

Stylistic Revisions

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn how to address stylistic concerns in order to increase your writing's clarity, conciseness, and professionalism. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Revising for Style



THINK ABOUT IT

You know the difference between cloudy and clear water, but can you tell when your writing is cloudy, when meaning is hidden in the shadows, when the message you are trying to communicate is obscured by the style you use to present it?

Here we will discuss several strategies to help clarify your writing style. If you have made wise word choices, then the next step to clarifying your document is to take it sentence by sentence. Each sentence should stand on its own, but each sentence is also interdependent on all other sentences in your document.

These strategies will require significant attention to detail and an awareness of grammar that might not be your area of strength; however, the more you practice them, the more they will become good habits that will enhance your writing.

1a. Break Up Long Sentences

By revising long sentences, you can often increase the overall clarity of your document. To do this, let's start off with one strategy that will produce immediate results: Count the number of conjunctions in your document. Word processing programs will often perform a search for a specific word, such as "and."



HINT

Simple sentences often become compound and complex through the use of the word "and." The distance that the subject, the action, and the modifiers or descriptions are from one another is directly related to the complexity of the sentence, increasing the probability of reader error and misunderstandings. Look for the word "and" and evaluate whether the sentence has two complete thoughts or ideas. Does it try to join two dissimilar ideas or ones better off on their own?

In prose, and your expository writing classes, you may have learned that complex sentences can communicate emotions, settings, and scenes that evoke a sense of place and time with your reading audience. In business writing, our goals aim more toward precision and the elimination of error; a good business document won't read like a college essay.

A professor may have advised you to avoid short, choppy writing. Are we asking you to do something along those lines? No. Choppy writing is hard to follow, but simple, clear writing does the job with a minimum of fuss and decoration.

1b. Revise Big Words and Long Phrases

Big words can clutter your writing with needless jargon that may be a barrier to many readers. Even if you know your audience has significant education and training in a field, you may need to include definitions and examples as effective strategies to communicate meaning.

Don't confuse simple writing with simplistic writing. Your task will almost certainly not require an elementary approach for new readers, but it may very well require attention to words and the degree to which they contribute to, or detract from, the communication of your intended message.

Long noun sequences, often used as descriptive phrases, can be one example of how writing can reduce clarity. If you need to describe a noun, use a phrase that modifies the noun clearly, with commas to offset and enhance clarity.

Another type of long phrase to watch out for is often located in the introduction. Long preambles can make the sentence awkward and will require revision. Sentences that start with "It is" or "There are" can often be shortened or made clearer through revision.

1c. Delete Repetitious Words

Some level of repetition is to be expected and can be beneficial. It is also important to be consistent in your use of words when precise terminology is appropriate.

However, needless repetition can make your document monotonous and discourage readers from continuing. Synonyms are useful in avoiding the boredom of repetition.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Use of the word "said" when attributing dialogue is acceptable a couple of times, but if it is the only word you use, it will lose its impact quickly. People can "indicate," "point out," "share," and "mention" as easily as they can "say" words or phrases.

1d. Eliminate Archaic Expressions or References

Some writing has been ritualized to the point of cliché and has lost its impact.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Consider the sentence "Heretofore, we have discussed the goal of omitting needless words." "Heretofore" is an outdated word that could easily be cut.

Like certain words and phrases, some references can be outdated. While it is important to recognize leaders in a field, as this course does when referencing pioneers in the field of communication, it is also important to focus on current research and concepts.

Without additional clarification and examples, readers may not understand references to an author long since passed even though that person made an important contribution to the field.

1e. Eliminate Slang

Many college professors can give examples of emails they have received from students that use all the modern characteristics of instant message and text abbreviation combined with a complete disregard for any norms of grammar or spelling, resulting in nearly incomprehensible messages.

If your goal is to be professional, and the audience expectations do not include the use of slang, then it is inappropriate to include it in your document. Eliminate slang as you would a jargon term that serves as a barrier to understanding meaning. Not everyone will understand your slang word, and it will thus defeat your purpose.

Norms for capitalization and punctuation that are routinely abandoned in efficient text messages or tweets are necessary and required in professional documents. Finally, there is no place in reputable business writing for offensive slang or profanity.



Self and Social Awareness: Skill Reflect

Strong self and social awareness skills can help you determine which language is appropriate. Taking the time to know and understand your audience can be the difference between success and a misunderstanding (or worse). Can you think of a time when your word selection led to an issue? Maybe it was in a presentation? Maybe in a casual conversation? How did you feel afterward?

1f. Evaluate Clichés

As you learned in a previous lesson, clichés are words or phrases that, through their overuse, have lost their impact. That definition does not imply they have lost their meaning, and sometimes a well-placed cliché can communicate a message effectively.

➞ **EXAMPLE** "Actions speak louder than words" is a cliché, but its five words speak volumes that many of your readers will recognize.

This appeal to familiarity can be an effective strategy to communicate, but use it carefully. Excessive reliance on clichés will make your writing trite, while eliminating them altogether may not serve you well either. As an effective business writer, you will need to evaluate your use of clichés for their impact versus detracting from your message.

1g. Emphasize Precise Words

Concrete words that are immediately available to your audience are often more effective than abstract terms that require definitions, examples, and qualifications. All these strategies have their place, but excessive use of abstractions will make your document less precise, requiring additional clarification that can translate to work for you as the author and, more importantly, for your readers.

Qualifiers deserve special mention here, as you have been taught that words like "may," "seems," or "apparently" make your writing weak. Words are just words and it is how we use them that creates meaning. Some qualifiers are necessary, particularly if the document serves as a record or may be the point of discussion in a legal issue.

In other cases, direct language is required, and qualifiers must be eliminated. Too many qualifiers can weaken your writing, but too few can expose you to liability. As a business writer, your understanding of audience expectations and assignment requirements will guide you to the judicious use of qualifiers.

1h. Evaluate Parallel Construction

When you are writing in a series or have more than one idea to express, it is important to present them in

similar ways to preserve and promote unity across your document.

Parallel construction refers to the use of the same grammatical pattern; it can be applied to words, phrases, and sentences.

➞ **EXAMPLE** "We found the seminar interesting, entertaining, and inspiring" is a sentence with parallel construction, whereas "We found the seminar interesting, entertaining, and it inspired us" is not.

If your sentences do not seem to flow well, particularly when you read them out loud, look for areas of mismatched structure and change them to make the construction truly parallel.

2. The "Is It Professional?" Test

Finally, when revising your document with an attention to detail, you simply need to ask the question: Is it professional?

If a document is too emphatic, it may seem like an attempt at cheerleading. If it uses too much jargon, it may be appropriate for experts, but may limit access to the information by a nontechnical audience.

Conversely, if the document appears too simplistic, it may seem to be "talking down" to the audience, treating the readers more like children than adults.

To conduct the "Is it professional?" test, ask yourself the following questions:

1. *Does my document represent me and my organization in a professional manner?*
2. *Will I be proud of the work a year from now?*
3. *Does my text fulfill its mission, stated objectives, and the audience's expectations?*



BIG IDEA

Business writing is not expository, wordy, or decorative, and the presence of these traits may obscure meaning. Instead, business writing is professional, respectful, and clearly communicates a message with minimal breakdown.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned some strategies to help you when **revising for style**. These strategies include **breaking up long sentences** and **revising big words and long phrases** to reduce complexity, **deleting repetitious words**, **eliminating archaic expressions or references**, **eliminating slang**, **evaluating cliches**, **emphasizing precise words**, and **evaluating parallel construction**. You should also consider whether your document passes the **"Is it professional?" test**, meaning whether it will reflect positively on you and your organization now and in the future.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: This tutorial has been adapted from "Business Communication for Success" Version 1.0 by Scott

