

Writing with Power: Clarity, Concision, and Variation

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Hello everybody, and welcome to this nonfiction session on style. My name is Brian Jackson. I teach writing at BYU. I directed the University Writing Program for a while, and now I teach First Year Writing on a regular basis. It's my favorite class to teach. And I'm glad to be with you today. I know this isn't quite the arrangement we maybe had hoped for, for a conference.

It'd be nice to be there with you breathing the same air, but to be truthful, the idea of breathing the same air is sort of a terrifying idea right now. So I'm happy to be with you prerecorded.

So I'm going to share some principles with you about style. And so I have three preliminaries before we begin.

The first one is that I'm going to be asking you to do some writing exercises. So if you could get out a word processor, or open up another tab on your laptops, or get out a piece of paper and a pencil and pen, I'll be asking you to do three exercises, as we go along. And when I do that, I'm going to give you the prompt on a slide and then I'm going to blank my screen and mute my audio so that you can just spend about five minutes doing the exercises—the writing exercises I'd like you to do.

The second preliminary is that just to make sure that this is accessible to everybody, I'm going to be reading the material that you're going to see on these slides just to make sure that everyone can experience and enjoy this presentation. And then finally, my office is right next to a construction site; it looks like they're completing up for the day, but you may hear some some bleeps and some noises as trucks and forklifts go by. Anyway, glad to be with you. So I'm going to share my screen now, and we're going to talk about style for a second.

So I know that we promised you three different principles of style—clarity, concision and variety—but we’re only going to do two today because that’s all the time that we’ve got.

So the first one is clarity, and I want to begin by suggesting that there are several different ways that you can define what a clear writing style is. For example, some people think about concision being less wordy as being clear. Other people think about diction, which is the choice of words you pick, using concrete over abstract words, things like that. So that could be another definition of clarity. Others might think about flow. Writing is clear when it’s transitioning easily from one idea to the next and creating that meta language that connects the parts of the pros.

But actually, I’m going to talk about what I consider one of the most important aspects of style, which is the action of an English sentence. What do I mean by the action of an English sentence? Well, let’s take a look at a sentence here: a decision about the forcible administration of medication in an emergency room setting, despite the inability of an irrational patient to provide legal consent is usually an on-scene medical decision.

Not an award winning sentence, but this is the kind of sentence you might see in official government documents, or in bureaucratic technical documents, and anywhere on the web. And sometimes in professional writing, you’ll see a sentence like this. Well, what’s the problem with this sentence? If you look at a revision of this sentence, you’ll see what the problem might be. Emergency room care-givers decide at the scene whether to forcibly medicate mentally-ill patients who cannot provide legal consent.

So you see what’s happening here is we’re finding the action of a sentence. The English sentence depends on a subject verb construction or as you may have remembered from nightmares of grade school is subject and predicate. A person or some kind of agent performing some kind of action or some kind of way of being.

And the second sentence shows how the first sentence is missing that element. And one of the great benefits of you of tapping into the action of an English sentence is we dropped the word count by thirty-two percent.

So I’m going to share with you three different strategies that you can use as a professional writer to tap into the action of an English sentence. And the first one has to do with combining actors and actions.

So here's another sentence that's similar to the one that we just looked at: with the decline in network cable television viewing in favor of streaming programs, awareness is growing at the networks of a need to revise programming.

So I want you to start thinking right now. How might you revise this sentence? And you might revise it by thinking about some questions: who is viewing? Well, people who watch stuff. You know, you call them viewers.

And whose awareness is growing? We're looking for actors in the sentence, right—people at the networks.

And then finally, where is the action hiding? And you'll notice that some of the action is hiding in phrases like "a decline in," "in favor of," "awareness of," "a need." You see that? So that's the first thing to do is to find the actors and the actions of a sentence. And this sentence is better: because of viewers stream video more than they watch cable TV, network executives realize they need to revise programming.

And related to this is the second one which is this idea that you're changing nominalizations.

Now, nominalizations are sometimes called zombie nouns. I can't remember who called this phenomenon that first, but nominalizations are nouns that have verbs hiding in it. And sometimes they end in -tion like administration instead of administer, a decision, instead of decide. You see that? So the second strategy for finding the action of an English sentence is to go after these zombie nouns and change them into active verbs.

And that's something that you can look through your own writing and see whether or not you do.

And then finally, one thing that you can do to tap into the action of an English sentence is to avoid passive voice. You may have heard this before, "unless the actor doesn't matter." This passive voice is used often and used effectively. And in fact, I just use passive voice there. So let's take a look at this bit of information here: an examination of an applicant's academic record is made to determine whether she has established a strong affirmative case in regard to the character of her general education and her fitness for graduate work in her proposed subject of study. Letters of recommendation from persons who are in a position to analyze the candidates abilities and to estimate her promise are given very serious consideration.

My goodness, I almost fell asleep just reading that. But one thing that this is saying is we examine all applicants academic records and we consider seriously letters of recommendation.

There is no shame in putting the actors and the actions into your sentences to make them clear. So, our three strategies. Number one, find the actors and the actions of the sentence.

Number two, change nominalizations which are those nouns. Those zombie nouns that are hiding verbs hiding action inside of them.

And then the third strategy is avoid passive voice. And by now, I think you can see how those three things are interrelated.

Okay, so what I'd like you to do. Now I'm going to show you five sentences. And if you want to play along, I invite you to rewrite those sentences using some of the strategies that we've talked about. And here they are. I'm going to read them real quick and then I'm going to go dark here and give you five minutes to complete this assignment. So number one: There has been speculation by educators about the role of the family in improving educational achievement.

Number two: Complaints by editorial writers about voter apathy rarely offer suggestions about dispelling it. I've given you a hint here that you might want to start that sentence with when when actor action actor action. Just think about it.

Number three: There is a need for an analysis of library use to provide a reliable base for the projection of needed resources.

And then number four: Precision in plotting the location of building foundations enhances the possibility of its accurate reconstruction.

Okay, everybody ready, go ahead and get to work and I'll be back with you in just a moment.

Alright, welcome back. I hope that was enough time for you to be frank, I didn't start my timer. So that was about five minutes. I think so.

Okay, so much for clarity. There's more we can talk about there, but we're going to move on to variation, now. Before before we talk about variation as a strategy of style. I'd like you not to get comfortable, but to do the following exercise.

Let's see, here it is. I want you to pair to write a paragraph, at least five sentences long about your experiences during the code pandemic.

So this is going to be a personal narrative about your experience to the during the coven pandemic. Just one paragraph. Okay? So I'm going to give you five minutes to do that again and go ahead and get started.

Okay, start to wrap that up. I know from writing research that writing is a good way to deal with trauma. So I hope that was a good experience for you, dealing with the trauma of coven that we've all been experiencing.

Now I want you to just set that aside and ignore it for just a second. I'm going to have you go back to it in a minute. Why don't we take a look at a paragraph.

And this is sort of a corny paragraph. This is a bit of fiction, but let's look at it, anyway. My sister Rose was a cheerleader in high school.

She attended Evergreen High back in the late 90s. Her grades weren't that good, but she had fun socially. When she started dating a baseball player, she stopped cheering.

Surprisingly, this made my parents happy; her grades improved. Dating anyone exclusively turned out to be a motivator for her. Because he was driven, he helped her study more. He wouldn't go out with her until they'd finish their homework. This guy was a great influence on her.

Okay. Once again, this is a just fine sentence. But I want you to take a look for a second on the length of each of the sentences that you see here there's something eerie about this as we read it out loud. And as we experience it on the page.

The one thing that you might notice is, if we were to go and count every word in each sentence you would find that there is not much variation in the word length across the sentences.

And this sort of creates a static almost uncanny unrealistic voice that's on the page.

And so you can see that I've put these all here and we don't have much variation between nine and 11 words per sentence.

And I explicitly constructed this so it would look like this. And so maybe this is a too dramatic an example of what we're talking about.

But one of the things that you might think about as a stylist is using variety to strengthen your prose using variety specifically to create different sentence length. And so I want you to now look at this example as sort of a contrast between the one before.

My sister Rose was a cheerleader in high school-at Evergreen High in the late 90s. Though she was whip-smart, she couldn't keep her grades up. Too busy playing.

She stopped cheering, though, when she started dating a baseball player, a remarkably studious one whose manic drive for excellence in math, as in baseball made my parents giddy.

Because he studied, Rose studied. A lot. In part because he wouldn't spend time with her until homework was done. In short, he was a good influence on her.

Now if you know me reading it dramatically kind of takes a little bit of the flattens the tone out of it, just a tad. So I understand that this is a little bit artificial but If we were to count the words per sentence we would find some really interesting variation The shortest sentence here is the sentence fragment. A lot, which only has two words and the longest one is that one in the middle that's 29 words.

Now you might think that's too dramatic of a break. But I want to show you an example from professional writing from what I think of as an amazing pro stylist James Baldwin.

In his essay notes of a native son. I'm going to show you an example from a professional writer that has that variation and you can hear the transition from longer to shorter sentences and it creates a more exciting and realistic and various voice behind the pros. So here's James Baldwin.

And this is after Baldwin has been thrown into jail in a French jail because his roommate had stolen some towels or some linens, or something like that. So here's Baldwin.

He, meaning, one of the guards in the jail. He gave me a package of Lucky Strikes and said that, though it was doubtful that there would be any celebration in the prison, he would see to it that I got a fine Christmas dinner when I got out. And this somehow seemed very funny.

I remember being astonished at the discovery that I was actually laughing. I was too, I imagine, also rather disappointed that my hair had not turned white, that my face was clearly not going to bear any marks of tragedy, disappointed at bottom, no doubt, to realize, facing him in that room, that far worse things had happened to most people. And that, indeed, to paraphrase. my

mother, if this was the worst thing that ever happened to me. I could consider myself among the luckiest people ever to be born.

I just love that ending. It's lovely. And you can hear how Baldwin between the sentences is using longer and shorter sentences to create a real strong feeling here.

And so that's the first aspect I wanted to talk about a variety is to create different kinds of sentence length, but there's something also about this example that I wanted to point out, and that is a variation of sentence structure.

And if you look at the Baldwin example, you're going to see not only a variation of sentence length, but in that long sentence in the middle, you're going to see That Baldwin is interrupting the flow of the sentence even between subjects and verbs or verbs and direct objects.

With different kinds of grammatical structures so that he has a rhythm to this something that carries you along and also creates editorial commenting as he goes. How can you do this? Well, let's take a look again in our sister rose example. If it's not too corny to go back to.

You may have noticed that there's some really interesting sentence structure variation going on in this example.

For example, there's a propositional phrase separated with a dash. So one thing you might do is use punctuation to create sentence structure variety There's also dependent clauses. So you may have heard of compound or complex or compound compound complex sentences.

And that's when you see people using dependent and independent clauses and joining them together in different ways, this, this, these two examples are examples of starting a sentence with dependent clauses.

You also may have noticed sentence fragments here which you'd usually mark as error, but these are intentional sentence fragments. I hope that was clear by the the style of the writing.

You also may have noticed that there are some interruptions. Just like the Baldwin example, where here we have an a positive phrase modifying modifying flow. A positive just means you rename the noun that comes Before that element. So a remarkably studious baseball player is modifying the word baseball player. And then again, a propositional phrase also modifying flow and then a brief opening phrase separated by a comma, which is another way to create some rhythm to your sentences.

So, I want to summarize a few things before I just log off and let you take about five minutes here at the end to revise your coven paragraph.

And I want to summarize first by saying that we've talked about two things in this in this conference presentation. We talked about clarity.

And the way that you can create clarity by engaging with the action of an English sentence.

By finding the actors and the actions, avoiding nominal nominal associations and avoiding passive voice, unless the actor is not important.

And then we talked about sentence variety, creating varying sentence length and also sentence structures.

And I really like what Richard Lanham, he's a scholar of rhetoric, and he said that we often write in what he called a chronic absence of mind.

And I love that phrase, because it reminds me that sometimes when I write I'm writing and I'm using that letter box in my brain to write and it's a little bit of a mystery how the words come out.

I don't know if they're coming from a long term memory or from the reading that I've done.

The novels and the histories and scripture and all those things that you've read to you have that letter box in your head to when you write you draw from it.

Some of these activities and some of these principles that I've been teaching you is something that you can go back and do once you've drafted something for your professional writing And you can go back and test yourself on your clarity and your sentence variation as a way to inject more style, more purpose more variation, more meaning into your writing.

And I hope this was useful to you. I really appreciated the time I could spend with you here. And if you'd like. At the end of the five minutes.

If, if the moderator wouldn't mind just starting a timer when I'm done here. I'll stop. I'll stop sharing My screen there and I've, I've enjoyed my time with you and hope to bump into you sometime. So thanks everybody.