

WRITING TUNE-UP

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Strong writing is not a miracle. It's a technique, one that you can observe and practice. This is what we're here to help you do.



Nor is "sounding academic" a mystical feat that can only be accomplished after decades in the academy. There are prose conventions that *produce* a scholarly voice, and we'll review some of those today.



TODAY'S WORKSHOP

Sentences

Paragraphs

Sounding "Academic"



WHAT IS A SENTENCE?

- A sentence is a “grammatically complete idea” that contains both a **noun** (or pronoun) and a **verb** (Khan Academy).
- **The dog chased** his ball through the grass.



WHERE'S THE ACTOR IN THIS SENTENCE? AND WHERE'S THE ACTION?

Because the evidence suggests

the lack of reasonable workplace accommodations

is a major factor in unemployment rates among autistic people,

a new framework is imperative for employers to create,

building acceptance, awareness, and universal design

among neurotypical employees.



THE ACTOR = EMPLOYERS

ACTION = SHOULD DEVELOP

Employers should develop

a framework to promote awareness and acceptance of autism, because evidence suggests that, without reasonable accommodations, people with autism struggle to gain employment.



INTRODUCE THE MAIN CHARACTER QUICKLY

“The human mind loves to process information in the form of a story. . . For these reasons, readers prefer sentences to foreground a character and an action, and the sooner in a sentence the reader *finds* a character followed by an action, the happier the reader will be.

Consider, for example, how horrible this sentence is:

‘Once upon a time, a walk through the woods by Little Red Riding-Hood was occurring, when a jump-out from behind a tree by the Big Bad Wolf caused fright in her.’

What makes that sentence so awful is that the main characters are not up front in the subject position where they belong, and their main actions are obscured.”

-- T.R. Johnson, *Teaching Prose Style*



TIP #1: SPOTLIGHT THE ACTOR IN EVERY SENTENCE



Figure out who or what **does something** within each sentence. Then put that actor near the beginning of the sentence.

This will be harder than it sounds. To spotlight the actor requires you to know precisely what you want to say within each sentence.



FIND THE ACTOR, FIND THE ACTION

Making the reader aware specifically of the horrors endured in slavery, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* unveils Sethe's life gradually.

First, find the actor: Who or what does something in this sentence?

What does the actor do?

Do stories typically "unveil" a life?

More commonly, stories narrate, describe, document, follow, or reveal a life.

Beloved describes Sethe's life, slowly revealing the horrors she endured in slavery.



If you're not sure whether the verb(s) you're choosing communicate the action clearly, visit <https://fraise.it>

When you search for a word on this website, it will show you several sentences where the word is used in context.

It will also suggest synonyms, and when possible, show you video clips of the word being pronounced.



VERB CHOICE AND THE DIFFERENCE IT MAKES

- “To be” is the most common verb in the English language.
- You cannot and should not seek to eliminate it from your writing: I used it already as a verb on this slide.
- You should, however, read through your papers (and any other high- stakes writing you produce) and ask whether you have relied on this verb heavily or exclusively.
- Overreliance on “to be” strips your sentences of their **clarity and power.**

FORMS OF “TO BE”

- > **Be**
- > **Is**
- > **Am**
- > **Are**
- > **Was**
- > **Were**
- > **Has been, had been, etc.**
- > **Will be, would be, etc.**



A WORD ON THE PASSIVE VOICE

“The passive voice” refers to a type of sentence in which the subject is also the object, meaning it’s acted *upon*. For instance:

The car was washed

The laws were passed

The beliefs were held

While there are legitimate reasons for writing in the passive voice (especially in the sciences), popular audiences, as well as authors in the humanities and social sciences, prefer active voice. These sentences clearly name the actor and demonstrate the actor’s relationship to the action:

I washed the car

Congress passed the laws

Students held the beliefs

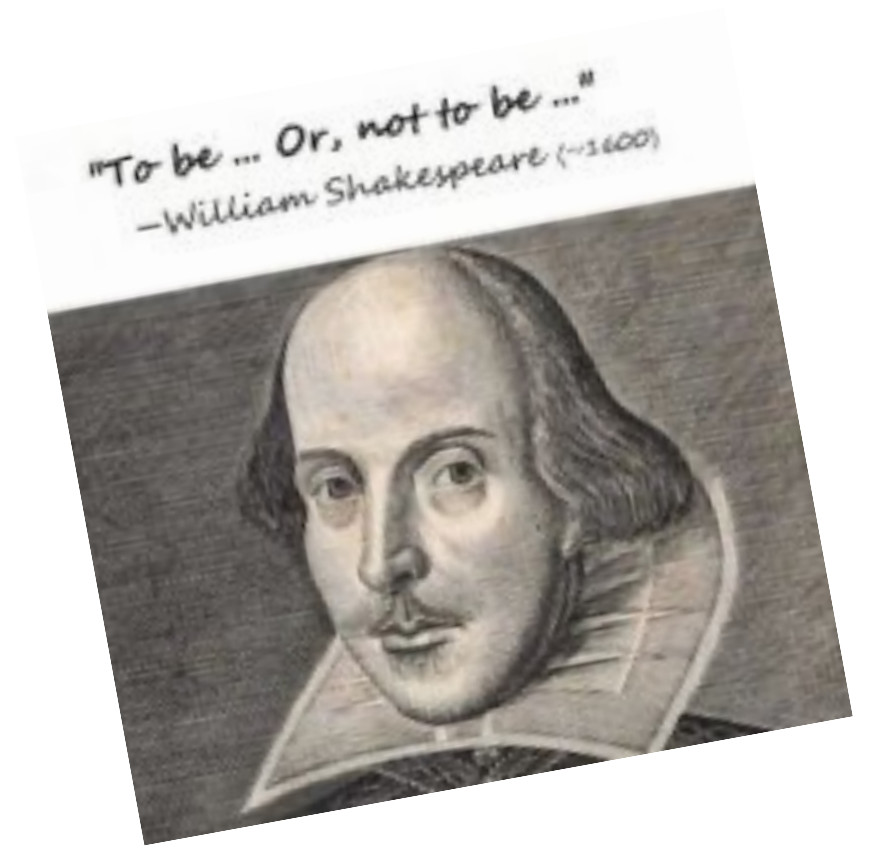
When I refer to “weak verbs,” I’m gesturing toward a different problem: *active* sentences that use some form of “to be” as their verb.

The movie was bad.

USC is a world-class research institution.

PROBLEMS WITH HABITUAL USE OF "TO BE"

- X "Is" does not communicate much besides the mere fact of existence. Therefore, writers usually have to surround this verb with other explanatory words or clauses. This leads to wordiness.
- X "Is" allows writers to get away with too much imprecision. It robs sentences of their descriptive and explanatory power.



ACTIVE VERBS GIVE YOUR SENTENCES MORE FORCE AND EXPLANATORY POWER

The movie was bad.

The movie **bored** me.

The movie **played** shamelessly on my sympathies.

The movie **traded** in every tired cliché known to romantic comedies.

USC is a world-class research institution.

USC **maintains** cutting-edge laboratories and facilities.

USC **recruits** faculty who are leaders in their professions.

USC **hosts** numerous special events to enrich the intellectual life of the campus.



**TIP #2: CHOOSE
VERBS THAT
CLEARLY
DESCRIBE THE
ACTION**

<https://frazee.it>

If you're not sure whether the verbs you're choosing communicate the action clearly, visit <https://frazee.it>

When you search for a word on this website, it will show you several sentences where the word is used in context.

It will also suggest synonyms, and when possible, show you video clips of the word being pronounced.

After you have figured out who or what **does something** within each sentence, choose a verb that clearly expresses that action.

Look out for habitual use of the verb "to be," which leads to wordy sentences *and* unnecessary sentences: ones that do not say very much at all.

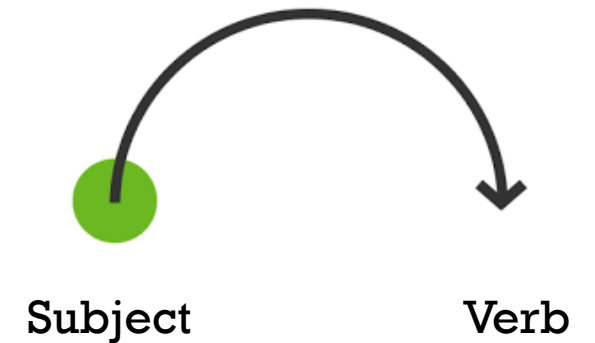
SENTENCE STRUCTURE

Due to the dominant presence of men in the leadership ranks at companies of various kinds, **the strict social norms** for how women should behave in the office **are** formulated through the eyes of men.

There are a lot of problems here. To begin with, the sentence buries the actor ("strict social norms"). Secondly, the sentence uses the passive voice (strict social norms *are* formulated.....but who's doing the formulating?)

But far more importantly, **the subject ("strict social norms") and the verb ("are") have been separated by a long clause.**

Your goal on the sentence level should be to make the relationship between the actor and the action clear – usually by keeping the actor and the action close together. This will be much easier to accomplish if you first identify the actor and the action and *then* rearrange the order of your words, if necessary.



Since they dominate the leadership ranks of various companies, **men formulate** strict social norms for how women should behave in the office.





Readers will suspend interpretation of your sentence until they have located both the subject and the verb.

If these two components are separated by multiple clauses, readers can easily get distracted or fatigued.

Paraphrased from *A Concise Guide to Technical Communication*,
by Heather & Robert Graves



THINK OF THIS AS A FORM OF MENTAL EXERCISE



Sentences that lack a clear actor, a clear action, and a clear relationship *between* the actor and the action often represent a deeper problem: an unclear or unfinished thought.

By focusing on your sentence structure, you will also improve the clarity of each thought.

Questions to ask of every sentence

1. Who/what does something in this sentence?
2. What do they do?
3. How can I bring the actor and the action closer together?

THE UNDYING, ANNE BOYER

1. In 1972, **Susan Sontag** was **planning** a work to be called "On Women Dying" or "Deaths of Women" or "How Women Die."
2. In her journal under the heading "material," **she wrote** a list of eleven deaths, including the death of Virginia Woolf, the death of Marie Curie, the death of Jeanne d'Arc, the death of Rosa Luxemburg, and the death of Alice James.
3. **Alice James** **died** of breast cancer in 1892 at the age of forty-two.
4. In her own journal, **James** **describes** her breast tumor as 'this unholy granite substance in my breast.'
5. **Sontag** **quotes** this later in *Illness as Metaphor*, the book she wrote after undergoing treatment for her own breast cancer, diagnosed in 1974 when she was forty-one.



LOCKING UP OUR OWN, BY JAMES FORMAN, JR.

1. **All of us** in the public defender's office **feared** the Martin Luther King speech.
2. **Curtis Walker**, an African American Superior Court judge in Washington, D.C., **was** famous for it.
3. And today **Brandon**, my fifteen-year-old clients, **was** on the receiving end of it...
4. **Brandon had pleaded** guilty to possessing a handgun and a small amount of marijuana — enough to use, but not to sell.
5. **I had argued** for probation.
6. **Judge Walker told** Brandon he was considering my proposal.
7. But first **he had** some things to say.



EVICTED, BY MATTHEW DESMOND

1. Jori and his cousins were cutting up, tossing snowballs at passing cars.
2. From Jori's street corner on Milwaukee's near South Side, cars driving on Sixth Street passed squat duplexes with porch steps ending at a sidewalk edged in dandelions.
3. Those heading north approached the Basilica of St. Josaphat, whose crowning dome looked to Jori like a giant overturned plunger.
4. It was January of 2008, and the city was experiencing the snowiest winter on record.
5. Every so often, a car turned off Sixth Street to navigate Arthur Avenue, hemmed in by the snow, and that's when the boys would take aim.
6. Jori packed a tight one and let it fly.
7. The car jerked to a stop, and a man jumped out.
8. The boys ran inside and locked the door to the apartment where Jori lived with his mother, Arleen, and younger brother, Jafaris.
9. The lock was cheap, and the man broke down the door with a few hard-heeled kicks.
10. He left before anything else happened.
11. When the landlord found out about the door, she decided to evict Arleen and her boys.
12. They had been there eight months.



AMITY AND PROSPERITY, BY ELIZA GRISWOLD

1. Four hundred million years ago, **dragonflies** the size of crows **drifted** above a giant inland sea.
2. **The first sharks swam** in its brackish currents, along with algae and other primordial creatures.
3. As they died and sank to the seafloor, **their remains petrified**, turning into fossil fuel.
4. **Oil and gas were trapped** in the silt that became a sedimentary rock called shale.
5. Over the next sixty million years, as the sea receded and left behind freshwater bogs, the **plants and trees** that collapsed into them **formed** coal, the youngest of earth's fossil fuels.
6. At first **these layers** of oil, gas, and coal **piled** tidily atop one another.
7. Then, under tremendous heat and stress, **they twisted and buckled**, in some places rising to the surface, in others, remaining miles below ground.



**TIP #3: MAKE THE
ACTOR/ACTION
RELATIONSHIP EASY
TO TRACK WITHIN
EACH SENTENCE**



When possible, keep the actor and action close together in your sentences.

When not possible, make the action clear, ideally by choosing a vibrant and expressive verb.



CAN YOUR GROUP SOLVE THE MYSTERY OF THESE SENTENCES???



- Tip #1: Spotlight the actor in every sentence
- Tip #2: Choose verbs that clearly describe the action
- Tip #3: Make the actor/action relationship easy to track within each sentence

With your colleagues, try rewriting a few sentences to share with the larger group



PRACTICE SESSION

1. Frequently, after **breaking news** has aired, it ultimately **becomes** an appeal for people at large.
2. Therefore **media outlets**, in order to capture the attention of the public, **are** eager to adopt a dramatic story by publishing only the sensational pieces of a story.
3. **This trend is** apparent through close examination of the news created by the opioid epidemic which throughout the United States has instigated one of the longest and most severe public health crises of our modern times.
4. **Patients**, seeking relief from chronic pain and using prescription painkillers such as oxycodone in a perpetual manner, **are developing** addictions to this powerful class of drugs.
5. But to cause outrage within an audience far removed and generally misinformed from the genuine problem, the **American media**, **is misrepresenting** this crisis
6. Through emphasis of the addictive tendency that leads to the “personal choices” of addicts themselves, **media outlets are simplifying** the roles of powerful drug companies and prescribing physicians.
7. **The opioid crisis**, so implied by the media, **is** a tragedy stemming from poor personal choices.

1. **Breaking news appeals** to people.
2. Thus, to capture the public’s attention, **media outlets publish** the most sensational aspects of dramatic stories.
3. **This phenomenon becomes** particularly apparent when we examine news coverage of the opioid epidemic, one of the severest public health crises of the 21st century.
4. **Patients develop** addictions to prescription painkillers such as oxycodone, a powerful drug that treats chronic pain.
5. However, the **American media misrepresents** these patients, framing their stories in a manner that elicits outrage and misinforms the public.
6. **Media outlets emphasize** the “personal choices” that addicts make, while simplifying the roles played by prescribing physicians and powerful drug companies.
7. Thus, **the media implies** that the opioid crisis stems from poor personal choices.



TOPIC POSITION

The information that begins a sentence establishes for the reader a perspective for viewing the sentence as a unit:

Readers expect a unit of discourse to be a story about whoever shows up first.

"Bees disperse pollen" and "Pollen is dispersed by bees" are two different but equally respectable sentences about the same facts. The first tells us something about bees; the second tells us something about pollen.

The passivity of the second sentence does not by itself impair its quality; in fact, "Pollen is dispersed by bees" is the superior sentence if it appears in a paragraph that intends to tell us a continuing story about pollen...

Writing that continually begins sentences with new information...misleads the reader as to whose story is being told; it burdens the reader with new information that must be carried further into the sentence before it can be connected to the discussion; and it creates ambiguity as to which material the writer intended the reader to emphasize.

-- George Gopen and Judith Swan, "The Science of Scientific Writing"



THIS PARAGRAPH TELLS A STORY ABOUT RECURRENCE RATES

1. Large earthquakes along a given fault segment do not occur at random intervals because it takes time to accumulate the strain energy for a rupture.
2. **The tectonic plates** move and accumulate strain at their boundaries at approximately uniform rates.
3. Therefore, in first approximation, one may expect that **large earthquakes** at the same fault segment will occur at nearly constant intervals.
4. But if **subsequent main shocks** have different amounts of slip across the fault, then the recurrence time may vary.
5. Along the southern segment of the San Andreas fault, **the recurrence rate** is 145 years with variations of several decades.

1. Large earthquakes along a given fault segment do not occur at random intervals because it takes time to accumulate the strain energy for a rupture.
2. **The rates** at which tectonic plates move and accumulate strain at their boundaries are roughly uniform.
3. Therefore, **nearly constant intervals** between large earthquakes would be expected at the same fault segment.
4. However, **the recurrence time** may vary if subsequent mainshocks have different amounts of slip across the fault.
5. For example, **the recurrence rate** along the southern segment of the San Andreas fault is 145 years, with variations of several decades.

This small change makes a big difference in your reader's experience because it allows them to draw micro-connections among the sentences. It gives your writing a feeling of "flow."

WHAT NEW INFORMATION DOES EACH SENTENCE PROVIDE? END THERE.



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- “It is a linguistic commonplace that readers naturally emphasize the material that arrives at the end of a sentence. We refer to that location as a ‘stress position.’ If a writer is consciously aware of this tendency, she can arrange for the emphatic information to appear at the moment the reader is naturally exerting the greatest reading emphasis” (Gopen & Swan).



KNOWN INFORMATION = BLUE

NEW INFORMATION = ORANGE

1. Ralph was having an absolutely lousy Monday.
2. Chicago had gotten six inches of snow the previous night, and Ralph had a long walk to the bus because his car had gotten towed.
3. The coffee machine at work was broken, so surviving this terrible morning uncaffeinated was Ralph's only option.
4. Every Monday, Lorraine brought pastries to the office, so Ralph tried to console himself by choosing the best one.
5. The only remaining pastry was a whole-wheat muffin (*with carab chips!!*), and this is another example of Ralph's terrible luck.
6. Asking for a meeting, his boss poked his head into the kitchenette, even before Ralph's toes had time to defrost or his stomach had the chance to stop rumbling.

KNOWN = BLUE

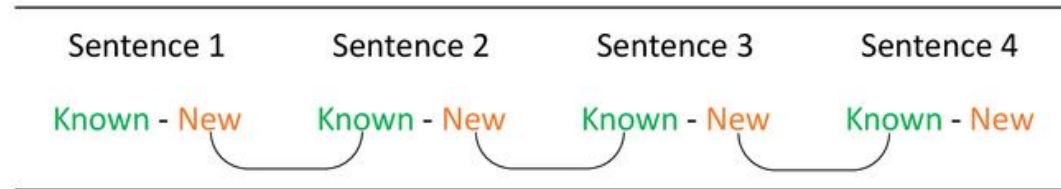
NEW = ORANGE

1. Ralph was having an absolutely lousy Monday, which began when his car got towed.
2. He was therefore facing a very long walk to the bus, made worse by the six inches of snow that fell in Chicago last night.
3. After Ralph got to work, he learned that the coffee machine was broken, so his only option was to survive the morning uncaffeinated.
4. Ralph tried to console himself by choosing the best option from the box of communal pastries, which Lorraine brought every Monday.
5. But his terrible luck persisted: only the whole-wheat muffin (*with carab chips!!*) remained.
6. Ralph's toes hadn't defrosted, nor had his stomach stopped rumbling, before his boss poked his head into the kitchenette, asking for a meeting.



**TIP #3: USE THE
“KNOWN-NEW”
CONSTRUCTION TO
GIVE YOUR
PARAGRAPHS A
FEELING OF
COHESION**

Known-new contract



In “The Science of Scientific Writing,” Gopen & Swan recommend the following sentence structure:

1. The person, thing or concept **whose story it is** appears in the topic position.
2. The new, emphasis-worthy information appears in the stress position [end of sentence].



WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

Roald Dahl was a beloved laureate of modern children's fiction. He often boasted of his uncanny access to the seven-year-old mind. He preeningly referred to himself in old age as a 'geriatric child.' But he did not write a children's book until his forties. When he did, he was only following his agent's advice. He did so grudgingly because his stories for adults weren't selling. He published *James and the Giant Peach* in 1961. Until then, he regarded writing for children as a joke. Writers of adult fiction rarely enter willingly into the ghetto of children's fiction. But for Dahl, the dreaded Kiddy Korner proved to be his liberation. The miracle of his children's work was not that it banished his nastiness. Instead, it transmuted the nastiness into something vigorous and joyful. His capacities as an adult writer were fatally limited by misanthropy. But misanthropy brought energy and subversive humor to his children's books.

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WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

Roald Dahl is a beloved laureate of modern children's fiction (10). He often boasted of his uncanny access to the seven-year-old mind (11). He preeningly referred to himself in old age as a 'geriatric child' (12). But he did not write a children's book until his forties (11). When he did, he was only following his agent's advice (10). He did so grudgingly because his stories for adults weren't selling (11). He published *James and the Giant Peach* in 1961 (9). Until then, he regarded writing for children as a joke (10). Writers of adult fiction rarely enter willingly into the ghetto of children's fiction (13). But for Dahl, the dreaded Kiddy Korner proved to be his liberation (12). Miraculously, his children's work did not banish his nastiness (9). Instead, it transmuted the nastiness into something vigorous and joyful (10). His capacities as an adult writer were fatally limited by misanthropy (11). But misanthropy brought energy and subversive humor to his children's books (11). In fact, Dahl had a pervasive influence on children's literature (10).

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TIPS FOR LONG SENTENCES

Try putting the subject and verb near the beginning and then letting the rest of the sentence unfurl, like a long tail: “[**Dahl**] **had** a vast and starry circle of trans-Atlantic acquaintances (Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, Hoagy Carmichael, Ernest Hemingway, Francis Bacon, Noël Coward, C.S. Forester, Spencer Tracy) and a no-less-starry record of sexual conquests (Martha Gellhorn, Clare Booth Luce, Gloria Vanderbilt, Ginger Rogers, Elizabeth Arden, as well as, according to one American witness of his wartime adventures, ‘everybody on the east and west coasts that had more than fifty thousand dollars a year’)” (72).

Add length by listing, which allows readers to hold all the items in their head as one unit:

“[**Roald Dahl**] **was**, at various times in his life, an oil executive, an RAF fighter pilot, a Washington-based spy for the British, an art collector, an antiques dealer, a gambler, and a greyhound racer” (34).

Use em dashes, parentheses, or semicolons to break up a long sentence and offset less vital information:

“**The villains are** grotesques, and even the benign adult protagonists—Wonka, Mr. Fox, the centipede in *James and the Giant Peach*—are not altogether safe or nice; they are mercurial, mendacious figures, sarcastic and brusque and ever so slightly cruel” (40).

Introduce new clauses with the same word, thus continuously reinforcing the relationship of new information to existing information:

“Writing about the joy of chocolate, or a boy’s flight on the back of a swan, or the experience of crawling through a peach, **Dahl comes** as close to the sublime as any children’s writer has” (36).



AIM FOR AN AVERAGE SENTENCE LENGTH OF 40 WORDS

Choose shorter sentences when....

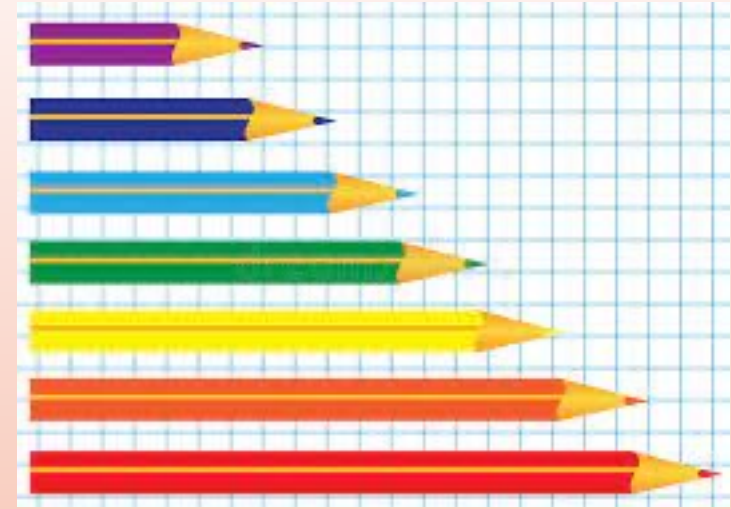
- You want to convey authority or a touch of aggression.
- You want to emphasize clarity or simplicity. (“Give school boards more money. Give them money to hire more teachers’ aids. Give them money to replace falling-apart textbooks...”)
- You want to emphasize a sudden change or an unexpected reversal. (“The American playbook on pandemic control was the envy of the developed world. Until it didn’t work.”)
- You are writing to an audience that prioritizes efficiency.
- You have a run of long sentences (+50 words) in your paragraph and need to break up the rhythm.

Choose longer sentences when....

- You want to emphasize the length of a list (“Grad school can be stressful because X, Y, Z.”)
- You want to highlight chronology (“After X, after Y, after Z”).
- You want to exaggerate a parenthetical or “interrupter” clause. Works best when reversing an audience’s expectations of simplicity: “American democracy – if, by American democracy, we mean a system that A, B, C, D, E, F, and G – is a noble system.”
- You have a run of short sentences (-30 words) in your paragraph and need to break up the rhythm.



TIP #5: VARY THE LENGTH OF YOUR SENTENCES



A paper composed entirely of long-winded, multi-clause sentences will tire your readers unnecessarily.

A paper that communicates entirely in clipped, brief sentences will sound choppy. Try alternating short and to-the-point sentences with longer, more complex ones.

Reading your papers aloud can help you to catch places where your sentences have fallen into a monotonous rhythm.

WHAT IS A PARAGRAPH?

"A paragraph is a collection of related sentences dealing with a single topic" (Purdue OWL).



PARAGRAPHING AND THE DIFFERENCE IT MAKES

Ten years ago, I interned at a literary magazine, publishing imprint, and agency in Minneapolis called Paper Darts. It's the first time in my life I had ever felt like a member of the in-crowd. For the in-crowd, taste is all about social bonding. It isn't developed in isolation. It's a direct result of engagement with a peer group of other avid consumers. It was there at those meetings in my boss' cramped, modestly decorated house that what I was supposed to like was communicated to me: tacos (one of the editors had an entire blog devoted to them, which they took very seriously); the musical act Neon Indian; *Portlandia* (Fred Armisen blurbed one of the imprint's books, although, judging from his quick response to the email request, he likely didn't read it); sans serif fonts; and clothing brands like ModCloth, among other early-2010s trends that were both things to buy and ways of being sold to. The magazine itself, a whimsical and kitschy artifact, had a vaguely countercultural bent in the way that everything organized by young people does. Its own cool pretentiousness was modeled after magazines like *McSweeney's* and the *Believer*, founded by the once-cool Gen X-er Dave Eggers. By the standards of the upper Midwest, Paper Darts embodied the characteristics of publications they wanted to be more like, trafficking in many of the same ideas. But I didn't feel like I embodied those characteristics myself. As the only non-white person there, the only 21-year-old Black woman hailing from a Muslim background, the expectation was that I was supposed to meet them at their level, not the other way around. My coworkers became a prism through which to look, filtering my own perspective through their white, supposedly rarified lens. From the first day on the job, I knew my colleagues' stylistic choices and musical preferences were of utmost importance to them, communicating information about who they were as consumers and humans. My journal entries from this time reflect an acute awareness of and sensitivity to the trends they talked about. Everyone else seemed like naturally insouciant aesthetes, like they woke up with the knowledge of culture, art, and hipness, whereas everything I knew felt labored and deeply, obsessively limned. The stuff my colleagues owned and liked informed their identities, and by extension, the buyer persona of the ideal reader of their magazine. That persona, of course, was a mirror held up to themselves, a mirror that I felt couldn't be held up to me. They couldn't see themselves in me. I knew that; it wasn't their fault. If they were ever going to, I knew that I would have to try harder to be legible. I'd have to assimilate.

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PARAGRAPHS MAKE ME FEEL FEELINGS

- What assumptions do you make – as a reader – when confronted with a long wall of text?
- What assumptions do you make when you see paragraphs of a manageable and relatively consistent length?



WHAT IS A PARAGRAPH?

A paragraph is a signal to your reader, indicating that all of the sentences are working together to accomplish the same task.

The average length is 200 words, ± 50
(though this might differ significantly in your discipline)





PARAGRAPHING RELATES TO FOCUS

Problems with paragraphing usually indicate a lack of focus/intention in the writing itself.

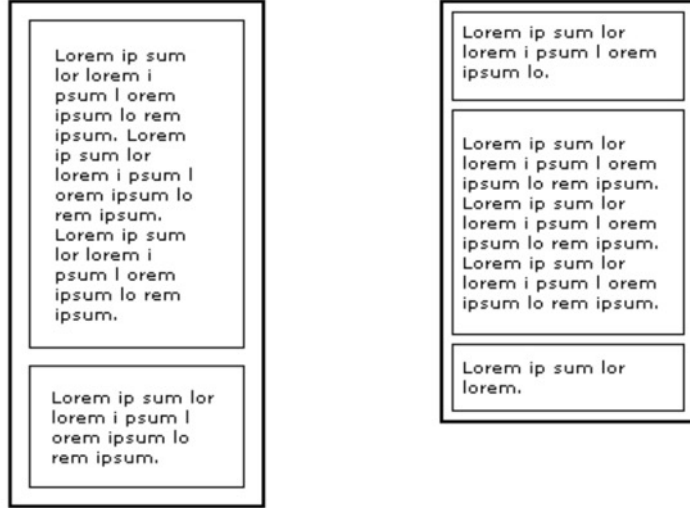
When looking over your draft, have you produced any unusually long (+400 words) or unusually short (-100 words) paragraphs?

If so, you have probably arrived at a moment in your paper where you have not thought enough about **what you are saying and why you are saying it.**

Re-read the paragraph and ask yourself what action these sentences collectively accomplish.

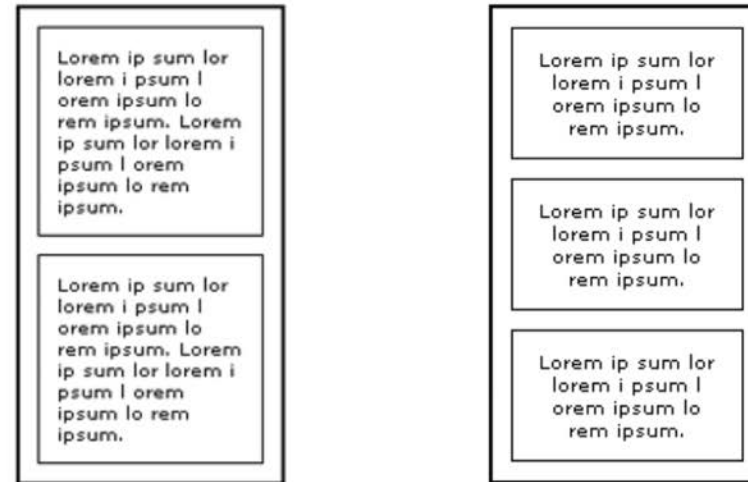


UNBALANCED PAGES WITH IDEAS NOT EQUALLY DEVELOPED:



Unbalanced Paragraphs

SOME BALANCED PAGES:



Paragraph Balance

THE MONSTER AND THE BABY

Monster paragraphs

- Change course multiple times
- Define a complicated theory *and* apply it simultaneously
- Present complex analysis *and* a counterargument simultaneously
- Are often organized by source or example rather than a claim ABOUT that source/example (e.g., "everything and anything relevant about article X or example Z")
- Generally feel rushed



Baby paragraphs

- Consist entirely of a quotation
- Consist entirely of a definition, with no context or explanation
- Refer to an example without follow-through ("This can be seen in many comments from parents")
- Often do not fit into the paper's flow/seem out of place
- Generally feel unfinished



ONCE AGAIN, FIND THE ACTION



Do not ask: “What are these sentences saying?”

Ask: “**What are these sentences doing?**”

The answer should always be more specific than “explain” or “show”!!



THE TASK MASTER: SOME ACTIONS THAT INDIVIDUAL PARAGRAPHS CAN ACCOMPLISH

Draw attention to something	Identify or classify something	Speculate about something	Connect two or more things	Contrast two or more things	Point out a conflict
Resolve a conflict	Defend/justify something	Build upon/further develop an idea	Point out a problem	Warn an audience	Inspire an audience
Summarize something	Analyze something	Analyze something with the help of a theory	Challenge or criticize something	Defend something	Recommend something
Deduce something	Reveal a pattern	Differentiate between two or more things	Elaborate on something	Find errors in something	Refute something

Each paragraph should have one main task: no more!



THE CHEAT SHEET: MOMENTS WHEN YOU SHOULD INTRODUCE A PARAGRAPH BREAK

<p>When you transition from describing a broad trend to pointing out a specific instance of that trend</p>	<p>When you want to introduce a new or contrasting interpretation of the evidence that you have just analyzed.</p>	<p>When you want to introduce a theory, statistic, or concept that helps you reconsider some evidence you've just analyzed.</p>
<p>When you transition from discussing a phenomenon to considering its causes or effects.</p>	<p>When you transition from outlining a problem to suggesting a way we could address that problem.</p>	<p>When anticipating an objection to a point you have just made.</p>



UNBALANCED PAGES WITH IDEAS NOT EQUALLY DEVELOPED:

Diagram illustrating an unbalanced page layout. The page is divided into two large rectangular sections. The top section contains a large block of text, and the bottom section contains a smaller block of text.

Top section text:
Lorem ip sum
lor lorem i
psum l orem
ipsum lo rem
ipsum. Lorem
ip sum lor
lorem i psum l
orem ipsum lo
rem ipsum.
Lorem ip sum
lor lorem i
psum l orem
ipsum lo rem
ipsum.

Bottom section text:
Lorem ip sum lor
lorem i psum l
orem ipsum lo
rem ipsum.

Diagram illustrating an unbalanced page layout. The page is divided into three rectangular sections of varying sizes. The top section is the largest, the middle section is medium-sized, and the bottom section is the smallest.

Top section text:
Lorem ip sum lor
lorem i psum l orem
ipsum lo.

Middle section text:
Lorem ip sum lor
lorem i psum l orem
ipsum lo rem ipsum.
Lorem ip sum lor
lorem i psum l orem
ipsum lo rem ipsum.
Lorem ip sum lor
lorem i psum l orem
ipsum lo rem ipsum.

Bottom section text:
Lorem ip sum lor
lorem.

THE REVERSE OUTLINE

1. Print your paper
2. Number each of your body paragraphs.
3. Read through the first paragraph and, in the margins, note what that paragraph is doing. Is it introducing an idea? Is it providing background information? Is it providing an example?
4. Keep in mind that you aren't considering what you *intended* the paragraph to do. For the reverse outline, you are concerned only with what is actually happening on the page.
5. Move on to the next paragraph, repeating this same process for the entire paper. Don't stop until you have a written record of what each and every paragraph is doing.
6. After you have an outline of your paper, take note of any places where a paragraph....

- **Has multiple purposes or main ideas**
- **Discusses several different claims at once**
 - **Contains unfinished thoughts**
- **Has no clear purpose or main idea**
- **Repeats a claim that has already been established**



TIP #6:

**GIVE EACH
PARAGRAPH A JOB
TO DO**

Think of each
paragraph as
an action!



Aim for paragraphs that are relatively consistent and manageable in length (approximately 200 words, though this can vary).

Remember, in all cases, to think of each paragraph in terms of *action*. Your paragraphs are critiquing, connecting, disputing, questioning, etc. If too many of your paragraphs seek to “explain” or “show,” then your paper may become disorganized.



Sounding Academic

The next example on your handout contains three paragraphs, all of which discuss the same topic.

One was published in a scholarly journal.

One was published in a major newspaper with national circulation.

One was self-published online.

Read through these paragraphs and then decide which one is from a scholarly journal.

Next, list the context clues that guided you to this decision. Why do you suspect that X paragraph is an example of scholarly prose?



ONCE MORE, WITH CITATIONS

- Paragraph E, “Affordable Housing Forever,” by Michael Friedman (*New York Times* Opinion column, April 15, 2021)
- Paragraph F, “Ghost Stories: A Story of Gentrification in Bushwick, New York,” by Kayli Kunkel (*Medium.com*, 2017)
- Paragraph G, “Resisting Gentrification: The Theoretical and Practice Contributions of Social Work,” by Amie Thurber, Amy Krings, Lisa S. Martinez, and Mary Ohmer (*Journal of Social Work*, 2010)



“Academics” are not a monolith

Writing conventions vary significantly from discipline to discipline.

However, there are some key features of academic writing that cut across nearly all disciplines – and those are the ones we’ll highlight today.



In developing cities across the globe, residents and housing advocates are sounding alarms in response to rapidly rising land values and the diminishing pools of affordable housing. This spatial and social transformation is commonly referred to as gentrification. Although definitions vary, Davidson and Lees (2005) suggest gentrification is distinguished by four key characteristics: (1) reinvestment of capital, (2) increase in high-income demographics, (3) landscape change, and (4) direct or indirect displacement of low-income groups (p. 1187). In the United States, urban neighborhoods are gentrifying at twice the rate of the 1990s, with one in five low-income neighborhoods experiencing rapid increases in median home values, and cities nationwide reporting affordable housing crises (Maciag, 2015). A recent study by the National Low Income Housing Coalition (Aurand, Emmanuel, Yentel, & Errico, 2017) found the United States currently has a 7.4 million unit shortage in affordable housing. Though multiple factors contribute to this gap, the shortage is most severe in states experiencing gentrification. Similar patterns of soaring housing values and shrinking affordability have been documented in Canada and the United Kingdom (Owen, 2015; Sturgeon, 2016). Given social work's commitment to pay "particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty" (National Association of Social Workers, 2017), the field has a distinct responsibility to intervene in gentrifying neighborhoods.



Academic writers frequently cite other academics. These citations are a prominent feature of the text.

This is because most disciplines take the form of a long conversation. Scholars build on one another's work.

You establish your credibility by demonstrating familiarity with that conversation.



In developing cities across the globe, residents and housing advocates are sounding alarms in response to rapidly rising land values and the diminishing pools of affordable housing. This spatial and social transformation is commonly referred to as gentrification. **Although definitions vary, Davidson and Lees (2005) suggest gentrification is distinguished by four key characteristics: (1) reinvestment of capital, (2) increase in high-income demographics, (3) landscape change, and (4) direct or indirect displacement of low-income groups (p. 1187).** In the United States, urban neighborhoods are gentrifying at twice the rate of the 1990s, with one in five low-income neighborhoods experiencing rapid increases in median home values, and cities nationwide reporting affordable housing crises (Maciag, 2015). A recent study by the National Low Income Housing Coalition (Aurand, Emmanuel, Yentel, & Errico, 2017) found the United States currently has a 7.4 million unit shortage in affordable housing. Though multiple factors contribute to this gap, the shortage is most severe in states experiencing gentrification. Similar patterns of soaring housing values and shrinking affordability have been documented in Canada and the United Kingdom (Owen, 2015; Sturgeon, 2016). Given social work's commitment to pay "particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty" (National Association of Social Workers, 2017), the field has a distinct responsibility to intervene in gentrifying neighborhoods.



Academic writers define their terms early and often — usually the first time those terms are used.

These definitions go beyond a simple explanation: they often unpack the term and show its inner complexity, while citing others who have developed competing definitions.

This convention works hand-in-hand with the previous convention (citing constantly). It's another way of showing that you know the field and respect its inherent complexity.

In developing cities across the globe, residents and housing advocates are sounding alarms in response to rapidly rising land values and the diminishing pools of affordable housing. This spatial and social transformation is commonly referred to as gentrification. Although definitions vary, Davidson and Lees (2005) suggest gentrification is distinguished by four key characteristics: (1) reinvestment of capital, (2) increase in high-income demographics, (3) landscape change, and (4) direct or indirect displacement of low-income groups (p. 1187). **In the United States, urban neighborhoods are gentrifying at twice the rate of the 1990s, with one in five low-income neighborhoods experiencing rapid increases** in median home values, and cities nationwide reporting affordable housing crises (Maciag, 2015). **A recent study by the National Low Income Housing Coalition (Aurand, Emmanuel, Yentel, & Errico, 2017) found the United States currently has a 7.4 million unit shortage in affordable housing.** Though multiple factors contribute to this gap, the shortage is most severe in states experiencing gentrification. Similar patterns of soaring housing values and shrinking affordability have been documented in Canada and the United Kingdom (Owen, 2015; Sturgeon, 2016). Given social work's commitment to pay "particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty" (National Association of Social Workers, 2017), the field has a distinct responsibility to intervene in gentrifying neighborhoods.



Academic writers take time to justify the importance of their subject matter.

Writers of popular journalism often replace this step with a “hook” that puts a human face on the subject.

But academics read scholarly work out of a sense of professional obligation. They don't choose to read an article because it sounds *interesting*. They choose to read an article because it sounds useful.

In the sciences and social sciences, your justification often *quantifies* the importance/impact of the topic.



HOW ACADEMICS TALK

Kind of term	Germanic terms	Latinate terms
Adjective (describing word)	Big	Large, significant, extensive
	Good	Valuable, advantageous, appropriate, approved
	Main	Principal, significant, primary, essential, fundamental
Phrasal verb (action words that have more than one word)	Think about	Consider, examine, appraise, review
Adverb	Fast	Rapid, prompt, sudden
	Strongly	Powerfully, forcefully, intensely

DEFINE YOUR TERMS

- Historically, the term X has been used to describe ...
- In this essay, the term X will be used in its broadest sense to refer to all ...
- While a variety of definitions of X have been suggested, this paper will use the definition first suggested by Smith (1968), who...
- According to Smith (2002), X can be defined as follows...
- In this paper, the terms X and Y are used interchangeably to mean ...
- Unfortunately, X remains a poorly defined term, but this paper will...
- Smith (2001) identified four qualities associated with X....
- Since the definition of X varies among researchers, it is important to clarify how the term is ...



JUSTIFY THE IMPORTANCE OF YOUR SUBJECT MATTER



- Give readers a sense of who is affected by this topic and in what way.
- If working in the sciences or social sciences, quantify the significance of your topic with numbers/data.
- If working in the humanities, quantify the significance of your topic by referring to other scholars who study it and/or social problems associated with your topic.



JUSTIFY THE IMPORTANCE OF YOUR SUBJECT MATTER

- X is a common/growing problem for Z....
- Estimates suggest that X affects more than Z people...
- Since DATE, numerous incidents have demonstrated the importance of X....
- X is valuable because it invites us to consider...
- As one of the only instances of Z, X reveals....
- Studies have consistently shown that X has a positive/negative impact upon...
- There is a large body of literature suggesting that X....
- Discussions of X are absent from the literature, but Z data suggest that it...
- When viewed through Y lens, X becomes significant because...



CITE OTHER ACADEMICS

- A number of studies have postulated a convergence between ...
- It is now well established from a variety of studies that ...
- Many critics have argued that ... (e.g. Jones, 1987; Johnson, 1990; Smith, 1994).
- There is a consensus among social scientists that ... (e.g. Jones, 1987; Johnson, 1990)
- Only in the past ten years have studies of X directly addressed how ...
- The first serious discussions and analyses of X emerged during....
- The construct of X was first articulated by Smith (1977) and popularized in his book: ...
- What we know about X is largely based on observational studies.
- Most studies of X have situated it in Z field...
- X has largely been neglected by scholars, perhaps because...



EXPLAIN YOUR THEORETICAL STANCE/METHODOLOGY



- In many academic fields, *how* you're doing the work matters just as much as *what* you're doing.
- Because academics discuss the same topics frequently, they differentiate their work by explaining the theoretical lens they're using
 - or the research methods they're using
 - or the data set they're using.



EXPLAIN YOUR THEORETICAL STANCE/METHODOLOGY

- Using an X approach....
- X offers a way to understand/reframe...
- Analyzing X through a Z lens illuminates...
- My argument draws on the teachings of...
- This paper uses X as a means of understanding...
- I argue that X can be understood as a Z issue...
- Combining an X perspective with a Y approach, this paper...
- I draw on X theories/analyses/studies...



GENERAL LANGUAGE FUNCTIONS

Being cautious

Being critical

Classifying and listing

Compare and contrast

Defining terms

Describing trends

Describing quantities

Explaining causality

Giving examples

Signalling transition

Writing about the past

Describing quantities

The language for writing about quantities can be a complex area for non-native speakers because there are many combinations of short grammar words, such as prepositions and pronouns, and these can easily be confused. Many of the phrases given below also contain approximators such as: *nearly, approximately, over half, less than, just over.*

+ Describing fractions

+ Describing proportions

+ Describing percentages

+ Describing averages

+ Describing ranges

JOHN MORLEY'S ACADEMIC PHRASEBANK

<https://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/>

“The Academic Phrasebank is a general resource for academic writers. It aims to provide you with examples of some of the phraseological ‘nuts and bolts’ of writing organised according to the main sections of a research paper.”



LEARN THE JARGON OF YOUR FIELD (THIS TAKES TIME)

Keep a notebook where you jot down phrases you like or that come up frequently

- **In some cases, the jargon consists of technical language.**
 - *Doctors might refer to "end-stage renal disease"*
 - *Architects might refer to an "air handling unit"*
- **In others, it serves as shorthand for complex concepts**
 - *Educators might refer to "scaffolding" when discussing their lesson plans*
 - *Business students might refer to "corporate defense management" when discussing an insurance policy*
- **In still more, jargon is simply the way scholars signal belonging to one another**
 - *Literary critics say they will "interrogate the text"*
 - *Cinema studies scholars refer to the "polysemic appeal" of a movie*



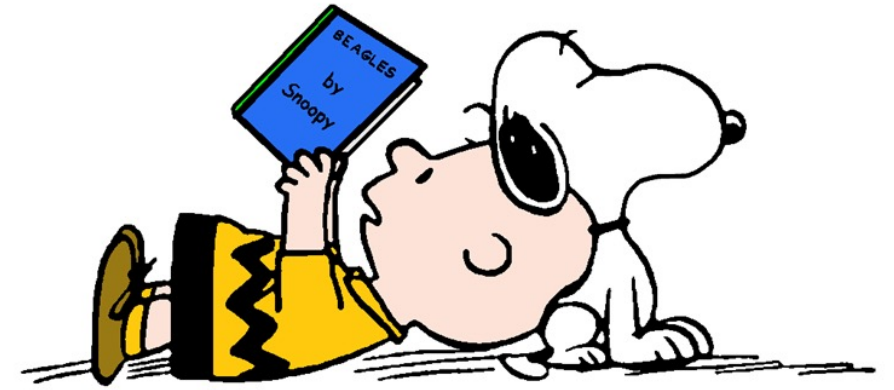
TIP #7:

PRACTICE KEY CONVENTIONS TO SOUND ACADEMIC



1. Define your terms
2. Quantify the significance of your topic
3. Cite other academics frequently to give a sense of the larger conversation
4. Explain your theoretical stance/ methodology
5. Keep a notebook to jot down terms and phrases that people in your discipline use frequently
6. Locate “mentor texts” and notice how they construct arguments, use theory, etc.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



- *The Only Academic Phrasebook You'll Ever Need: 600 Examples of Academic Language* (Barros, 2016)
- *How to Fix Your Academic Writing Trouble* (Mewburn, Firth, and Lehmann, 2019)
- *An A to W of Academic Literacy: Key Concepts and Practices for Graduate Students* (Curry 2021)
- *Stylish Academic Writing* (Sword, 2012)
- "The Science of Scientific Writing" (Gopen & Swan, 1990)



Questions? Comments? Need more
advice?

Book an appointment at the Writing Center
or explore our online library of resources:

writing@usc.edu

<https://dornsife.usc.edu/writingcenter/>

