam, and America's intervention was too little, too late.

**How to correct it:** Clichés stand in for more precise descriptions of something. Slow down and write exactly, precisely what you mean. If you get stuck, ask yourself "why?" or "how?"

**Better example:** As the French faltered in Vietnam, even American intervention could not save the collapsing regime.

2. **Problem:** Lots of qualifiers (very, often, hopefully, practically, basically, really, mostly)

**Example:** Most people usually think that many puppies are generally pretty cute.

**How to correct it:** Eliminate some of these qualifiers and you will have a stronger, more direct point. Some qualifiers are necessary, but you should use them carefully and thoughtfully.

**Better example:** Most people think that puppies are cute.

3. **Problem:** Using two words that mean the same thing.

**Example:** Adrienne fulfilled all our hopes and dreams when she saved the whole entire planet.

**How to correct it:** Choose the most precise term and delete the extra one.

**Better example:** Adrienne fulfilled all our hopes when she saved the planet.

**Some "wordy" constructions take a little more practice locating and correcting:**

1. **Problem:** Overuse of prepositional phrases (prepositions are little words such as in, over, of, for, at, etc.)

**Example:** The reason for the failure of the economic system of the island was the inability of Gilligan in finding adequate resources without incurring expenses at the hands of the headhunters on the other side of the island.

**How to locate and correct this problem:** Locate this problem by circling all of the prepositional phrases in your paper. A few are okay, but several in a sentence (as demonstrated here) make the reader struggle to find and follow your subject and point. Correct this problem by reading the sentence, looking away from it, and writing or saying out loud what you meant when you wrote the sentence. Try asking yourself "Who did what to whom?" Replace the first sentence with your new sentence.

**Better example:** Gilligan hurt the economic system of the island because he couldn't find adequate resources without angering the headhunters.

2. **Problem:** Stock phrases you can replace with one or two words.

**Examples:** The fact that I did not like the aliens affected our working relationship.  
The aliens must be addressed in a professional manner.

**How to locate and correct this problem:** Locate this problem as you do clichés. Is this just something people say? What do the words actually mean? Correct this problem by looking for a single word that expresses your meaning.

**Better examples:** My dislike of the aliens affected our working relationship.  
The aliens must be addressed professionally.

Here's a list of common or stock phrases to find in your paper and replace with a single word (see Joseph M. Williams, *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*):

The reason for	because, since, why
For the reason that	
Due to the fact that	
Owing to the fact that	
In light of the fact that	
Considering the fact that	
On the grounds that	
Despite the fact that	although, even though

Regardless of the fact that	
-----------------------------	--

In the event that	if
If it should happen that	
Under circumstances in which	

On the occasion of	when
In a situation in which	
Under circumstances in which	

As regards	about
In reference to	
With regard to	
Concerning the matter of	
Where ___ is concerned	

It is crucial that	must, should
It is necessary that	
There is a need/necessity for	
It is important that	

Is able to	can
Is in a position to	
Has the opportunity to	
Has the capacity for	
Has the ability to	

It is possible that	may, might, can, could
There is a chance that	
It could happen that	
The possibility exists for	

Prior to	before, when, as, after
In anticipation of	
Subsequent to	
Following on	
At the same time as	
Simultaneously with	

--	--

Not different	similar
Not many	few
Not have	lack
Not include	omit
Not consider	ignore
Not the same	different
Not often	rarely
Not allow	prevent
Not admit	deny
Not accept	reject

## Verb trouble

Nouns (person, place, thing, or concept) and verbs (words that describe an action or state of being) are the hearts and souls of all sentences. These become the essential elements—what your grammar teacher may have called the “subject” and the “predicate” or the “actor” and “action” of every sentence. The reader should be able to clearly locate the main subject and verb of your sentences and, ideally, the subject and verb should be close together in the sentence. Some style “crimes” are varied symptoms of one problem: the subjects and verbs or the actor and action of your sentence are hiding from the reader. The reader has trouble following who is doing what to whom. Instructors may write comments like “passive voice” or “weak verbs” in your paper’s margins. While using passive voice or weak verbs is grammatically correct, it may make the reader work too hard to decipher your meaning. Use passive voice and weak verbs strategically once you get the hang of them. If you’re still struggling to figure out what they are, you need to aim for “active voice” and “strong verbs” to improve your writing.

1. **Problem:** Passive voice. When you hide the actor by putting it somewhere after the action (not in the usual subject part of the sentence) and add a “to be” verb, you are using passive voice. For more detailed coverage, see our handout on the passive voice.

**Examples:** Here’s a passive sentence with the actor at the end of the sentence (not at the beginning, where you would usually expect the subject): The alien remains were lost by the government.

**Some passive sentences omit actor entirely:** The alien remains were lost.

The car was wrecked.

**Better (active) examples:** The government lost the alien remains.

I wrecked the car.

**How to locate and correct this problem:** Locate passive voice in your papers by circling every “to be” verb (am, is, are, was, were, be, been, being) in your paper. Not all of these verbs will indicate a passive construction or one you want to change, but if the “to be” verb is sitting next to another verb, especially one that ends in “ed,” (“was lost”, “was wrecked”) then you may be using passive voice. If you have trouble finding “to be” verbs, try finding the subject, verb, and object in each sentence. Can the reader tell who or what is doing the action in your sentence?

Correct passive constructions by putting that actor back in the subject of the sentence and getting rid of the “to be” verb. Note that you may have to add information in the sentence; you have to specify who in your sentence and thereby keep the reader from guessing—that’s good.

2. **Problem:** Nominalization—a fancy term for making verbs and adjectives into nouns. Again, sometimes you want to use nominalization and may do so purposefully. But too much nominalization in a paper can sound abstract and make the reader work to decipher your meaning.

(Professional academic writing often has a lot of nominalization—that’s one reason why you may struggle with some of your assigned reading in your courses!)

**Examples:** The discovery of the aliens was made by the government.

The car wreck was a result of a lack of visual focus.

**How to locate and correct the problem:** Locate nominalization in your papers by circling all of the nouns. Do you have several in a single sentence? You might be hiding the action (the verb) of your sentence inside of a noun. Correct nominalization by returning the abstract noun to its function as verb or adjective. This will take practice—focus on making the sentence simpler in structure (actor and action):

The government discovered the aliens.

My sister wrecked the car when she forgot to wear her glasses.

Also, look for sentences that begin with the following phrases: there is, there are, this is, that is, it is. Sometimes you need these phrases to refer to an immediately preceding sentence without repeating yourself, but they may be hiding nominalizations.

**Example:** There is a need for further study of aliens.

**How to locate and correct this problem:** Circle these phrases in your paper and try omitting them from the sentence. Who is doing what to whom?

**Better example:** We need to study aliens further.

3. **Problem: Weak verbs.** If you have located and corrected passive voice and nominalization problems in your essay but your sentences still seem to lack meaning or directness, look for “weak” verbs. Verbs such as “to be” verbs and “have” verbs can often be replaced by “strong”

verbs, verbs that carry specific meaning. Concentrate on what the subject of your sentence does and make that the verb in the sentence.

**Example:** The aliens have a positive effect on our ecosystem.

**How to locate and correct this problem:** Locate weak verbs by circling all of the “to be” and “have” verbs in your paper. Correct weak verbs by omitting them and replacing them with a more meaningful verb. Notice that you will need to add information as you specify the nature of the action.

**Answer the question:** “What does the subject really do?”

**Better example:** The aliens improve our ecosystem.

## Ostentatious erudition

You may be inclined to improve your style by sounding more “collegiate” or by using multi-syllabic words. Don’t ever do so without looking up those words to make sure you know exactly what they mean. And don’t blindly accept the recommendations of your word processing program’s thesaurus—these tools may be dangerous unless you double-check the meaning of the words in a dictionary. Many times, an inappropriate synonym will make you sound like you don’t know what you are talking about or, worse yet, give the impression that you are plagiarizing from a source you don’t understand. Never use a word you can’t clearly define. It’s okay to use big words if you know them well and they fit your overall tone—just make sure your tone is consistent. In other words, don’t say “That miscreant has a superlative aesthetic sense, but he’s dopey.”

You may use overly “erudite” words because you think it is wrong to use the same words over and over again in an essay. In fact, it’s often okay to repeat the same word(s) in your paper, particularly when they are significant or central terms. For example, if your paper discusses the significance of memory represented by the scent of wisteria in William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom*, you are going to write the words “memory” and “wisteria” a lot. Don’t start saying “recollection,” “reminiscence,” “summoning up of past events,” and “climbing woody vine” just to get a little variation in there. A thesaurus might even lead you to say that the significance of nostalgia is represented by the odiferous output of parasitic flowering vegetation. Such sentences may cloud rather than clarify your point.

## Now you are ready to edit

You are probably not guilty of every style “crime” in this handout. If you consistently struggle with one of these issues, focus your attention on that one. If you struggle with two or more, work on one at a time. If you try to fix all of them at once, you may find your approach too scattered or the task just plain overwhelming. You may also find that you use different styles for different assignments, with different responses from instructors. Whatever the case, the next time you finish a paper, take the issue you want to address and isolate it. Edit your paper using our “locate and correct” suggestions for that one issue. Ignore everything else (spelling, punctuation, content) and look for only that one issue. This strategy may sound time-consuming, but by isolating your style problems, you will find them easier to fix. As you become more proficient, you will include fewer and fewer style problems in your initial draft, and therefore your draft will need less editing. In the end, you will be a better writer—so what are a few minutes now?

If, after reading this handout and looking at your own writing, you are still struggling to understand style problems, bring a few of your old papers to an appointment at the Writing Center. Using already finished papers will help your tutor show you where your chronic style problems occur, why they occur, and how you can fix them.

By the way, a lot of students who come to the Writing Center almost immediately locate their own problem sentences when they read them aloud. Try this technique yourself, before you hand in your paper. Check out our handout on proofreading techniques for more tips.

## Works consulted

We consulted these works while writing the original version of this handout. This is not a comprehensive list of resources on the handout’s topic, and we encourage you to do your own research to find the latest publications on this topic. Please do not use this list as a model for the format of your own reference list, as it may not match the citation style you are using. For guidance on formatting citations, please see the UNC Libraries citation tutorial.

Lanham, Richard A. *Revising Prose*, 3rd ed. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992.

Strunk, William Jr. *The Elements of Style*, 4th ed. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2000.

Williams, Joseph M. *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity & Grace*, 4th ed. New York: HarperCollins College Publishers, 1994.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License.

You may reproduce it for non-commercial use if you use the entire handout (just click print) and attribute the source: The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

If you enjoy using our handouts, we appreciate contributions of acknowledgement.

Make a Gift