



Connors Writing Center

7 Hamilton Smith Hall • UNH • writing@unh.edu • 862-3272

Improving Sentence Clarity

Student writers often come to a writing conference and ask their consultants to make sure their writing flows. Often, this flowing quality of writing comes from *sentence clarity* -- the way we put together a sentence and give information in a logical order, so that readers understand it easily. Here are a few ways to help your writing flow.

1. Go from old to new information.

Introduce readers to the main idea of a paragraph first. When you give new information, link it to familiar information in earlier sentences. Move from old information to new information. For example:

The cast of Firefly, a space western TV series, returned in the film Serenity. In this film, (old) a fanatical assassin hunts one of the crew of the ship Serenity: River Tam, a seventeen year old psychic (new). River has intuited (old) one of the government's coldest secrets: an experiment that cost the lives of an entire planet (new).

- Below is a sentence that is not clear because it moves from new information to old:

Lately, most movies I've seen have been merely second-rate entertainment, but occasionally, some have worthwhile themes. The rapid disappearance of the Indian culture (new) is the topic of a recent movie (old) I saw.

The writer has skipped from movies to vanishing Indian culture abruptly. To make the transition clearer, reverse the information in the last sentence: *A recent movie I saw talked about the rapid disappearance of the Indian culture.*

2. Add clauses at the beginning or end of a sentence rather than in the middle.

Breaking up the main sentence makes it harder to follow.

- clear (clause at the end):

Industrial Spying is increasing rapidly because we use computers to store information.

- not as clear (clause embedded in the middle):

Industrial spying, because we use computers to store information, is increasing rapidly.

3. Use the active voice.

Active voice means the subject of the sentence does the action: *I shot the sheriff.*

Passive voice means the subject was acted on: *But the deputy wasn't put out of action.*

The active voice tells us who did what more clearly than the passive, in fewer words. The passive voice is weak and often unclear.

4. Use parallel constructions.

Parallel means the same kind. We can read a list more easily if all the pieces of it have the same form. Use the same kind of noun (flying, swinging, baking... or to swim, to perch, to screech...) or the same kind of verb (chopped, minced, grated . . .) or the phrases with the same structure.

- clear (the numbers designate parallel features in the sentence):

In the hurricane, we learned (1) to become aware of the warning signs, (2) to take precautions and (3) to seek shelter early.

- not as clear (not parallel):

In the hurricane, we learned (1) to become aware of the warning signs, (2) taking precautions is important and (3) we should seek shelter early.

5. Link pronouns to nouns clearly.

Because pronouns stand in for nouns, be sure your pronouns refer to nouns you have already put in place, usually in the sentence just before the pronoun appears.

- Unclear examples:

Time is money. This is valuable.

What is valuable here – time, money, or the worn out idea?

Alicia met Sunita in Cairo. She wore green silk boxers.

Which woman is cool and comfortable?