

Clarity and Concision

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Introduction

Writing and then revising a paper can certainly be a time-consuming and messy process. However, if you take the writing process one step at a time, the less anxiety you are likely to feel about meeting the deadline. Also, keep in mind that you can take your paper to the Writing Center at *any* step in the writing process, and either a peer or professional tutor would be glad to help you! This handout can also serve as guide by reminding you what to look for as you revise your paper for clarity and concision.

First read your paper out loud, either to yourself or perhaps to your roommate. (Reading your paper out loud will help you to hear how it is coming across to the reader). Then ask yourself these questions as you begin the revision process.

Clarity Questions

1. Does the paper fulfill the assignment requirements?

Look back at the original directions...what are the directional words used? Did the paper ask you to analyze, demonstrate, or explain? Did you follow the directions? Your paper should answer all of the questions that the assignment is asking.

- a. *Analyze* – to examine by separating a work, structure, ideology, etc. into parts and critically studying their relations to one another.
- b. *Demonstrate* – to clearly show (usually one's understanding of materials or ideas) through the use of examples, practical application, experiments, etc.
- c. *Explain* – to define a concept so that it is understandable to the reader (in this case, assume the reader is oblivious to your concept; that is, go into as much detail as possible when explaining).

2. Does your thesis statement *still* fit the direction you took your paper? (If applicable).

Most often, students will write the thesis before the body of their paper is complete. If that is the case, make sure to really analyze (and be critical!) of your thesis. If it

does not fit with what your paper is arguing then you will need to revise it. Also, ask yourself if your thesis is specific and tailored enough to *your* paper.

- a. *What is a thesis statement?* A thesis is a sentence or two that provides the reader with an overview of your paper. Essentially, what it is that you will be arguing throughout the body of your essay, the main focus of your paper. Your thesis should be specific and to the point. If you have trouble zoning in on a specific argument ask yourself “So what? What is the purpose of my paper?”. Your answer to that question becomes your thesis.

3. Is my paper well organized?

That is, does your paper flow in a logical manner? Does the order of your paragraphs make sense and do your paragraphs all work together to support your paper’s central argument? If your paper’s logic appears to jump around then ask yourself why you choose to order the paragraphs in that specific way. As you continue through the revision process you may find that you need to rearrange paragraphs or even combine and delete others. Above all, your paper should flow and your argument should unfold in a clear, concise manner for the reader. So, if you feel as though your paper could be organized in a different manner, try considering the paragraphs individually. Ask yourself if every paragraph is organized in a way so that it adds to the central argument of the paper. If not, try re-arranging the paragraphs so there is a more clear and concise fit. You can also ask yourself why the paragraphs flow in that way and go from there.

4. Are there any confusing words, sentences, ideas, passages, etc?

Keep in mind not every idea you have will translate so easily on paper. One of your main goals (besides fulfilling the duties of the assignment of course) is to make sure that your ideas are clear to the reader. The reader should be able to not only understand your paper (even if s/he does not have the exact assignment sheet in hand) but also, s/he should be able to take away something from your argument. If your reader is able to do so, then your paper is especially clear. A helpful exercise to check for clarity could be to again read your paper out loud to a roommate or friend. Ask them what they think you are trying to convey with that particular word, passage, idea, etc. If what they say is not what you had intended try writing down exactly what you mean before attempting to revise your idea. (Sometimes, as writers, we become so focused on expressing our ideas in an articulate and academic manner, that soon enough our actual idea becomes lost in the words that we choose).

5. Are your pronouns clear (unambiguous)?

If you can, try to avoid vague pronouns. For example, (the vague pronouns are in blue) “The author argues that peoples who do not exercise regularly and who eat poorly put themselves at risk for cardiovascular disease. **They** provide census figures and anecdotes to support **their** claim.” Who does refer to? In this case, they could either be the author or the people who do not exercise and eat healthy. It is very important to make this distinction clear. Fortunately, making the switch from unclear to clear pronouns can be done very easily. “The author, Mrs. Smith, argues that incidences of domestic disputes between a husband and wife creates a cycle of violence. Mrs. Smith provides census figures and anecdotes to support her claim.” Also, make sure to have your pronouns agree with the subject in number. A single subject requires a single pronoun/verb; a plural subject calls for a plural pronoun/verb. For example, (subject in number are in blue) “There **are** four **books** in my backpack right now;” “The **cat** is orange with white stripes.” The books are plural subjects whereas and cat is a single subject.

Concision

Writing concisely will not only help your paper to be more clear, but will also allow you to say all that you need to in your paper without going over the word allotment (especially if you have a lot of ideas you would like to express and are penalized for going over the specified word count). Concise writing does not always use the fewest words, but rather the strongest words.

Here are some tips for concise writing:

1. **Use more specific words.** Sometimes, writers will choose phrases that really do not convey much meaning. Instead, substitute those phrases with stronger, more concise words. Searching in a thesaurus can help you look for an appropriate substitute. For example:
 - a. **Wordy:** Students are often required to complete certain assignments or writings that fulfill a grade requirement towards graduation.
Concise: Certain assignments or writings are a graduation requirement for many students.
 - b. **Wordy:** In my opinion, writing is one of the most important skills that one can have while pursuing their education and gaining knowledge to use later in life.
Concise: In my opinion, writing is an important skill, both in obtaining an education and for use in life.
 - c. **Wordy:** Working under the Assistant District Attorney at the Courthouse was an experience that will really remain with me and also helped me a lot.
Concise: Interning for the Assistant District Attorney at the Courthouse was both an educational and memorable experience.
2. **Check to make sure that every word is contributing to the meaning of your sentence.** Eliminate any unnecessary or even redundant words.
 - a. **Wordy:** My professor outlined various methods and techniques that I could use to eliminate words from my paper.
Concise: My professor outlined techniques for eliminating words from my paper.

3. **Combine Sentences.** Not every piece of information requires its own sentence, so when appropriate you can combine sentences (Weber & Hurm, 2009).

Please refer to the Purdue Owl Online Writing Lab for further instruction
(<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/572/01/>)

References

Weber, R. & Hurm, N. (2009). Conciseness. In *Purdue Online Writing Lab*.

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