

Tips for Good Writing

Concise Writing

TL;DR: Write less!

In a great newspaper article, each sentence strikes you in a way that makes you want to keep reading. The authors cuts right to the point, and doesn't fill up the paragraphs with fancy words or flowery phrasing.

Of course, there are many differences between writing a newspaper article and an essay - but for either one, your argument and writing style will be stronger if you write concisely.

Words/phrases you can almost always cross out!

Empty phrasing: "It is important to see that", "In fact"

Intensifier words: "ultimate" "extremely" "very" "greatly" "many" "severely"

Example:

Bad: "The long, complex, and intricate history of computing..."

Good: "The history of computing..."

Bad: "The conceptualization of this immensely powerful and globalized form of communication..."

Good: "This new form of communication..."

Use the shortest version of a word

No need to say "utilize" or when you could say "use".

Use the verb form of the word, rather than turning it into a noun!

A lot of English verbs can be turned into nouns. Avoiding this will also help you use the active voice (see section on Active and Passive voice).

Examples:

Bad: "This vulnerability allows for the exploitation of the network by an attacker"

Good: "An attacker can exploit this vulnerability to get on the network"

Bad: "the speaking of authoritative diction"

Good: "speaking authoritatively"

Bad: “The beginning of the great cyberwar had its inception on March 6”

Good: “The great cyberwar began on March 6”

Only A Sith Deals in Absolutes

Most statements that use *always*, *never*, *everyone* aren’t actually true. So try to avoid these words whenever possible!

Example:

Bad: “Since companies never protect themselves from cyber attacks, they are always being attacked and so everyone is constantly at risk.”

Avoid Repetition!

This applies to full papers all the way down to use of certain words. Don’t have multiple paragraphs that argue the same point, unless they have unique approaches to arguing that point.

Same goes for words. If you find yourself using a certain word many times, try to think of a synonym for it, or a different way to describe it. For example, a paragraph sounds clunky when the word “hackers” occurs over and over again, even if “hackers” are the subject of your paragraph.

Precise Writing

Say what you mean! Mean what you say! This goes hand-in-hand with being concise - don’t dilute your argument with fancy words and complicated sentence structure.

Active and Passive voice

TL;DR: Avoid using the word “is”!

Use the active tense whenever possible! Have the *subject* do the *action*, rather than the *action* be done by the *subject*.

Examples:

Passive (bad): “The network was infiltrated by attackers.”

Active (good): “Attackers infiltrated the network.”

Passive (bad): “The security of cyberspace is increased when the government is reading our emails.”

Active (good): “By reading our emails, the government increases the security of cyberspace.”

In the second example, notice how the passive voice uses the word “is” twice? Even though both sentences say the same thing, the active voice sentence doesn’t pull its punch.

Of course, sometimes you have to use the words “is” or “are.” I’m not advocating completely cutting these words out of your writing entirely! When proofreading, ask yourself whether a sentence could be rearranged to avoid these words - if you think it sounds awkward to change it, or you can’t think of a way to put it in active voice, then leave it. But oftentimes, you’ll find that you can quickly think of an alternative active voice sentence and it will sound much better!

Check out [this](#) link to read further about the differences between active and passive voice and when to use them.

Avoid sentence with “it” as subject!

Example:

Bad: “It is quite obvious to tell that companies should protect themselves from cyber attacks.”

Good: “Companies should protect themselves from cyber attacks.” (Just cross out the whole first part of the sentence!)

Content and other stuff:

General paper format

We do not mandate a 5-paragraph style paper, but if you are unsure of how to write your paper, I recommend using this format. Your intro paragraph should include a clear thesis, and the 3 body paragraphs should each begin with a topic sentence, evidence to follow, and some analysis. Regardless of whether you stick to the exact 5-paragraph format, you should have a clear overall argument, and each paragraph should contribute some new insight to that argument (although it’s ok to be a bit repetitive in the conclusion).

Quotes:

- Use quotes when necessary, not as a crutch when you want to fill space. If you think an author’s words speak better than your own, you should use a quote. But if you think it’s something you can paraphrase, you should use your own words. We do not require direct quotes in these papers.
- Quotes should not take up majority of paragraph, especially for papers this short.

Assumptions about the reader

This suggestion may be the trickiest of all, so it's ok if you don't fully understand it. These are the assumptions that you should and should not make about the reader.

- Assume your reader is unfamiliar with unusual terms. The word "unusual" can be ambiguous - one person might be so familiar with cross-site scripting attacks that they assume other people know about them too. Much of this one comes down to your own judgment. What do you think your reader already knows?
- On the flip side of this, assume your reader understands basic things. In other words, avoid stating the obvious.

Examples of stating the obvious:

"Attacks against a nation's infrastructure could be very harmful if they are not prevented."
"If a hacker steals your personal information and posts it online, your information is no longer private."

First Person

Finally, please avoid first person in essays for this class. I know that this point can be argued, and some classes allow for first person (the mantra that we are taught in high school to "never use 'I'!!!!!" in a paper isn't quite as clear cut in college). However, since these papers are relatively short and because we want to have a consistent policy, we insist upon not using first person.