Writing better essays

Part 2: Style

Learning to write grammatically and use punctuation correctly may help you express yourself clearly and accurately, but it is not the sum total of good English. Good written communication also means writing in a way that is clear and logical, and with an economy that eschews unnecessary words.

Under the broad heading of style, we shall look at using the paragraph effectively, then at how to write simply and concisely, and finally, bearing in mind how conventions vary according to audience, and what are the distinguishing marks of an academic style.

The paragraph

Good use of the paragraph is key to good style. If it is used badly – if too long or short, or if there is a sudden break in sense within or between – then the meaning is obscured. Below are some simple rules for good paragraph construction.

Topic sentences

A well-constructed paragraph should have one major theme, announced in the topic sentence, which subsequent sentences should develop and support.

Observation can be used as both a quantitative and a qualitative research methodology. In the case described in this study, observation was mainly used qualitatively as the research was highly exploratory in nature. On the other hand, observation, if structured, can generate detailed quantitative findings. Data, for example, generated via EPoS tracking (a machine-based observational tool) is highly statistical in nature. Whether findings generated by observation are quantitative or qualitative in nature depends on whether the research is structured or unstructured - which, in turn, often depends on the stage of the research project.

Developing ideas

Ideas set out in the topic sentence should be developed by adding information, providing explanation or data, giving examples, defining terms, comparing and contrasting. Here is how the above paragraph does this:

Observation can be used as both a quantitative and a qualitative research methodology. EXAMPLE: In the case described in this study, observation was mainly used qualitatively as the research was highly exploratory in nature. COMPARISON/CONTRAST: On the other hand, observation, if structured, can generate detailed quantitative findings. EXAMPLE: Data, for example, generated via EPoS tracking (a machine-based observational tool) is highly statistical in nature. EXPLANATION: Whether findings generated by observation are quantitative or qualitative in nature depends on whether the research is structured or unstructured - which, in turn, often depends on the stage of the research project.

Building bridges

You need to connect the information you provide by bridging words and phrases. Bridges can be logical, i.e. implicit in the logic of the paragraph by ideas being developed as above, or verbal, through linked words and phrases, or referring back to key ideas.
If you ensure that ideas develop along a main theme, as we discussed above, it should help in building logical bridges. Verbal bridges however are also very useful, and there are a number of ways of providing them, including:

- using linking words and phrases (on the other hand, for example).
- referring back to key ideas, either repeating phrases or using pronouns (‘in the case described in this study’).

Length

While in general it is best to avoid paragraphs that are too long, there is no hard and fast rule for their length other than to say that sense will dictate a new paragraph, when it is clear that you are dealing with another topic. If when reading through your work you find that some of your paragraphs are very long, check to see if there is a natural break in the sense.

Making effective transitions

You need to make sure that you have proper transitions between paragraphs, and that there are no awkward jumps which can leave the reader confused. Here are some examples of transitional words or phrases:

- Likewise, in the same way, similarly, in comparison: shows similarity, comparison, drawing a parallel
- On the other hand, in contrast, despite, nevertheless, in spite of: contrasts with what has gone before, dissimilarity
- First, second, to begin with, at the same time, later, finally: placing in order, showing a temporal sequence
- Thus, accordingly, therefore, because, as a result, since: shows causality, cause and effect
- As has been said previously: referring back
- For example, for instance, such as, thus, as follows: introducing examples
- In other words, namely, to be more precise, that is to say: providing an explanation
- Also, for example, in other words, moreover, more importantly: addition, reinforcement:
- Finally, in conclusion, in short, overall, to conclude, to sum up: in summary, conclusion.

Wordiness is the enemy of good writing. You should always go through drafts as if you were weeding a garden or pruning a tree: cut out anything that is not needed. There are always ways of saying the same thing more concisely, as in the following example.

**Writing concisely**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original version</th>
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<td>Vocabulary acquisition is naturally a basic skill for all language students and much research has been done in this domain at all levels from ab initio to advanced study (Chesters et al., 1992; Meara, 1997). A group of academics within the French Department decided upon the idea of designing a micro-computer program that</td>
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</table>
would allow students to learn French vocabulary in such a way, that:

1. the learning would be faster
2. the lecturer input would be less
3. the effectiveness of learning would be enhanced

computer program to help student to learn French vocabulary faster, more effectively, and with less lecturer input.

Here are some suggestions as to how you can make your style more concise:

Avoid circumlocutions

A 'circumlocution' is the use of many words when just a few will do – an easy trap to fall into when trying to make a point a little more forcefully! Here are some examples, together with simpler ways of expressing the same idea:

It is possible that: may, might, could

Prior to, in anticipation of, following on, at the same time as: before, after, as

At this point in time: now/then

The reason for, owing to the reason that, on the grounds that: because, since, why

Notwithstanding the fact that, despite the fact that: although

This is a subject which: this subject

The question as to whether: whether

Is able to, has the capacity to: can

Avoid "padding" words and tautologies

There are some other words of this type which are pure padding and can be omitted – for example, 'basically', or 'current' as in 'the current chairman' when you are not referring to past or future chairmen.

Tautologies are those words which mean the same thing: for examples safe haven, future prospects etc. Sometimes, tautologies are used for rhetorical effect, but at other times removing the unnecessary words will improve conciseness.

Avoid the passive voice

Using the passive voice (the subject receives the action) when the active voice (the subject does the action) would suffice is a classic error even amongst experienced writers, and has the immediate effect of adding unnecessary words which means that the sentence loses impact. For example, 'He was stopped composing by his failing health' is better phrased as 'His failing health stopped him composing'.

However, there are times when it is better to use the passive voice to create a more impersonal style and avoid too much use of the personal pronoun, for example, ‘Interviews were carried out’ instead of ‘I carried out interviews’.
Avoid unnecessary determiners, qualifiers and modifiers

There are some words which appear to modify a noun but which merely clutter up the sentence.

*Managers need some kind of extra help if they are to avoid getting bogged down with paperwork.*

*To a certain extent women no longer lag behind men in terms of pay in certain areas.*

Either omit these words or give specific details.

Change clauses into phrases and phrases into single words

Sometimes, phrasal constructions can be reduced to adjectives:

*The employee with talent*

*The talented employee*

Relative clauses can also sometimes be reworded:

*The IT system that met most of our requirements*

*The most compatible IT system*

Other clauses can be worded more simply as in the following example, in which two clauses are put together as one:

*If citing a shortish extract, you can do this by just reproducing it within the article.*

*A shortish extract can be reproduced within the article.*

Some infinitive phrases (those that use verbs with ‘to’) can be turned into sentences with active verbs:

*The responsibility of a leader is to motivate and inspire*

*A leader should motivate and inspire*

Writing in an academic style

There are so many different styles of writing – academic essay, business report, e-mail – there can be no one right style for each. In the third you will be more informal, in the second you will be succinct, and break up the text with bullet points and headings, whilst in the first you will adopt a more formal style. Here are some pointers for writing in a more academic style:

- Use formal English – don’t write in a colloquial style, using abbreviations (won’t, can’t) or exclamations.
- Be impersonal (‘It can be seen that’) avoiding use of the first person where possible (except in the case of personal reflections)
- Be cautious - use phrases to indicate that you cannot be completely certain: appears to, seems to, tends to, may in some cases, the evidence tends to suggest.
- Temper generalizations – give examples, and don’t make absolute claims unless you can substantiate them, use qualifying words such as as a rule, for the most part, generally, in general, potentially, normally, on the whole, in most cases, usually, the vast majority of, a large number of, it is likely that, have tended to.
• Avoid faulty logic – if you are developing a general argument, make sure that the statements on which you base the argument are valid. Avoid non sequiturs, which are sudden jumps in the sense, with the effect that a point raised in one paragraph is followed by a completely different point in a subsequent paragraph, or even within the same paragraph. This leaves the reader confused and unable to hold onto the thread of the argument!
• Use continuous prose – avoid devices that break up the text, such as bullet points or headings. The latter will however probably be necessary for a longer piece of work, such as a dissertation, or a report.

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