Flow and Voice
Writing Smooth Sentences

Part of the learning experience in a college composition course, and a valuable skill in any kind of writing, is the ability to not only write sentences in a way that is grammatically correct, but also choose the best words and order to make the sentence flow as well as possible. There are many ways to improve a sentence's flow, and different methods are useful in different settings. The best way to improve the flow of a sentence is largely the writer's own judgment; there isn't a single "right way" – often, there are many paths to the same destination. Writing is almost never tied to a black-and-white, right-or-wrong formula; there are often many grammatically correct ways to write the same thing. The key to making your paper as effective as possible is to use words that are grammatically correct in context, flow well and don't feel awkward, and sound right to you.

Much of the finesse in improving the wording of sentences lies in well-placed vocabulary. Many writers make the mistake of thinking that *bigger* words or *longer* sentences are better, when the truth is usually the opposite. More often than not, the reliable adage of "less is more" rings true, at least to some degree. When you're trying to make a strong point, it's usually best to do so using the fewest but most accurate and simplest words possible while still making your point fully and clearly. This concept in writing is known as *conciseness* (or sometimes *concision*). Two of the most important elements of conciseness are the concepts of *flow* (how easy it is to read a sentence or passage) and *voice* (in essence, the subject/verb structure of each sentence).

Flow and Structure

One of the keys to a successful paper is writing sentences that are not only easy to read on their own, but fit well together. This entails using sentence elements that fit together for a paper that can be read and understood without difficulty. In English, a sentence's natural flow is from *subject* to *verb* to *object*; changing or interfering with this order often causes confusion or awkwardness. The important thing to remember is that grammar is merely the foundation of good writing. A sentence can be grammatically correct but still worded poorly.

Noun Strings and Nominalizations

Nouns (words that represent a person, place, thing, idea, or quality) are a key building block of sentences because actions (that is, verbs) are meaningless without actors and objects, but nouns can be troublesome to the flow and clarity of sentences, usually in connection to their relationship *with* verbs. Many nouns can take verb forms, and vice versa. For example, "discovery" is the noun form of the verb "discover." When a sentence uses a verb's noun form, this is known as a *nominalization*. While nominalizations are not grammatically wrong, they can easily be overused, and their use can often lead to a sentence being more wordy than necessary. This is especially true when a nominalization is paired with an adjective that *could* be an adverb instead. There's no need to use a nominalization when a verb will suffice, especially when adjectives can be simply changed into adverbs to make the same point. Conciseness is making a point completely while using the fewest words

possible, so avoiding nominalizations can greatly improve your paper's flow. Nominalizations can also make a sentence unclear. For example:

>   NOMINALIZATION (UNCLEAR): The keynote speaker's introduction was favorable.

In the above example, "introduction" is a nominalization. However, this leads to a lack of clarity. To what does "favorable" refer: the keynote speaker, or the introduction? If we *need* the nominalization of "introduction" to refer to it as a thing, the sentence needs a clearer verb.

>   NOMINALIZATION (CLEAR): The keynote speaker gave a favorable introduction.

If, however, we're using "favorable" to refer to the speaker, we need to eliminate the nominalization and use a verb and adverb instead.

>   VERB (CLEAR): The keynote speaker was introduced favorably.

Bear in mind that the two "clear" examples above have completely different meanings, so it's important to be sure of yourself and of what you mean to say; don't change the meaning of your sentence to something you don't intend for the sake of being technically correct. Instead, be technically correct while also saying precisely what you mean to say.

Another problem with nominalizations is that they often lead to *noun strings* (that is, a series of connected nouns written one after another), which are difficult to understand. Noun strings are an example of taking conciseness to a problematic extreme: using *too* few words. In many such noun strings, there are nouns that could be verbs instead. This often requires more words, but that's necessary because the sentence is unclear without them. For instance:

>   NOUN STRING (WEAK): The speaker gave her ecosystem deforestation destruction
>   presentation.

The above example has condensed the description of the speaker's presentation for the sake of brevity, but there is a difference between brevity and conciseness: brevity is simply using as few words as possible, while conciseness is using as few words as possible while still being clear. To revise this, we need to add a few words by turning one of those nouns into a verb.

>   REVISED (STRONG): The speaker gave her presentation on how deforestation
>   destroys the ecosystem.

The above example uses more words, but the flow is much better, and the description is much clearer. Therefore, even though it uses more words, it is more concise.

Introductory Elements

Introductory elements – that is, words or phrases (or, sometimes, even clauses) that occur before the subject of the sentence – are very useful for creating a varied sentence structure. However, used incorrectly, they can quickly detract from the sentence's flow and make it very difficult to read.

The best way to create these introductory elements correctly is to carefully consider the *entire* sentence before you write it. Remember that a sentence – introductory elements and all – forms one thought and acts as a

single, unified grammatical unit. This means that everything in the sentence should be clearly connected. This is especially important to remember when the introductory element acts as a modifier (typically an introductory element that includes a word ending in "-ing," but not always), because using a modifier incorrectly can convey a meaning you didn't intend. For instance:

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WRONG: Singing in the shower, the bar of soap fell out of Mary's hand.
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A grammatical rule is that when a modifier is used before the subject of a sentence, the subject then becomes the target of that modifier. This leads to a problem in the sentence above: while we can probably infer that the author *meant* to refer to "Mary" with the introductory phrase "Singing in the shower," because "the bar of soap" is the subject of the sentence, it *looks* like the author is saying that the bar of soap is singing. To fix this, the subject and modifier need to be connected properly, either by changing the subject of the sentence or by incorporating the modifier into the wording of the sentence.

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RIGHT: Singing in the shower, Mary dropped the bar of soap.

RIGHT: The bar of soap fell out of Mary's hand as she was singing in the shower.
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Another common problem with introductory elements is when they're worded as modifiers but have no clear subject to modify.

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WRONG: After lifting the jack, the lug nuts on the wheel can be loosened.
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The sentence above appears correct, but it flows poorly; as it's written, it appears to say that the *lug nuts* are what lift the jack, which is obviously not the case. However, there's no other noun in the main clause of the sentence that can act as a clear replacement (the only other noun there is "the wheel," which is also not what's lifting the jack). Remember, in an academic paper, it's incorrect to use second person unless you're giving a speech or writing a letter (or otherwise directly addressing a specific audience), so you can't just say, "After lifting the jack, loosen the lug nuts" because that's directly addressing your reader, which is second person and therefore inappropriate for an academic paper. This can be fixed by changing the wording of the sentence in a way that adds a clear subject.

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RIGHT: After the mechanic lifts the jack, the lug nuts on the wheel can be
loosened.
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In the above example, there's no confusion as to who is lifting the jack. This makes the introductory *phrase* into an actual *clause*, which eliminates confusion. Alternatively, we could simply change the structure of the introductory clause so that *who* is lifting the jack becomes unimportant.

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RIGHT: Once the car is lifted on the jack, the lug nuts on the wheel can be
loosened.
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The above example might be more useful if you're talking about how to change a tire at home (for example, in an informational process analysis) but can't use second-person because the assignment guidelines don't allow it. In this example, we've added a passive subject ("the car") and basically changed how the verb works. This concept is called *voice*.

Voice

The concept of voice is distinct from – but closely related to – sentence flow. Voice refers mainly to the role the verb plays in a sentence, along with how its subjects and objects are connected. There are two voices, as the term relates to verbs: *active* voice (the "usual" voice of a sentence, where a subject noun or noun phrase performs the action of the verb) and *passive* voice (where an object stands in as a subject because the subject is unknown or inconsequential). Both voices are grammatically correct, but one is usually more fitting than the other in any given sentence.

Active and Passive Voice

Active voice is the voice that readily fits the usual sentence structure. It takes the simple form of subject-verb-object. Sometimes modifiers and other elements may be used throughout the sentence too, but the basic structure of subject-verb-object is still accurate.

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ACTIVE VOICE: The tornado destroyed the town.
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In the above sentence, there is a very clear action ("destroyed") and an equally clear actor ("the tornado"). There's no reason to use anything other than active voice here; the focus of the sentence is the subject, which is both clearly defined and clearly connected to the verb. But what if we only happened upon a town in ruins with no idea what destroyed it? We want to report on the destruction of the town, but we have no clear actor. In such a case, we would use *passive* voice.

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PASSIVE VOICE: The town was destroyed.
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In this example, we don't know *what* destroyed the town, only that the town now lies in ruin. Therefore, we've changed the sentence from a subject-verb-object construction to simply a subject with a complement. That is, a subject simply described by its state of being and connected to that description by a linking verb, which will usually (but not always) be a form of the verb "be" (in this case, "was," though depending on tense and subject, you could also use "is," "am," "are," "were," or "will be").

Using Passive Voice Correctly

In cases where the actor is known, it's almost always better to write the sentence using *active* voice. Passive voice, in such cases, is not only unnecessarily wordy, but also weaker than active voice.

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PASSIVE VOICE (WEAK): The town was destroyed by the tornado.

ACTIVE VOICE (STRONG): The tornado destroyed the town.
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Since active voice is simpler and more direct, it's better to use it when possible, except in a few cases. When the verb action has a clear actor, passive voice usually takes more words than necessary and detracts from the flow. However, sometimes the actor of a verb's action is *known*, but isn't intended to be the focal point. That is, the actor is known but unimportant. For instance:

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PASSIVE VOICE: The Department of Homeland Security was established in November
of 2002 by the Bush administration.
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In this example, "the Bush administration" is the actor, but it is clearly not intended to be the focal point of the sentence. In other words, the actor is *less important* than the thing *receiving* the action ("The Department of Homeland Security").

Where flow and word choice are concerned, you should always favor active voice over passive voice except where the actor is unknown or unimportant. Remember, conciseness means making your point fully and completely while using the fewest words possible, and when the actor for a verb is known, active voice requires fewer words than passive voice.

Other Writing Center Resources

- Fragments and Run-Ons
- Clauses
- Pronounitis

Further Reading

- "Active and Passive Voice." Purdue University Online Writing Lab.
  https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/539/1
- "Improving Sentence Clarity." Purdue University Online Writing Lab.
  https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/600/1
- "Flow and Cohesion" UMass Amherst Writing Center.
  https://www.umass.edu/writingcenter/flow-and-cohesion