

Hints for better writing

Taken from 'The Elements of Style' by William Strunk Jr and E.B. White

Use the active voice to make your writing stronger.

Passive Voice: Rock samples were collected by the astronaut

Active Voice: The astronaut collected rock samples.

Keep to one tense – use the active voice, if possible.

'There were a great number of dead leaves lying on the ground.'

Change to: 'Dead leaves covered the ground.'

'At dawn the crowing of a rooster could be heard.'

Change to: 'The cock's crow came with dawn.'

'The reason that he left college was because his health became impaired.'

Change to: Failing health compelled him to leave college

'It was not long before he was very sorry that he had said what he had.'

Change to: 'He soon repented his words.'

Further examples: from the internet:

The blaze was extinguished by the firefighter.

The firefighter extinguished the blaze.

The boy's temperature was checked by the nurse.

The nurse checked the boy's temperature.

The plans were drawn by the architect.

The architect drew the plans.

The bones were found by the archaeologist.

The archaeologist found the bones.

The novel was written by a famous author.

The famous author wrote the novel

Put statements in a positive form:

'He was not very often on time.'

Change to: 'He usually came late.'

'He did not think that studying Latin was a sensible way to use one's time.'

Change to: 'He thought the study of Latin a waste of time.'

Other examples – did not remember = forgot

did not pay attention to = ignored

(Note the elimination of the underlined words)

Omit needless words

Vigorous writing is concise – a sentence should contain no unnecessary words and a paragraph no unnecessary sentence.

Examples – he is a man who = he

In a hasty manner = hastily

His story is a strange one = his story is strange

The reason why is that = because

As to whether = whether

As yet = yet

Try to avoid using **would, should, could, may, might** and **can** as they introduce doubt making your writing weaker – save them up for real uncertainty.

‘Once a year he would visit the old mansion’, becomes ‘He visited the mansion once a year’

Avoid **so**. For example: so good, so warm, so delightful

Avoid the use of qualifiers – **rather, very, little** and **pretty**

Avoid using **the fact that**

‘Owing to the fact that’ = since / because

Similarly **who is** and **which was** can often be eliminated

His brother who is a member of the same firm = His brother, a member of the same firm

Trafalgar, which was Nelson’s last battle = Trafalgar, Nelson’s last battle

Avoid starting a sentence with **however** when the meaning is nevertheless. **However** serves better when not in first position. When however comes first it means ‘in what ever way’ or ‘to whatever extent’.

The roads were almost impassible. However, we at last succeeded in reaching camp.

The roads were almost impassible. At last, however, we succeed in reaching camp.

That is a defining pronoun, **which** is non defining

Consider these two sentences: *The lawn mower that is broken is in the garage* tells which one.

The lawn mower, which is broken, is in the garage adds a fact about the lawn mower in question.

Write with nouns and verbs

Write with nouns and verbs, not with adjectives and adverbs.

Do not overwrite or overstate – rich, ornate prose is hard to digest.

Do not explain too much.

Make sure the reader knows who is speaking. Make sure your attributives do not awkwardly interrupt a spoken sentence. Place them where break would come naturally in speech.

For example: ‘Now, my boy, we shall see,’ he said, ‘how well you have learnt your lesson.’

‘Now, my boy,’ he said, ‘we shall see how well you have learnt your lesson.’

or

‘What’s more, they would never,’ he added, ‘consent to the plan.’

‘What’s more,’ he added, ‘they would never consent to the plan.’

Avoid the use of **adverbs** after ‘he said’ or ‘she replied’.

For example: ‘he said consolingly’ or ‘she replied grumblingly’ – let the conversation disclose the speaker’s manner or condition.

The opening sentence of your writing will often indicate by its subject the direction the paragraph will take.

For example: The breeze served us admirably or to add interest you can begin a paragraph with a concise, comprehensive statement that serves to hold together the details that follow.

For example: He picked up the heavy lamp from the table and began to explore.

Simple sentences will often work better, but an occasional loosely joined sentence will add variety. Avoid a succession of loose sentences connected by and, but, who, which, when, while and where. Simple sentences will often work better, but an occasional loosely joined sentence will add variety.

Avoid too frequent use of **but** – if you need a loose sentence consider substituting **although**.

Avoid elaborate fancy words when a simple one will suffice.