Writing with Clarity

Writing attempts to effectively convey an idea which may be new, difficult, or important to an appropriate audience. The following principles – adapted from Dr. Joseph Williams’ four principles of readability – are an introductory checklist to get you writing with more clarity.

1. The “doer” of the sentence should be in the subject position.

Example: Joe threw the ball. vs. The ball was thrown by Joe.

The first sentence is clearer, because the one doing the action (Joe) is in the subject position, at the beginning of the sentence. After the subject, the action is represented by the verb “threw”.

This idea is also known as Active Voice writing rather than Passive Voice writing. Passive Voice writing can sometimes be effectively used, but there should be a good reason for this choice.

2. Action should be expressed in a verb, rather than a noun.

Avoid sentences which express major action through nouns which have been derived from verbs (nominalizations), as opposed to verbs themselves.

Example: The captain conducted an investigation into the matter.

The major action is conveyed through the nominalization “conducted an investigation”. The sentence would be clearer if written with major action being expressed through a verb.

Example: The captain investigated the matter.

3. State your point in the affirmative. Avoid the negative.

Sentences which are written in the affirmative have greater strength, and are clearer for a reader. Avoid the word “not” where possible.

Example: “Most students study hard.” is clearer than “Not many students don’t study hard.”

Example: “He declined the invitation.” is clearer than “He did not accept the invitation.”

4. Prune sentences of empty expressions.

Get rid of words and phrases which do not contribute directly to the main point of your sentence.

Example: Insofar as he is basically a good man, the President is also undeniably a good leader.

This sentence could be trimmed of unnecessary, overcomplicated or obvious words and phrases.

Example: The President is a good man and also a good leader.