Writing with Clarity

Goals

This workshop is intended to help students improve the clarity and conciseness of their writing. The first 15 minutes will consist of reviewing the key terms and concepts, and the preparatory activity, from these pre-workshop materials, which student attendees are expected to read and complete in advance (the workshop is not a teacher-centered lesson in rules). Following that brief review, in the remaining 30 minutes students will dynamically interact with each other and the Writing Center consultant while actively engaging their own and others’ work.

Materials Needed

In order to participate fully in the workshop, bring the following:

- A laptop or tablet with wireless internet capability (to access these materials during the workshop)
- Your completed preparatory exercise (see “Preparatory Activity” below)
- An essay you have written or are writing, whose clarity and conciseness you would like to explore

Topic Overview

Strong academic writing is marked not only by a sophisticated argument but also by the clarity and conciseness with which that argument is communicated. Many components go into crafting clear and concise prose, and they involve the choices an author makes with regard to style. In the aggregate, crisp and compelling writing has these features: use active voice instead of passive voice, express action with verbs, state points in the affirmative, and eliminate unnecessary words and expressions.

Key Terms and Concepts

- **Write Actively:** Whenever possible it is preferable to place sentences in the **active voice** rather than the **passive voice**, which means that the “doer” is in the subject position and not the receiver of the action. Consider the following sentences, and determine which is easier to understand and why.
  - “The runner’s fatigue prevented his qualification for the Olympic trials competition by a poor finish in the local meet.” | “The fatigued runner did not qualify for the Olympic trials because he finished poorly in the local meet.”

- **Express Action with Verbs:** Using verbs in place of nouns to express action is a powerful way to improve the clarity of writing and make sentences more engaging. Consider the following sentences, and determine which is more effective and why.
  - “Upon completion of the orientation session, the one-month training of the salesman with the sales manager will begin.” | “When they complete the orientation session, the salesmen will train with the sales manager for a month.”

- **State Points in the Affirmative:** Sentences that are formulated in the affirmative generally have greater strength, and as such it is usually preferable to remove the word “not” whenever possible. Consider the following sentences, and determine which are more appealing and why.
  - “He did not accept the offer.” | “He declined the offer.”
• “He didn’t fail the exam.” | “He passed the exam.”
• “Many students did not buy the yearbook.” | “Many [other] students bought the yearbook.”

**Eliminate Unnecessary Words and Expressions:** Students sometimes assume that “intelligent” writing needs to be complicated and verbose, but close readers are more impressed with disciplined prose. Consider the following sentences, and determine which is more appealing and why.

• “For the most part, Majestic is a fast horse; the fact is, however, that for all intents and purposes any horse can beat him on a muddy track.” | “Majestic is a fast horse; however, any horse can beat him on a muddy track.”

**Style:** The example sentences above demonstrate that clarity and concision are determined by a writer’s stylistic choices, which include word choice (meaning and flow), sentence structure (tight and readable), and voice (persona and perspective).

**Additional Resources**

• For materials on clarity and concision, go to the USC Writing Center’s website for the resources titled “Avoiding Negative Sentences,” “Writing with Clarity,” “Tightening Passive Sentences,” and “Eliminating Unnecessary Wordiness.”
• For additional information on clarity, visit the Purdue Online Writing Lab’s pages on “Improving Sentence Clarity.”
• See also, Duke University’s “Clarity and Conciseness.”

**Preparatory Activity**

Now that you have learned a bit about writing in the active voice, expressing action with verbs, stating points in the affirmative, and eliminating extraneous words and expressions, consider the following short paragraph. How could you edit this paragraph to add more clarity? Please print this page and mark up the paragraph to show the changes you would make. Bring this completed exercise with you and be prepared to share your editing suggestions at the beginning of the workshop.

Civil disobedience happens when set laws are willfully not obeyed. These laws are broken because it is not believed that they are just and equal to each and every person. Throughout past history there have been numerous examples of civil disobedience. In "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," some particular examples of historical importance who went against the particular laws of their time were noted by Martin Luther King, Jr. During his discussion, he said, "I would agree with St. Augustine that 'an unjust law is no law at all.'" This shows that even religious heroes, such as St. Augustine, did not believe in every law set forth by the government 8 and that there was approval of not following those laws that are seen to be not just. Without the work of those who go against certain unjust laws, many laws would never be changed by governments. The Boston Tea Party was held by colonial settlers who did not want a continuation of British rule over them. Were it
not for that specific act of civil disobedience it is entirely possible that we might have remained a
British colony much longer than we were.