

Welcome to Writing Workshop #4

University of Victoria SON

- November 12, 2009
- 6-8 p.m. PST





Agenda

- Check in – Any writing issues you would like to take up tonight?
- Clarity in reading and writing: what is it?
- Two principles of writing clearly
- Examples and practice exercises
- APA manual, review of punctuation part I
- Check out
 - Note: many of the ideas from tonight's E-session are borrowed, with gratitude, from Joseph M. Williams' excellent book: *Style: toward Clarity and Grace*. I recommend this book to all those interested in improving their writing.

Clarity – what is it?

Graduate school entails that we read and write complex prose . Sometimes that prose is unnecessarily unclear. Complex writing may

1. Precisely reflect complex ideas



2. Gratuitously complicate complex ideas

3. Gratuitously complicate simple ideas



An example of 3:

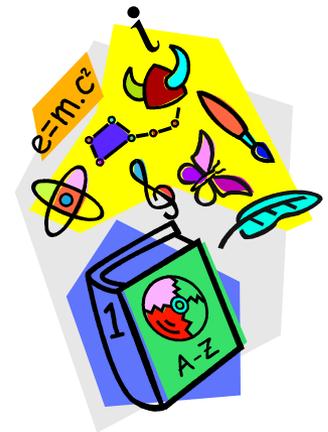
- The absence from this dictionary of a handful of old, well-known vulgate terms for sexual and excretory organs and functions is not due to a lack of citations for these words from current literature. (from the preface to *Webster's Dictionary*)
- This means ... We excluded vulgar words not because we could not find them.

Self doubt. . .

- Sometimes we doubt our own competence and trust that a writer must know what he or she is talking about. We defer to what is difficult, even if it is overwrought language.
- If you can't understand an article or book, it is not necessarily due to your incompetence or inexperience; it may well be because the author did not write clearly!

Prior knowledge & perceived clarity

- We comprehend best when we already know something of the content we are reading.
- In other words, if you know something about how flu viruses work, but little about philosophy, you are more likely to understand a badly written piece on flu viruses than you are a well written piece on philosophy.
- We rely on prior knowledge to help us understand.



Prior knowledge and clarity, cont'd

- This is important because competent writers usually know their subject TOO well . . . They are so close to it that they assume others know more than they do.
- Writers are handicapped in recognizing how much help a reader may need. . . So as a writer, it's best to give more help than you think your reader needs. This also means to give your writer lots of structural help – use many signposts to show where you are going.

Clarity in writing – first, what is unclear

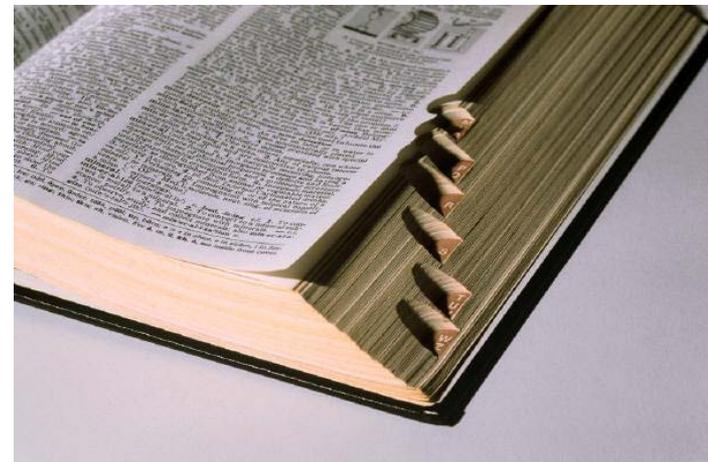
- English has a varied vocabulary – from French, Latin, and Greek influences (Norman Conquest and Renaissance infusion of classical languages).
- This is good – gives writers a potential for rich and varied language.
- But downside is it is too easy to write badly!
- The profusion of complex Latinate and specialized words means we are tempted to use them to sound learned and authoritative.

Stylistic Inflation - For example...

“The adolescents who had effectuated forcible entry into the domicile were apprehended.”

Simpler:

“We caught the kids who broke into the house.”



Stylistic inflation, cont'd

- As societies become more literate and intellectually mature, writers start to replace specific verbs with abstract nouns.

Abstraction – from verbs to nouns

- Thus: The committee proposal would provide for biogenetic industry certification of the safety to human health for new substances requested for exemption from Federal rules.
- Notice that as nouns make the style more abstract, they encourage further abstraction by eliminating the agents that perform actions, thus:
- The proposal would provide for certification of the safety of new substances in request for exemption.

Unreadable prose

- This shift from concrete verbs with agents to abstract nouns makes prose unreadable.
- This historical shift in writing is combined with our own personal reasons for bad writing... Maybe we are trying to sound impressive. Perhaps we use difficult language to sound intimidating or to wield power. Another reason is that we believe we are expected to sound complicated because we are in grad school.

Why we write badly

- Or maybe it's the memory of that awful English teacher who wielded a red pen with pleasure... And now a blank page is a minefield of potential errors!
- What are your reasons?



New to the field...

- Another common reason for bad writing is that we are new to a field.
- Getting to know the “community of discourse” means that writing is a work in progress, a process of trial and error.
- We need to learn new vocabulary, new syntax, new rules, new concepts.
- A new writer in a field is trying to simultaneously master new knowledge, new thinking, and a new voice. How can you do it all equally well? (You can't!)

New community of discourse

- New writers in a field will typically try to imitate features of style in their new field.
- Unfortunately, some of the writing they try to imitate is prolix and abstract.
- Don't despair . . . Coming soon are two simple principles of clear writing that you can learn.

First – telling stories

- Before we examine those two principles, it is helpful to know that prose that reads clearly usually has at its foundation a sense of *narrative* or *story*.
- Stories are the first continuous discourse we learn as children. Narration is fundamental to human language.
- Even academic prose has important “story” components: characters and their actions.

Characters and actions

- Stories in academic prose may have characters that are concepts – nonetheless, clear writing (or writing that seems clear when you are reading it) usually includes a cast of characters acting with concrete verbs.
- Think of your writing as a play with characters performing actions. If you lose sight of these characters and their actions...Your prose may become too abstract!

The First Two Principles of Clear Writing

- Readers are likely to feel that they are reading prose that is clear and direct when
 - 1) the subjects of the sentences name the cast of characters
 - 2) the verbs that go with those subjects name the crucial actions those characters are part of.

Examples:

- Our lack of knowledge about local conditions precluded determination of committee action effectiveness in fund allocation to those areas in greatest need of assistance.
- Who are the characters? Who is the subject? What actions are being done?

Examples, cont'd

- The subject is an abstraction: “our lack of knowledge” followed by a vague verb “precluded”
- Now look at a better, clearer version where abstraction is replaced with concrete nouns and verbs:
- Because we knew nothing about local conditions, we could not determine how effectively the committee had allocated funds to areas that most needed assistance.

Compare these:

- Our lack of knowledge about local conditions precluded determination of committee action effectiveness in fund allocation to those areas in greatest need of assistance.
- Because we knew nothing about local conditions, we could not determine how effectively the committee had allocated funds to areas that most needed assistance.

Comparison, cont'd

- Sentence A actions are not verbs but abstract nouns: lack, knowledge, determination, action, allocation, assistance, need.
- Sentence B names those actions in verbs: we knew nothing, we could not determine, the committee allocated, areas needed.
- The crucial difference in Sentence A and B is where the writer placed characters and expressed actions.

A simple rule of revision:

- When your prose seems too abstract or too complex, do two things:
 - 1. First, locate your cast of characters and actions they perform.
 - If you find that those characters are not subjects and their actions are not verbs, revise so that they are.

Second principle of revision

- 2. Second, run a line under the first five or six words of every sentence. If you find that (1) you have to go more than six or seven words just to get past the subject to the verb and (2) the subject of the sentence is not one of your characters, take a look at the sentence.

Revise the sentence so that characters appear as subjects and actions as verbs.

Other benefits of following these principles:

- When you revise according to these principles, you get other benefits – your prose becomes more logical and chronological because you place subjects/ characters followed by concrete verbs in the order that things happen.
- Also, when you turn nouns into verbs, your prose becomes more logical because you must use connectors like “because” and “although” to link clauses.

Revision exercise

- Read the following and revise according to the two principles we just learned:
- The closure of the branch and the transfer of its business and non-unionized employees constituted an unfair labour practice because the purpose of obtaining an economic benefit by means of discouraging unionization motivated the closure and transfer.

Worried about using passive?

- Perhaps you are worried that naming your characters and their actions so directly means that you cannot use the passive mode, which some students believe is required for scientific prose.
- It's true: writing like this means that the passive mode is reserved for times when we don't know or care who is responsible for an action, or when we want to emphasize the object of the action rather than the actor. In other words, the passive voice has a special but secondary place rather than a starring role.

Passive, cont'd

- But don't worry: APA manual now encourages the active voice over the passive (see p. 77).
- Increasingly, social science writers use the active voice or mode.
- Check with your instructor, but assume that this kind of writing is not only acceptable, but encouraged.

APA review of punctuation, part I, pages 87-89

- The APA manual's Chapter 4 is all about the mechanics of style.
- Let's review spacing, periods, and commas.
- 4.01 – let's see what one blogger had to say about the new rule that puts 2 spaces after final punctuation... These comments illustrate that the APA manual is always changing to reflect users. Don't be surprised if this rule is reversed soon...

□ 2 space rule comment:

Like others I do not understand the APA change to 2 spaces after a period. It works against everything that word processing software was designed to do. I have taught various forms of word processing software at the community college level for the past 15 years and this is so misunderstood (it seems) because our ingrained ideas held over from the typewriter world.

The 2 space rule comes from the typewriter world where all spacing was measured horizontally including the size of the font - CPI characters per inch (horizontal inch). Thus the only way to create clear spacing after a sentence was to physically create 2 spaces.

Today, in our software world we all use proportional fonts which use a vertical measurement (points) and which translates to both before and after vertical paragraph spacing in word processors. All spacing is determined by the font size - again vertical measuring.

Blogger continues to complain...

- This 4.01 rule in the sixth APA Style Guide does not consider the inherent rules built into word processing software and will only cause documents to have an inconsistent appearance. APA is wrong given the design and rule-bound nature of word processing software.
- Please change this rule or at least sit down with the software engineers and understand the ramifications of such a rule.

4.01 Periods

- Period use is perhaps self explanatory. But the thing you should note with APA is that you do not use periods for acronyms, for example it's: APA, IQ, NIMH not A.P.A. , I.Q., or N.I.M.H.

4.03 Commas

- Commas have several uses. See p. 88-9.
- Use a comma between elements (including before *and* and *or*) in a series of three or more items.
- “the height, width, or depth”
- “he bought apples, pears, and bananas.”
- This last comma is sometimes referred to as the “Oxford comma” and is optional in some other styles. But it’s not optional in APA: it’s required!!

Commas, continued

- Also use commas to set off a nonessential or nonrestrictive clause (a clause that is unnecessary to the meaning of the sentence):
- Mary, who was pregnant, was standing on the corner.
- Mary who was pregnant was standing on the corner (assumes that there are two or more Marys and it is important we know which one).

Commas, cont'd.

- A third use of commas is to separate two independent clauses joined by a conjunction (joining words are for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so – mnemonic is FANBOYS)
- Here's an example: Pregnant Mary stood on the corner, and she was very big.
- If you leave out the comma, you have a run on. If you leave out the “and,” you have a comma splice.

Commas, cont'd

- A common mistake is to add a comma whenever you see “and” or any of those other little conjunctions. This is described on page 89 – adding a comma between the two parts of a compound predicate.
- This is often a mis-application of the previous rule.
- First, you must check that the “and” is there to join two independent clauses and not simply joining a compound predicate.

More on commas (yawn...)

- Okay – more comma usage:
- Use commas to set off a year in exact dates – April 18, 1992, was the correct date.
- Use commas to separate groups of three digits in most numbers of 1,000 or more.
- And use commas in your parenthetical citations:
- (Andres, 1992).

One more comma usage...

- APA doesn't mention this comma usage, but you can use a comma for clarity after an introductory word group.
- For example,
- When John was ready to iron, his cat tripped on the cord.
- Without the comma, readers may imagine John ironing his cat!

Okay, just one more (please!)

- Again, not in APA specifically, but you should use a comma to introduce direct quotations:
- Naturalist Arthur Cleveland Bent once remarked, “In part the peregrine declined unnoticed because it is not adorable.”
- Of course, in APA-speak, that would look like:
- Bent (2004) remarked, “In part the peregrine declined unnoticed because it is not adorable” (p. 204).

Recommended books

- I recommend the book from which I borrowed material for tonight's session: *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace* by Joseph M. Williams (1990).
- Also, many students find the slim volume by Strunk and White eternally useful: *Elements of Style*.

Check out and good night to all

- How was tonight's session?
- What are three things that you learned?
- Do you have any suggestions for our last e-session on November 26?
- Good night and remember the grad student mantra: self care self care self care....

