The
Nuts & Bolts
of College
Writing

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There was a sociologist who had written a paper for us all to read—something he had written ahead of time. I started to read the damn thing, and my eyes were coming out: I couldn't make head nor tail of it! I figured it was because I hadn't read any of the books on [the conference] list. I had this uneasy feeling of "I'm not adequate," until finally I said to myself, "I'm gonna stop, and read *one sentence* slowly, so I can figure out what the hell it means."

So I stopped—at random—and read the next sentence very carefully. I can't remember it precisely, but it was very close to this: "The individual member of the social community often receives his information via visual, symbolic channels." I went back and forth over it, and translated. You know what it means? "People read."

Then I went over the next sentence, and I realized that I could translate that one also. Then it became a kind of empty business: "Sometimes people read; sometimes people listen to the radio," and so on, but written in such a fancy way that I couldn't understand it at first, and when I finally deciphered it, there was nothing to it.

> Nobel Prize–winning physicist Richard Feynman,
> "*Surely You're Joking, Mr. Feynman!*":
> *Adventures of a Curious Character*

Modern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits which spread by imitation and which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble. If one gets rid of these habits one can think more clearly.

> George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language"

For the present, however, you as students should devote yourselves to the power of simple expressions, to do all that can be done and learn how much can be said with the simpler and more fundamental terms.

> Robert Henri, *The Art Spirit*

Introduction

THIS BOOK can help you write better college essays. It combines the most important rules and conventions of academic writing with the rudiments of good style. Naturally it has its limitations: it is general (with little to say about writing in different disciplines), basic (and may be most useful to beginning college students), and short (thus covering a lot of ground quickly). It is not about critical thinking in any formal sense, and indeed tries to lay down its do's and don'ts, as well as my own unauthorized views on writing, as informally as possible. These views, personal and perhaps even idiosyncratic, may be its biggest limitation. Yet writing is an intensely personal activity. It seems only right, even necessary, that writing advice have a personal touch as well.

The college essay plays a special role in American higher education. The American system, more so than higher education in most countries, encourages a student's self-directed development. Writing essays in which you say what you think and why is crucial to that development. Writing an essay means working within a rigid framework of formats and conventions, but it requires much more than technique; in a college essay, the personal qualities of its author, passionate as well as rational, take center stage.

An essay, like a personality, hangs together through a delicate balance of forces; it should be clear but not empty, thoughtful but down-to-earth, strong-minded but fair-minded. The writer must be adept at making arguments and synthesizing and analyzing others' ideas, but original and honest. A good essay is a small piece of one's better self—more rational, more critical, and more cogent than one is in everyday speech or idle thought, yet also more spirited. When you write an essay you enter into the most challenging yet rewarding of the liberal arts: shaping your ideas, questions, and convictions to share with others.

For all that, an essay is written on paper, not carved in stone. Essays are, in the root sense of the word, tries. *To essay* originally meant to attempt or put to the test (and still does, in *assay* and the French *essayer*). The essay as a literary form became popular at the beginning of the modern scientific age, part of a seismic cultural shift away from

received wisdom and toward inquiry and exploration. (Montaigne's celebrated essays, genial and ruminative, helped establish the genre's tone in the latter half of the 16th century.) The essay has flourished ever since, as men and women have claimed increasing space to think for themselves. Essays, imbued with the spirit of inquiry, put ideas and assumptions to the test, and if they sometimes stumble or equivocate, that is part of their nature (Samuel Johnson's 18th-century dictionary defined an essay as "a loose sally of the mind; an irregular indigested piece"). The writer of an essay is a kind of intellectual entrepreneur, taking a risk to say something new.

But college essays are written in an environment in many ways ill suited to risk taking. The solemn trappings of college culture—degrees, grades, academic titles—can make it seem that formality is the most important thing to aim at. It's natural for many students to think that their goal is to learn what their professors know, or think what their professors think. Every area of study from anthropology to zoology has its own jargon and its own rules about what to study, how to study it, and how to write up one's ideas and explorations. And when students start reading academic writing, what they typically see doesn't seem to include much room for risk taking: formality, a more serious tone than students have encountered before, and hard-won familiarity with "the literature," that daunting mountain of published scholarship in every academic discipline.

The most successful writing in this academic environment is dense with learning. Here are two examples of good writing by respected scholars. Both examples display full-throated academic voices, each of them a striking blend of expert scholarship and sure-footed expression:

Like so many of the key ideas in Weber's sociology—*verstehen*, legitimacy, inner-worldly asceticism, rationalization—the concept of charisma suffers from an uncertainty of referent: does it denote a cultural phenomenon or a psychological one? At once "a certain quality" that marks an individual as standing in a privileged relationship to the sources of being and a hypnotic power "certain personalities" have to engage passions and dominate minds, it is not clear whether charisma is the status, the excitement, or some ambiguous fusion of the two. The attempt to write a sociology of culture and a social psychology in a single set of sentences is what gives Weber's work its orchestral complexity and harmonic depth. But it

is also what gives it, especially to ears less attuned to polyphony, its chronic elusiveness. (Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*)

The doctrine of Purgatory, as we have seen, occupied a place at the center of Christendom's ritualized strategies of familiarity, containment, and control. These strategies extended to the precise calculation of the number of masses or quantity of alms that might be required in relation to the probable number of years of purgatorial suffering, an "accounting of the hereafter" that Jacques Chiffoleau has related to the rise in the later Middle Ages of double-entry bookkeeping.[3] By these means, the living no longer need to feel paralyzed with anxiety and uncertainty in the face of spectral visitations. (Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory*)

Confronted every day with such nearly majestic writing, a student is anxiously aware of how little, by comparison, she knows, and how less impressive is her own writing. No wonder, then, that when a temptation to appear learned squares off against a habit of using plain English, temptation usually wins. Here, for instance, is a sentence from a student's scholarship-application essay:

Reflecting back and providing insight on what I gained from my four years in the system, I hopefully have allowed a plethora of new concepts and perhaps even new educational-administrative philosophies to surface.

This student is trying furiously to write like a scholar. The passages from Geertz and Greenblatt use big words sensibly, as the best way to convey the authors' complex and sharply observed arguments; the student's passage uses big words merely to dress up a simple—though sensible and indeed powerful—point. Why? The student is afraid he will seem simpleminded if he says something as plain as this:

In my four years of high school, I've learned a lot about how schools work and how students learn.

But this is not simpleminded at all—rather, it is simple, and far more powerful than the first version (once we get past the dazzle of all those big words).

The aim of this book is to convince you that plain, direct writing is the most effective way to express your ideas, even in college. Plainness

makes it easier to spot your argument and harder to hide behind words. But simplicity is not necessarily easy. Indeed, this book will complicate writing for you by suggesting a number of things to think about as you write. But the effort will be worthwhile. Mastering a plain, clear style is an indispensable step in one's education. You're not in college to imitate the erudition of your professors or even to learn their opinions, but to develop your capacity for independent critical thinking and judgment. As you learn more you'll find yourself with more to say, and you'll make increasingly sophisticated and nuanced arguments—but always building on a foundation of clear expression.

Learning to distinguish between clear and unclear writing will also help you understand what you read, both in college and elsewhere. Professional writing—memos, contracts, public documents, and the like—often seems intended to impede rather than promote understanding. ("A memorandum," former Secretary of State Dean Acheson once observed, "is written not to inform the reader but to protect the writer.") Nowadays a company is likely to call a loss "negative earnings"; bolder companies issue "pro forma" financial statements, a little Latin phrase that in effect lets them make up their own rules about what and how to count financial results. But deceptive language is not limited to the commercial sphere. Public broadcasting stations, of course, can't have ads; instead, "enhanced underwriting" lets "underwriters" (not advertisers) buy air time on PBS shows. An experienced political figure like Fed Chairman Alan Greenspan, whose slightest word can move markets, is famous for his opaque and Delphic style (after the Greek oracle whose predictions were often conveniently ambiguous). Chairman Greenspan would never call a recession a recession; the closest he would come would be a blurry phrase like "significant cyclical adjustment."

George Orwell, the English novelist and essayist, said almost sixty years ago that insincere language was the curse of the modern age. Politicians, Orwell said, feared to speak the blunt truth to citizens, while even in democracies citizens failed to demand truth from their leaders. Orwell's word for duplicitous language has entered the English language: "doublespeak." In Orwell's great novel *1984* the propaganda ministry—in charge of all the government's lying—is called the Ministry of Truth. In his allegory *Animal Farm* an animal paradise turns into a dictatorship as the cleverest animals, the pigs, take over, justifying their power grab with an immortal formulation: "All animals are equal—but

some are more equal than others." Both stories pose in sharpest form the basic question of how we use language—to tell the truth as we see it, or to hide behind words. In a classic essay, "Politics and the English Language," Orwell said that the renewal of politics and language would begin with the choices of ordinary people like you and me about how to speak and write: "If you simplify your English," he challenges his reader, "... when you make a stupid remark its stupidity will be obvious, even to yourself" (1968, 139).

But unfortunately the trends Orwell saw in the 1940s have, if anything, strengthened. In politics, at work, at school we swim in a sea of doublespeak. Any half-decent politician or lawyer today can spew forth obfuscatory words "like a cuttlefish squirting out ink," as Orwell put it (1968, 137). Enron, the poster child of 1990s corporate fraud, for years filed numbingly long financial statements full of obscure terms like "special purpose entities." It was a strategy of deliberate opacity that let the company hide its fraud in plain sight, legally speaking (confused stock analysts mainly stayed mum for fear they'd be laughed out of their jobs). Today attorneys learn to speak in a camouflaged manner almost by reflex, as part of defending their clients. An attorney for Enron, for instance, fends off an accusation of misconduct on his client's part: "I am unaware of any evidence that supports the allegation there was improper selling by members of the board or senior management" (*CNN Newsroom*, 2002). Such verbiage—windy, vague, almost automatically evasive—has been called a variety of things. Orwell called it the "inflated style" (1968, 136). Richard Lanham (1999) labels it the "official style." I call it the pompous style.

Of course, not all grand and ornate writing is deceptive or unclear. Many great scholars, like the 18th-century historian Edward Gibbon, write prose that is complex and dense, yet famously clear. And passages like those of Geertz and Greenblatt quoted above possess clarity as well as power and dignity. Done properly, grand writing can be wondrously effective. But it is not generally a style that suits undergraduate college students. For most, adopting a sturdy, direct, plain style is a better choice. Learn to write plainly, and you will more likely write clearly as you take on deeper subjects and become a better stylist.

The pompous style muffles and depersonalizes action. It cloaks itself in the language of science, hoping to take on a sense of scientific objectivity and credibility. No police officer, for instance, would ever report,

"I put him in a headlock." Instead he would say, "The suspect was restrained." A government agency like the Fish and Wildlife Service prefers the cool term "taking," to plainly saying that some animals die as a result of its policies; and it prefers the technical sound of "lethal control" to the bluntness of "sometimes we have to go out and shoot wolves that are killing livestock."

Death, especially the killing of human beings, tends to bring forth the most strenuous applications of the pompous style. A politician answers accusations of long-ago war crimes when he was a soldier with the bland statement that the platoon he led "used lethal methods" (not only is the phrasing antiseptic; it evades the question of who was killed). An American military official, responding to concern about civilian deaths from NATO bombing in Kosovo in 1999, responds as inertly as possible: "the collateral damage which has been done by NATO is at an absolute minimum, and we take great care in both targeting and in terms of the application of fire power to ensure that collateral damage does not occur" ("Pentagon briefing," 1999). The statement was not a lie but a practiced use of generalities and abstractions intended to lead the listener's mind away from the specific and concrete—men, women, and children killed by errant NATO bombs. As Orwell pointed out more than a half-century ago, this is the chief educated idiom of our time: "The whole tendency of modern prose is away from concreteness" (1968, 133).

The tendency toward abstraction reaches every corner of society, but is especially common in public and academic settings. All of us shift discursive styles when we move from private to public settings—the next time you see ordinary people interviewed on TV after something newsworthy has happened in their neighborhood, listen to the formal and stilted way most of them speak in front of the camera. Sudden shifts between the pompous and plain styles can make us smile, as when a TV announcer explained why a football player had been thrown out of a game: "Jay Leeuwenberg was the recipient of his anger. That means that's the guy he kicked."

To be sure, various degrees of formality are appropriate in various kinds of academic writing, and it's hard to write (or indeed think) about ideas without using abstractions. But none of this requires pomposity. So accustomed are we to the pompous style as the voice of authority that students can't be blamed for thinking it the way they should write in

school. Indeed our educational institutions—ahem, schools—do much to encourage this belief. Children learn to read and write short, plain sentences—"See Spot run"—then grow older and begin to write as if "Observe Spot in the process of running" were somehow an improvement. By the time they arrive at college, almost all revere formality in and of itself as the mark of good writing. And by and large they learn to write like George Eliot's self-important man of business, Borthrop Trumbull, talked: "Things never began with Mr. Trumbull: they always commenced."

The Borthrop Trumbulls of this world, successful and stuck in their ways, may be a lost cause. But in the following pages I'm going to try to change *your* mind, at least, about the use and abuse of written English. This book will help you develop a sound college writing style, a style that combines the essential elements of academic convention with clear expression. It will show you how to make your writing clearer and more precise by developing a style whose hallmarks are plain words, active verbs, and uncluttered syntax. We'll begin with concision and clarity, emphasizing the importance of verbs. Then we'll consider how to give writing a sense of flow, how to punctuate effectively, and how to make your writing more graceful. Next comes a chapter on sources. In the final two chapters we'll move to larger structural elements, with thoughts on paragraphs and the beginnings and endings of essays. At the end there's an appendix on common document and citation formats (CMS, MLA, and APA), but our main aim is showing you how clarity and plainness can make you a better writer and a clearer thinker. Let's ~~commence~~ begin.

1 Concision

CONCISION, leanness of words, is a natural place to begin because wordiness is so common in student writing and because (unlike losing weight) being concise isn't really so hard. It usually works by process of elimination: we watch what we say, ask ourselves whether what we've said is essential to what we mean, and eliminate what isn't. The real work is often figuring out what exactly we wanted to say in the first place. But trying to be concise helps with that too—by helping us see what we don't mean.

Concision can add remarkable grace to our prose. It also makes our prose easier to read and understand. Yet many of us are afraid of writing concisely because doing so can make us feel exposed. Concision leaves us fewer words to hide behind. Our insights and ideas might appear puny stripped of those inessential words, phrases, and sentences in which we rough them out. We might even wonder, were we to cut out the fat, would anything be left? It's no wonder, then, that many students make little attempt to be concise—may, in fact, go out of their way not to be—and so often couple this strategy with a style just as mistaken. Though you can certainly be wordy without writing pompously—and the other way around—the two go hand in hand so often that it's useful to consider them together. Here's how lots of students think they have to write in college:

Prospero is faced with the necessity of deciding whether to accept forgiveness for the actions of his brother or remain in a state of hostility.

It is evident that interpersonal conflict is responsible for many organizational problems experienced by businesses.

The role of women in households in medieval Europe was arrayed across a number of possibilities of increasing or decreasing activity and independence, depending on variables such as status, wealth, religion, or region.

That's the collegiate pompous style in action: big words, self-important phrasing, a flat tone, long gobs of prepositional phrases, nouns galore, and abuse of the passive voice—all of it run up the flag pole to see if the powers that be will salute.

1

The pompous style spreads like crabgrass, and can be as hard to root out. Here's a legal sentence crafted in classic pompous style, from Maryland's *Annotated Code of Laws*:

> Any investigation, inquiry, hearing, or examination which the Board is empowered by law to hold or undertake may be held or undertaken by or before the majority of the members of the Board or its secretary, and the finding or order of members of the Board or the representative, when concurred in by the majority of the members of the Board, shall have the same force and effect as the finding or order of the whole Board. (Article 56, Section 497). (77 words)

This sentence is a parade of legalese. And even if we don't understand it, its gassiness is almost reassuring—this is what we've come to expect "the law" to sound and feel like. But here's the same code, revised when the state, in a temporary fit of sanity, decided to make its laws intelligible to ordinary people (Hackett 1989, B1):

> A majority of the members then serving on the Board is a quorum. (13 words)

The result is an 83 percent reduction in length. It took courage to get rid of those twenty-dollar words like *empowered, finding,* and *concurred.* But now we have a sentence that is much easier to read. It sounds strange to us, perhaps—aren't laws supposed to sound like, well, laws? But if one imagines the thousands of laws, the book upon book of legal code, that could be simplified and compressed, one is likely to agree that from a citizen's perspective this is a vast improvement. (It is not incidental that the most enduring laws in Western culture, the Ten Commandments, are expressed in a succinct, lapidary style.)

Here's another example, from a different professional setting but with no less pomposity. This is a technical manual for programmers revising a corporate computer system:

> To ensure that the new system being developed, or the existing system being modified, will provide users with the timely, accurate, and complete information they require to properly perform their functions and responsibilities, it is necessary to assure that the new or modified system will cover all necessary aspects of the present automated or manual systems being replaced. To gain this assurance, it is essential that documentation be made of the entities of the present systems which will be modified or eliminated. (82 words)

This passage displays the same faults as the legal sentence. Its writer tries to convey its importance by stamping pretentious words all over it and piling on the verbiage. But the passage lulls the reader to sleep and thus defeats the point of writing in the first place. Bold pruning yields this core meaning:

> Make sure to document all planned changes so any mistakes you make can be corrected. (15 words)

Another 80 percent reduction in length. As with the legal sentence, the revision may sound less important (though that *mistakes you make* might catch the attention of those programmers who hold the future of the company in their hands). But it has lost not a shred of meaning. (That might be easier to see if we keep in mind that this instruction would occur in the context of a wider discussion of the computer system and planned changes.) If you're not sure the revision is really an improvement, consider what it would be like to read through page after page of the original. You'd go to sleep. Now conduct the same thought-experiment with the revision, and ask yourself which version you'd rather read.

The Pompous Style at School

College students begin their training in the pompous style innocently enough, with sentences like this:

> To satisfy her hunger for nutrition, she ate the bread.

Once you've decided to write in a formal tone, stilted phrases like *hunger for nutrition* arise almost automatically. But the sentence's tone is just too weighty for its message. Simplifying makes the sentence shorter and stronger:

> She was hungry, so she ate the bread.

nouns; some adverbs have been cut; repetitive words and phrases have been squeezed together with tricks like parallelism; and a difficult quotation has been paraphrased. These structural changes have moved the writing away from the pompous style and toward a more concise, vigorous, verb-centered style.

Later we'll look closer at some of these techniques. For now, let's focus on gaining the skill and confidence to pluck out empty modifiers. The pompous style prefers description over action, so it bristles with adjectives and adverbs. A useful step in unlearning the pompous style is to hunt for modifiers that add little or nothing:

Original	Revision
Women held an important place in ~~social~~ society.	Women held an important place in society.
Capitalism is accompanied by the ideal of freedom ~~as something to be attained~~.	Capitalism is accompanied by the ideal of freedom.

An *ideal* is, by definition, *something to be attained.* But sometimes a student resists cutting empty words because they seem to add important information. What do you think about the following cut?

Original	Revision
~~From a political-institutional point of view,~~ the Federalist Papers were the first full formulation of federalism as a theory.	The Federalist Papers were the first full formulation of federalism as a theory.

Political-institutional is the kind of claptrap that makes the pompous style so tempting for inexperienced writers. It sounds weighty but adds nothing. The "point of view," whatever that means here, is obvious from the context of the sentence—especially if we remember that this sentence will be read in its context, as part of an exploration of the topic. Another example:

Original	Revision
These are the practical ~~contingency management~~ implications:	These are the practical implications:

In the following instances, see if you can figure out what gets changed or cut to go from pompous to plain prose:

Pompous Original	Plain Revision
It was discussed in this reading that ...	Tannen argues that ...
The scene is very important because it helps us understand Cleopatra early on in the play.	This early scene helps us understand Cleopatra.
In the play, Menas, who is a pirate, says this about the marriage: "I think the policy of that purpose made more in the marriage than the love of the parties" (2.6.115-6).	The pirate Menas dismisses the marriage as a political arrangement.
The film and video industry category can specifically be broken down into subsequent industries of motion picture and videotape production, motion picture and videotape distribution, movie houses, and cable and other pay-television services.	The film and video industry category consists of production, distribution, movie houses, and cable and other pay-television services.
Some of AOL Time Warner's major media competitors include News Corporation Ltd, which is a global media and entertainment media power located in Australia, and Viacom Inc., which is based in the United States and is one of the world's leading media companies.	AOL Time Warner's major global media competitors include Australia-based News Corporation Ltd and U.S.-based Viacom Inc.

Do you see any patterns in the revisions? There's a hefty reduction in the total number of words. About 70 percent of the words in the original passages have been eliminated. But how does one decide what to cut? Here are some of the structural changes that make these revisions more concise: the verbs have gotten stronger (fewer linking verbs and less passive voice, and more active verbs in the active voice); adjective phrases and clauses have been pushed into short adjectives that precede

If we imagine the context, plainly this sentence occurs within a larger discussion in which the topic, *contingency management*, has already been introduced (otherwise the use of the phrase in this sentence would make no sense). The topic's repetition here blunts the energy of a sturdy little sentence.

When a student is wise enough to use a good verb, intensifying adverbs often backfire:

Original	Revision
Euthyphro continues to ~~further~~ justify his actions.	Euthyphro continues to justify his actions.
The play ~~carefully~~ examines the disorder brought by civil war.	The play examines the disorder brought by civil war.

These adverbs add nothing to the already strong verbs. They are just traces of the pompous style in otherwise good sentences. Keep in mind Mark Twain's advice: "Substitute *damn* every time you're inclined to write *very*; your editor will delete it and the writing will be just as it should be."

Since adverbs often prop up weak verbs, sometimes cutting an adverb will push the writer to choose a stronger verb:

Original	Revision
Antony plays on the crowd's emotions and successfully obtains their support.	Antony plays on the crowd's emotions and wins their support.

Here the writer, trying to fix the problem of an unhelpful modifier, realized that the solution was to put the sentence's key action into its verb:

Original	Revision
Socrates convincingly explains his position to Crito.	Socrates convinces Crito that it would be unjust to flee. / Eventually, Socrates convinces Crito.

Socrates convinces Crito by itself would be a bit abrupt, so the writer's next step was to decide how to add enough value to the sentence to make it read well. Two possibilities are shown.

Wordiness, as we've seen, is often tied to other problems, and the effort to make one's writing concise often brings about other improvements.

Consider this opening paragraph of a student essay about the Italian Renaissance political thinker Machiavelli:

Machiavelli best supports republics in *The Discourses*. His favorite republic is ancient Rome. He explains and supports his admiration in this work. The two major aspects that Machiavelli discusses are that the Romans were a great empire and that they had a powerful army. (44 words)

Right away the reader stumbles over *best supports*. What does it mean to say that Machiavelli supports republics? And why say *best*, a word that implies a comparison? As is often true of unclear writing, its writer has good ideas but hasn't yet succeeded in articulating them. The first of these is that Machiavelli praises republics in a book entitled *The Discourses*. The revision will build on this plainer verb, *praises*. The writer's second idea, only hinted at in that distracting word *best*, is that Machiavelli's praise of republics in *The Discourses* differs from his perspective in his other famous book, *The Prince*, where he seems to prefer monarchies. (We'd only know this in context, so to speak—if we were along for the ride with that student—but bear with me.) Mulling over ways to bring out this second point, the writer realizes she can skip it because it's not the point of her essay:

Original	Revision 1	Revision 2
Machiavelli best supports republics in *The Discourses*.	Machiavelli best praises republics in *The Discourses*.	Machiavelli praises republics in *The Discourses*.

There's still work to do. Look back at the original paragraph. The transitions between sentences are weak, and the third sentence adds little to the first. Here's the revised paragraph:

Machiavelli praises republics in *The Discourses*. Above all he praises the Roman republic, because it had a powerful army, and conquered and held a vast empire. (26 words)

The revision is 40 percent shorter. It keeps the same ideas (except for cutting the abortive contrast with *The Prince*) but expresses them with strong verbs (*praises, had, conquered,* and *held*) and good links (*Above all* and *because*).

Finally, note that the revision orders and expands the argument. The original version listed as *major aspects* (whatever that means) that Rome was an empire and had a strong army. The revision reverses the order of these items, since a strong army is what allowed Rome to gain its empire. And while the original says merely that the Romans *were* a great empire, the revision turns this identity into actions, *conquered and held*.

Here's a student trying to cram too many ideas into too small a space:

Alien 3 is a fast-paced, emotionally tense film composed of a vast array of symbols and meanings which reflect the political debates concerning women's reproductive rights in 1990s America. (29 words)

The idea is a good one, but the sentence, running without a pause, is too long for easy reading (pauses help readers make it through long sentences). And some of the verbiage veers into pomposity—a windy, hackneyed phrase like *vast array* should be a red flag. The solution is to cut to the core of the argument:

Alien 3 is a powerful allegory of the 1990s American debate about women's reproductive rights. (15 words)

The revision is half as long. Note how the windy *composed of a vast array of symbols and meanings* is captured and even sharpened in a single well-chosen word, *allegory*. *Emotionally tense* comes from the same pompous-style tendency: tension *is* emotional by definition, so *emotionally tense* is redundant. *Powerful*, the revision's choice of adjective, is vaguer and broader than *fast-paced* and *tense*, but that's a good choice here, where we want to focus the reader's attention on that key word *allegory*.

Note the mock profundity of this example from a marketing paper:

The company uses specific determination methods to make distinctions between customer segments. (12 words)

Specific, as used above, is a favorite pompous-style word, a vague term masquerading as a concrete one. And the gassy *uses specific determination methods to make distinctions* can be compressed into one word:

The company distinguishes between customer segments.

This is much better, but the revision isn't complete. It feels bare and overly general. The writer should provide more information to make the sentence feel full enough:

The company distinguishes between three customer segments. (7 words)

That's more like it. The sentence goes from vapid to informative—a good lesson that concision is more than many words versus few, or long versus short. Here, as so often, the challenge to be concise compels the writer to say something concrete and informative.

Now let's look at a sentence that replaces a typical pompous-style verb-swaddle with a strong verb:

Original	Revision
This secrecy becomes very damaging to Hamlet.	This secrecy cripples Hamlet.

Many students are uneasy with changes of this kind. They seem too bold. *Becomes very damaging* has a safe clinical sound, while *cripples* sounds almost rude to students schooled in the pompous style. But for anyone with an ear for English, the revision is better. It can stand by itself or serve as a frame on which to add nuance:

This secrecy cripples Hamlet by destroying his ability to trust.

Some may protest that this kind of revision changes the meaning. I would answer that the original sentence had *already* changed the meaning—it took what was a good idea on the writer's part, and sucked the life out of it.

Concision, to sum up, may start out simple—cut the fat!—but it becomes more complicated as we work deeper into our prose. Concision represents a careful, patient process of revision in which we weigh every word and phrase and think hard about how we can better develop, organize, articulate, and refine our ideas. Most writers produce wordy first drafts. Good writers realize that sad fact and are willing to spend time tightening their prose. Concision, in other words, is more a sign of perspiration than inspiration. As Pascal wrote in 1656, "This letter is long because I didn't have time to make it shorter."

The basic pattern is *who* (or *what*) *does what.* Logical actors like *Lavoisier, China, Shakespeare,* and *patriarchies* are made grammatical subjects. (In the first example a pronoun, *it,* points back to *continental drift.*) Actions—*reshaped, gave, joined, wrote, have institutionalized*—are expressed as verbs. These sentences are clear because their grammar matches their narrative.

When a writer doesn't do this the result is likely to strike us as confusing—and sometimes even comical, as in this passage from an accident report filed with an insurance company:

> The telephone pole was approaching. I was attempting to swerve out of its way, when it struck my front end.

Trying to find something else to blame for his one-car accident, the writer gives the telephone pole a life of its own. How? By making it the grammatical subject of two active verbs, *was approaching* and *struck.* Note that you can't chalk this up to lack of skill, but to a clever, if unsuccessful, attempt to hide behind words.

The question of *who did what* is known as agency. We tend to express ourselves clearly when agency is reflected in grammar: that is, when we express agents as subjects of sentences. Muddying up the question of agency is the root cause of most unclear student writing. Consider this passage from an essay about a court case:

> A motion was requested by the defendant for the case to be dismissed on the grounds that there was a failure on the part of the prosecution to establish the facts. This was accepted by the judge, and dismissal of the case was ordered. (44 words)

True, the passage describes actions and identifies the actors. But its clunky design makes it hard to figure out who's doing what. Here's a clearer revision:

> The defendant moved to dismiss the case on the grounds that the prosecution had not established the facts. The judge agreed and dismissed the case. (25 words)

The revision is about 40 percent shorter.

2 Clarity

MOST OF US think our writing is clearer than it really is. We know what we mean, so we see it in what we write. But good writers see their words from the reader's perspective, because clarity, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. Good writers ask, "Does my reader understand the words I'm using, in the way I'm using them? Have I explained enough so that she knows what I'm talking about? Is my evidence persuasive? Have I thought about possible objections? Is there a logical arrangement to my argument that will help the reader follow it? Have I used good links and transitions to keep her pointed in the right direction?"

One problem in answering these questions is that readers differ, so there's no one standard of clear writing. A general audience, for instance, needs more background and explanation than a scholarly one. Unless you know your audience, it's impossible to be assured that what you're writing will be well-received. Most undergraduate essays should be aimed at an audience of one's better classmates unless a teacher says otherwise. Such a standard will help you decide how much to explain, what terms to define, and what tone to strike: competent, disciplined plainness.

People tend to perceive a sentence as clear when its "narrative"—generally, the story it tells or the relationship it describes—corresponds to its grammatical structure. In other words, if you wish to write clearly, begin by making your narrative's characters the subjects of sentences, and their actions and identities the predicates. Some examples:

This process is called continental drift. Over time it has reshaped the surface of the earth.

Lavoisier gave Priestley's "dephlogisticated air" its modern scientific name, oxygen.

On December 11, 2001, China formally joined the World Trade Organization.

Early in his career Shakespeare wrote two narrative poems.

Historically, most patriarchies have institutionalized force through their legal systems. (Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics*)

I. Choose Verbs over Nominalizations

A nominalization is an action expressed as a noun rather than a verb, like *analysis* or *assessment* rather than *analyze* or *assess* (some words in English, especially short words like *talk* or *work*, look the same as verbs and nouns; it's their function that counts). Nominalizations often end in *-tion* or *-ion*:

Verb	Nominalization	Verb	Nominalization
act	action	examine	examination
analyze	analysis	explain	explanation
argue	argument	fail	failure
behave	behavior	investigate	investigation
describe	description	nominalize	nominalization
dismiss	dismissal	perform	performance
distort	distortion	reveal, show	revelation

The common *-ion* endings make it easy to find nominalizations in writing, and once you start looking for them you'll find a lot, especially in formal writing—as H. W. Fowler lamented years ago:

Turgid flabby English is full of abstract nouns; the commonest ending of abstract nouns is *-tion*, and to count the *-ion* words in what one has written . . . is one of the simplest and most effective means of making oneself less unreadable. (1983, 640)

By changing actions into nouns, nominalizations let you write sentences that don't make clear *who does what*. "Analysis," for instance, doesn't specify who's doing the analyzing. Sometimes that's okay. Consider the following:

Action in Verb	Action in Nominalization
I **did** all I could.	A full complement of **actions** was undertaken.

who	the defendant	the prosecution	the judge
did	filed	had not established	agreed and dismissed
what	a motion	facts	the case

To answer the question *Who did what?* you'd have to take apart the original and rearrange its pieces. The grammar of the revision, by contrast, makes answering this question a breeze. The revision shows three techniques for achieving greater clarity: (1) choose verbs over nominalizations, (2) choose active verbs over linking verbs, and (3) choose the active voice over the passive voice (see Diagram 1 for help with these terms).

Active voice
The subject performs the action.
A cow started
Bill Gates founded M
The president made a

Passive voice
The subject receives the action.
The fire was ... by a cow.
Microsoft ... founded in 1975.
Mistakes were made.

Voice
... to how ... with the subject ... the action.

A property of ... you express ... performing ...

Transitive verbs
Express action upon a direct object.
The ...
She ...

Intransitive verbs
Express action ... a direct object.
... the open window.
... failed.
... dropped in the mud.

Active verbs
Express ...

Linking verbs
Express a ... being or identity.
... was a failure.
... alienated.
... look promising.

Verbs

Diagram 1. A Verb Family Tree

None of these techniques should be considered an absolute rule. There are many times a good writer uses nominalizations, linking verbs, and the passive voice. But since those three elements constitute the structural core of the pompous style, and are habitually overused by college students, it's best to view them skeptically and know how to avoid them.

2. Choose Active Verbs over Linking Verbs

Not all verbs work the same way. Active verbs convey action—*he ran, she spoke, the patient suffered a relapse*. Linking verbs convey states of being or description—*my friend is in London, she seems smart, it will be difficult*.* It's natural to use linking verbs when you're defining or describing things:

According to Kübler-Ross there are five stages of grief or dying.

Poland's Solidarity was the first independent trade union in the Soviet bloc.

Machiavelli's cynicism seems utterly contemporary.

So far so good. But when this grammar of identity is used to convey actions, things get ugly. When Bill Clinton was being sued for sexual harassment by Paula Jones, his attorney told the judge in the case that the president knew of an affidavit (false, as it turned out) by Monica Lewinsky, which affirmed, as the attorney put it, that "there is absolutely no sex of any kind" with the president. The linking-verb construction might sound clumsy, but it cleverly treated *sex* impersonally. The attorney—clearly a master of the pompous style—did all he could to avoid conjuring any image of the president *in flagrante delicto*. The inert linking verb also finessed the issue of timing (past or present?). President Clinton later tried to rebut an accusation of perjury by hiding behind the vagueness of this particular linking verb: "It depends on what the meaning of the word 'is' is" ("The President's Testimony," 1998, B3).

That's a notorious example from sworn testimony, but linking-verb constructions make it all too easy to obscure actions in everyday speech. If the action isn't in its natural place—the verb—where is it? As you probably suspect, in a nominalization. Linking verbs and nominalizations occur together as elements of the pompous style, so replacing them in tandem tends to result in more dynamic sentences:

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* The forms of *to be* in statements like *she was running* or *my friend is studying in London* are not linking verbs, but auxiliaries that are part of compound verbs (the other part is a participle: the *-ing* forms here are present participles).

| We are carefully analyzing the data. | A systematic analysis of the data is underway. |

In sentences like these, which report on the scientific method, nominalizations (and their partner the passive voice) are commonly—and sensibly—used, because there is no real doubt about who is doing the actions (scientists write up their own findings). But when agency is uncertain, then nominalizations tend to make prose seem confusing or clunky, as in the following examples:

Nominalized Original	Clearer Revision
The play is an examination of the conflict the conspirators face after the assassination of Julius Caesar.	The play examines the conflict the conspirators face after they assassinate Julius Caesar.
The love Antony has for Cleopatra is much greater than any love he has for his wife.	Antony loves Cleopatra more than he loves his wife.
Assessment of his test performance showed satisfactory achievement.	He passed the test.

Another example:

Nominalized Original	Clearer Revision
Today, society witnesses the steady progress of women toward equality with their increasing presence in the working world and in government and their gradual move outside the home.	Today, society witnesses women's steady progress toward equality. Moving beyond the limits of the home, women are claiming new and increasing authority in government, business, and other traditionally male-dominated areas.

This revision divides the long string of words into two sentences, which already makes it easier to follow. It also aligns the character with the grammatical subject, by making *women* the subject of the verb in the second sentence. True, the revision is longer, but its new readability more than makes up for the added length. Concision isn't an end in itself, but a means to clarity.

looking at abuses of the passive voice, consider some examples that make good use of it:

The document was found in the governor's personal library.

Hamlet was written around 1600.

The particle's rate of decay was measured.

In all three of these sentences the passive voice works well (though to decide for sure we'd want to see the context and know the writer's intention). In general, the passive voice makes sense when you want to emphasize an action or its recipient and don't care about the agent. If you do want to identify the agent in the passive voice, use a prepositional phrase beginning with *by: Hamlet was written by Shakespeare around 1600.*

You can also use the passive voice to give a sentence more pizzazz by identifying the agent at the end of the sentence. In the following two-sentence sequence, for instance, the writer uses the active voice and then the passive, according to his purpose in each sentence:

Horses, mammoths, reindeer, bison, mountain goats, lions, and a host of other mammals cascade in image along the cave walls over a distance of almost a hundred yards, over three hundred depictions in all. Delicately executed and meticulously observed, these varied and overlapping images were made by people of the late Ice Age, perhaps thirteen thousand years ago. (Ian Tattersall, *Becoming Human*)

The first sentence, with its active voice and strong verb (*cascade*), emphasizes the lively energy of the paintings. The second sentence uses the passive voice and a *by* phrase to identify the agent at the end. That lets the second sentence start where the first leaves off. If the second sentence were recast in the active voice—say, *People of the late Ice Age made these varied and overlapping images, perhaps thirteen thousand years ago*—the passage would lose much of its interest (though none of its meaning).

A classic use of the passive voice comes from President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's address to Congress the day after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor:

Yesterday, December 7, 1941—a date which will live in infamy—the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan.

Linking-Verb Original	Active-Verb Revision
A mood of ambivalence is the main effect of the poem's language and imagery.	The poem's language and imagery evoke a mood of ambivalence.
Motion toward a light source is a behavior of *Euglena*, a single-celled organism.	*Euglena*, a single-celled organism, will move toward a light source.
There was a failure on the part of the accounting firm to engage in a thorough examination of the transactions of the company.	The accounting firm failed to examine the company's transactions carefully.

The third example shows a common trait of linking-verb sentences—a chain of prepositional phrases that makes for a plodding, monotonous rhythm:

There was a failure
   on the part
      of the accounting firm
         to engage
            in a thorough examination
               of the transactions
                  of the company.

Since the pompous style prefers nouns to verbs, it tends to overuse the prepositional phrase, that handy device for stapling nouns into sentences. When you build sentences on active verbs rather than nominalizations and linking verbs, you'll use fewer prepositional phrases. Now let's turn to the third technique for writing clearly.

3. Choose the Active Voice over the Passive Voice

Sentences written in the passive voice turn the usual narrative pattern upside down. The subject doesn't do anything—it is acted upon: *A car was stolen.* The doer of the action often drops out altogether. Before

Why the passive voice here? To reinforce FDR's argument that America had done nothing to provoke the attack. Later, the president uses the active voice in a strong parallel series to emphasize Japan's active perfidy:

Yesterday, the Japanese government also launched an attack against Malaya.
Last night, Japanese forces attacked Hong Kong.
Last night, Japanese forces attacked Guam.
Last night, Japanese forces attacked the Philippine Islands.
Last night, the Japanese attacked Wake Island.
This morning, the Japanese attacked Midway Island.

At the end, not wanting to leave his listeners with a message of their country's passivity, Roosevelt again uses the active voice—this time to assert America's unbroken resolve: "The American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory."

In sum, when Roosevelt wanted to emphasize innocence he used the passive voice. When he wanted to emphasize action he used the active voice. His masterly use of voice is the essence of good style: when *how* we say something suits *what* we say.

The passive voice has its uses, as Roosevelt's famous speech shows. But most of the time when good writers tell, describe, or explore, they reach for the active voice. If the passive voice dominates someone's style, it's a fair assumption that he or she is more interested in obscuring or ducking questions of responsibility than in frank expression. Indeed, politicians and others eager to appear contrite without actually taking responsibility cherish one particular passive construction: *Mistakes were made.* Here are some prizewinners:

Deng: Why is there still such a big noise being made about Watergate?
Kissinger: That is a series of almost incomprehensible events. . . . It has its roots in the fact that some mistakes were made, but also, when you change many policies, you make many, many enemies.
    Secretary of State Henry Kissinger speaking with
    Chinese Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping (April 14, 1974)

The execution of these policies was flawed and mistakes were made. Let me just say it was not my intent to do business with Khomeini, to trade weapons for hostages, nor to undercut our policy of antiterrorism.
    Ronald Reagan, radio broadcast (December 6, 1986)

Mistakes were made here by people who either did it deliberately or inadvertently. Now, others—it's up to others to decide whether those mistakes were made deliberately or inadvertently.
    Bill Clinton, press conference (January 28, 1997)

Mistakes were made that cost my son's life and all I can say is I'm so sorry for what happened.
    Brian Peterson, on trial with his girlfriend for killing
    their infant son, in court testimony (July 8, 1998)

If in hindsight we . . . discover that mistakes may have been made as regards prompt removal of priests and assistance to victims, I am deeply sorry.
    Edward Cardinal Egan, Archbishop of New York, letter to parishioners on
    the Catholic Church's pedophilia scandal (April 20–1, 2002)

At least the speakers of these grudging admissions chose their words carefully and, in a narrow sense, skillfully. But students tend to use the passive voice merely as a bad habit, part of the pompous style. The usual result? Turgid prose:

Passive Voice	Active Voice
The Taft-Hartley Act was also used to support the Court's decision.	The Court also cited the Taft-Hartley Act.
While reading Mill's "On Liberty," the concept of personal freedom was discussed.	In "On Liberty," Mill discusses the concept of personal freedom.
The view of the mother is displayed when Garland writes, "She didn't want to leave our home and move west."	Garland says his mother "didn't want to leave our home and move west."
It was discussed in this reading that it is important for us to understand the people with whom we work.	Smith argues that it is important to understand the people we work with.
In the novel's early chapters, a large emphasis is placed upon his pride.	The novel's early chapters emphasize his pride.

Clarity and Honesty

The three techniques we've discussed for writing clearer prose work well most of the time and will help you develop a lively style. Violating them indiscriminately will saddle your readers with lifeless, shapeless sentences littered with prepositions and ugly, boring nouns (as nominalizations—even the name is ugly—usually are). Throw in big words, and you've got the full-blown pompous style.

Some people instinctively turn to the pompous style when things get rough. Consider an example from the Bible, when Moses returns to the Israelites after he has spent forty days on the mountaintop. He's bringing the Ten Commandments, but while he's been gone all hell has broken loose. The Israelites, feeling abandoned in the wilderness, have begun worshipping a new idol that Moses' brother, Aaron, made: a golden calf. Furious, Moses smashes the Ten Commandments and turns to Aaron, who was supposed to have been in charge during his absence. What happened?, he wants to know. Where did the golden calf come from? Aaron doesn't flat-out lie, but he tries to weasel out of his role in the debacle:

And I said unto them, Whosoever hath any gold, let them break it off. So they gave it me: then I cast it into the fire, and there came out this calf. (Exod. 32:23)

There came out this calf. I've always wondered what look Moses gave Aaron after hearing this. (The Bible doesn't say.)

A more recent example of using language the weasel way comes from Kosovo, 1999. A young Serbian man said this to an American reporter:

We have to accept the facts. Very bad things happened in Kosovo, and we are going to pay for that. (Booth 1999, B5)

The statement starts off with a seemingly forthright acceptance of responsibility. Now comes the weaseling, starting with the no-agent agency of *very bad things happened*. But there's more: by rhetorically separating those *bad things* that happened from *we*—Serbians presumably—the sentence calls into question the legitimacy of holding that blurry *we* responsible. By the end of the statement the Serbs in Kosovo emerge not as victimizers but victims.

Human rights organizations tell us that in China (to take another example not on our doorstep), investigators routinely torture suspects during interrogation sessions. Chinese authorities don't like to admit this. Official transcripts of interrogation sessions in China thus require some reading between the lines:

Education takes place. (Rosenthal 2000, A10)

This bland, chilling statement could be Exhibit A in how to use words to conceal and evade.

No matter the technique for doing so, writing clearly is in the end not just a matter of technique or skill but of will. "The great enemy of clear language," Orwell said, "is insincerity" (1968, 137). Clarity is an ethical imperative. It takes honesty to say what we see and think, and courage to tell the truth. The ethics of clarity hold for college students no less than for diplomats, police, soldiers, politicians, and CEOs. How you choose to speak and write in school shapes how you will act—and what you will become—later in life.

3 Flow

AN ESSAY is made of passages, and a passage, as its name implies, involves motion—movement from point A to point B. A reader is thus a kind of traveler. If the writer has done his job, the travel will prove worthwhile and maybe even entertaining. On rare occasions the traveler may even feel magically transported by the grace of what she's reading. This feeling comes from hard work on the writer's part, yet there are tricks for getting a reader from A to B (or Z for that matter), for achieving writing that seems to flow. Consider the following:

Original	Revision
Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance are among the five stages of the process of grief, said a psychiatrist named Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in her book, *On Death and Dying.* Many people were influenced by the book, which was published in 1969 and was a bestseller. A refusal to accept the outcome commences the process. . . .	In *On Death and Dying* (1969), the Swiss psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross popularized the notion of grief as a process. According to Kübler-Ross there are five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. In the first stage, denial. . . .

The original's ungainly first sentence lists terms before offering any explanation or background. *Among* implies a partial list, and the reader may skip back and count the terms (we want the reader moving forward, not backward). Instead of building a bridge from the list to the last sentence by repeating the terms *denial* and *stage,* the original passage uses different words; its *refusal to accept* in place of *denial* is a distracting echo of a different term. The original's second sentence, on the book's influence, takes up too much space and diverts attention from the paragraph's main function, introducing Kübler-Ross' ideas.

The revision divides the long first sentence in two, shaping the flow of information and allowing a pause after introductory material. Its sentences end emphatically. The revision distills the original second sentence into one word, *popularized.* Its third sentence builds links by

repeating important terms, *stage* and *denial.* All of this helps speed the reader on.

In this chapter we'll look at four techniques for achieving flow in your writing: (1) deploying consistent and logical characters, (2) using pronouns and other pointers, (3) designing sentences with punch lines, and (4) signaling logical steps in your argument with conjunctions and other linking words. These four techniques will help you write prose that is easier to read and understand.

1. Use Consistent Characters

Good essays unfold like stories—not in the sense of being dramatic or exciting, but in the sense of showing characters doing things or being described. Here is a passage about the American political system in the 19th century:

> The American system Bryce was describing was one whose regulations were few, whose resources were many, and whose central government was unobtrusive. It was a system ideally suited for congressional government. (Theodore Lowi, *The End of Liberalism*)

American system binds this passage together, not just because it is the subject of both sentences, but because of those little words like *one, whose,* and *it* that point back to it. Note too how the passage ends by handing off, as it were, to a new character: *congressional government.*

The lesson is that you need to control how your reader moves from one character to the next. The next example fails to do that. It presents a jumble of characters, bringing the reader's thinking to a halt as he struggles to figure out who is doing what:

Original

> Machiavelli's view of Christianity comes from a political standpoint. Morality is taken into little consideration when religion is discussed in his works.

Even though it sticks to a single topic, the passage feels choppy. The revision addresses the profusion of characters by building upon one, *Machiavelli:*

We might encounter these characters in a passage like this:

The earth looks unchanging, but it is not. The Atlantic Ocean, for instance, is spreading by about two centimeters a year. The continent of Africa is being slowly torn apart down its middle, at the Great Rift Valley. India is gradually crashing into Asia, a pileup that created and is still lifting the Himalayas. The whole surface of the earth is in flux, as the continents crash together and pull apart. This process, long dismissed as a fantasy but confirmed in recent decades, is called continental drift. Over hundreds of millions of years it has reshaped the surface of the earth.

Continental drift is caused by the motion of convection currents in the earth's mantle, a layer of molten rock that lies beneath the crust. The crust itself is not solid, but consists of rigid slabs or plates. . . .

In the following passage from an economics paper, the student thought she was sticking to one topic, the benefits of foreign trade, but the passage lacks flow because it treats characters sloppily. It begins and ends with one character, China, but switches in the middle to another, the United States (denoted with an adjective and an unacademic *we*):

China stands to gain from increasing trade. Throughout the 1990s, 30 percent of American economic growth came from foreign trade (Garten 23). With the opening of China's markets, we stand to have even more economic growth from overseas, while China will also benefit greatly.

Either character, China or the United States, may be the appropriate one to focus on, depending on the writer's intentions—or both, perhaps, in successive paragraphs or sections. The key is to select and move among characters according to a sensible design.

2. Use Pronouns and Other Pointers

Inexperienced writers tend to prefer big words to little ones. But experienced writers, less anxious to show off their learning with every word, make frequent use of some of the shortest and humblest words in English—definite pronouns, possessive adjectives, relative pronouns, and relative adjectives. These little words point (or relate), in their respective ways, to something already named or known (an antecedent).

Revision

Machiavelli judges religion from a political standpoint. He virtually ignores the moral teachings of Christianity.

Here's another example of how thinking about characters can make a passage easier to read. We'll go through several revisions, to see how writing can improve step by step:

Original   Revision 1

The idea from Macgregor's book   Macgregor emphasizes self-
that stands out is the fact that   control and self-direction.
there is self-control and self-
direction.

The revision makes Macgregor the character—a much better choice than an abstract character like *idea* or *fact*. But more revision is called for. Since it isn't clear whose *self-control and self-direction* Macgregor means, the writer identifies another important character:

Revision 2

Macgregor emphasizes self-control and self-direction on the part of employees.

Better, but *self-control and self-direction on the part of employees* is ungainly, so the writer seeks a better term and considers making *employees* a more active character. This prompts further thinking, and the writer decides to provide more detail about what employees feel and why it matters:

Revision 3

Macgregor argues that employees who feel a sense of autonomy will have higher motivation and productivity.

Exploring a single topic often means treating several different characters. An essay about continental drift, for instance, needs to explain the process by considering the structures and dynamics of the earth's surface and interior. Its sequence of characters might look like this:

the earth's surface → parts of the surface (oceans and continents) → continental drift → forces driving continental drift → the earth's mantle → the earth's crust → plates

The pointer might function as a subject of its clause (e.g., I, we, you, they, who, that, which, this, that) or as its object (e.g., me, you, him, her, it, us, you, them, whom, this, that). The pointer can refer to the antecedent in its own right or merely in its capacity as a possessor of something (e.g., my, your, his, her, its, our, your, their, whose). The beauty of these little words is that they eliminate the need to repeat the antecedent; they allow you to focus attention on the antecedent's qualities or actions:

As Mahayana Buddhism spread across Asia, it came into contact with peoples of many different cultures and mentalities **who** interpreted the Buddha's doctrine from **their own** point of view, elaborating many of **its** subtle points in great detail and adding **their own** original ideas. In **this** way **they** kept Buddhism alive over the centuries and developed highly sophisticated philosophies with profound psychological insights. (Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics*, emphasis added)

Humble pronouns and other pointers permit powerful effects. The historian William Manchester, for instance, concludes a dense and detailed paragraph on European power politics in the 1930s with a strong sentence built on a relative pronoun: "This was the final blow to appeasement." Inexperienced writers tend not to trust the power of such simple effects, even going out of their way to avoid them:

Original

Hamlet wrestles with his identity while trying to fulfill the ghost's demand for revenge. Hamlet loves to learn and asks questions about everything. But Hamlet's search for knowledge conflicts with his sense of filial duty.

Little words make the revision more flowing and more sophisticated:

Revision

Hamlet wrestles with his identity while trying to fulfill the ghost's demand for revenge. He loves to learn and asks questions about everything. But his search for knowledge conflicts with his sense of filial duty.

A pronoun must match its antecedent. Failing to do this is a common but easy-to-fix mistake. Here, the pronoun *they* doesn't match the antecedent:

Machiavelli feels that Paganism favored freedom. They praised glory and war, unlike Christians. More inclined to fight fiercely, they were better able to defend freedom.

The writer assumed that referring to *Paganism* established the idea of *Pagans*, the implied antecedent for *they*. But this won't do. Though it isn't especially difficult, readers forced to make this little leap for themselves are likely to be a tad irritated. Revision is simple:

Machiavelli feels that Paganism favored freedom. Pagans, unlike Christians, praised glory and war. More inclined to fight fiercely, they were better able to defend their freedom.

A complication arises: When must you repeat your noun, and when is it okay to continue to use pronouns? The answer is that you should return to the original noun any time an intervening noun may create confusion (*Christians* above wouldn't confuse anyone). In the original below, it's unclear to whom *he* refers, so the revision names the person:

Original

In Florence, Leonardo studied in the famed workshop of Andrea del Verrochio. He had been trained as a goldsmith, and this proved to be a major influence on Leonardo's work.

Revision

In Florence, Leonardo studied in the famed workshop of Andrea del Verrochio. Verrochio had been trained as a goldsmith, and this proved to be a major influence on Leonardo's work.

As a stylistic matter, expect to use pronouns mostly *within* logical units, and to return to their antecedent nouns at natural emphasis points—the beginnings and ends of paragraphs, for instance.

3. Use Punch Lines

The same technique a comedian uses to make people laugh—careful setup and good punch line—can help you write sentences people like to read. Start with material that is familiar, scene-setting, or unsurprising, and end with material that is new or detailed or surprising (see also Williams 1994, 116–20). Here are two examples, one of which uses the

punch-line technique to set up a joke, and the other to deliver a memorable phrase:

In 1890, a railroad man from Cincinnati named Henry C. Bagley came to this part of Georgia, saw the stately white pines and poplars, and was so moved by their towering majesty and abundance that he decided to chop them all down. (Bill Bryson, *A Walk in the Woods*)

In brief, the interpretive difficulties surrounding the Founder come to this: the image simultaneously embodies an almost sanctimonious piety and a murderous cruelty, both reverence and mayhem. (Hanna Pitkin, *Fortune Is a Woman*)

Mind you, I'm not suggesting that every sentence should have this old-new structure, but it's a remarkably common pattern:

Most physicists believe that matter is composed of particles called fermions.

It has been said that the American Constitution is a system designed by geniuses to be run by idiots.

What stands out in the account of Inca religion is the divine mission of the ruler.

The punch-line technique is even more useful in weaving separate sentences together. Let's look back at the example that opened this chapter:

Original	Revision
Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance are among the five stages of the process of grief, said a psychiatrist named Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in a book titled *On Death and Dying*.	In *On Death and Dying* (1969), the Swiss psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross popularized the notion of grief as a process. According to Kübler-Ross there are five stages of grief. . . .

First the original reels off its list, and then it starts catching the reader up with the information needed to make sense of that list. The revision's two sentences, by contrast, start with scene-setting material and end with new ideas (*grief as a process* and *five stages of grief*). Note that even the arrangement of those two new ideas follows the same logic—first we learn about grief as a *process*, then we learn that this process consists of *five stages*.

When this punch-line technique is used to bind a paragraph, it's called a chain structure. Here's another example:

Our bodies are composed of cells. The cells each have in them a nucleus. Within the nucleus are twenty-three pairs of chromosomes. In each pair, one chromosome came from the genetic mother and one from the genetic father. Located on the chromosomes are the genes, the basic units of heredity, composed of a kind of protein called DNA. Any particular gene of a parent may or may not be passed to a child. A gene passed on may or may not be "expressed"—that is, a child with the gene may or may not have the characteristic. A child can carry one parent's gene for blue eyes, and yet have brown eyes. (Barbara Katz Rothman, *Recreating Motherhood*)

This structure helps the reader absorb a lot of information without feeling overwhelmed.

Introductory Phrases

A related technique is to begin a sentence with an introductory prepositional phrase. Such phrases often date or place the main statement:

By the middle of the sixth century B.C.E., the wave of colonial expansion was over.

From the turn of the century to the 1960s, experimental psychologists treated the mind as a blank slate.

In her youth Virginia Woolf chafed at the patriarchal boundaries of her father's world. [*Note that here the pronoun may precede the antecedent.*]

In France the situation was much different.

In these areas, people embraced Shang civilization but maintained political autonomy.

Or an introductory phrase may provide other kinds of contextual information:

In this letter to his old friend, Jefferson seems tired and pessimistic.

Behind the scenes there was confusion about how to respond.

In practice, however, the president's power waxes and wanes with the election cycle.

According to Lacan, there is an active linguistic relationship between analyst and patient.

This last phrase, *according to x*, is an especially useful technique in academic writing, where one of the main challenges is synthesizing others' words and ideas without endorsing them as your own. In general, these opening phrases make room for contextual information, so that by the time you reach your main point your reader gets it. In writing, as in joke-telling, timing matters.

4. Use Conjunctions and Other Linking Words

Introductory prepositional phrases lead naturally to our fourth and final technique for enhancing flow: conjunctions and other logical linking words. We'll consider two similar kinds of links, conjunctions and conjunctive adverbs. Conjunctions—everyday words like *and, but,* and *or*—show relations between words, phrases, or clauses. Conjunctive adverbs—dressy academic words like *furthermore, although, on the other hand,* and *in conclusion*—tend to take up more space and draw more attention to themselves. Both are part of an essay's meta-discourse—messages to the reader about what direction the argument is taking. They help prose feel connected from sentence to sentence. Writers who don't know how to use links well use only the simplest, like *also: Also, Touchstone tries to get out of marrying Audrey.* Or they repeat key terms from one sentence to the next, which is likely to give prose a plodding feel. Consider the following paper from a business class. Having just listed a company's strengths, the writer now turns to its weaknesses:

Original	Revision
Also, Disney has its share of weaknesses. One of Disney's potential weaknesses is the idea that the company may be facing the need for a new CEO in the next couple of years.	Despite these strengths, Disney does have its share of weaknesses. First, the company may soon need a new CEO.

Also is a poor choice, since it doesn't fit the logical turn the essay is taking (the revision's *Despite* is much more helpful). The original links its two sentences by repeating a keyword, *weaknesses*. By contrast, the revision uses a conjunctive adverb, *First*, and trusts the reader to remember the topic (note as well the other changes that make the revision more concise and active).

Inexperienced writers tend to overuse vague links:

Earlier it was mentioned that . . . as commented on earlier . . . as stated earlier . . . as stated before . . . as I wrote before . . . .

In a short essay these retrospective phrases are about as useful as stapling one sheet of paper. (If you feel you really need such a link—say, in a longish term paper—better choices might be *as noted above, as we've seen,* or *as we've suggested.*)

Now let's look at more effective ways of linking with conjunctions and conjunctive adverbs. In practice we're not much interested in the distinction between these types of links, except insofar as you know how to use and punctuate each term.* It's more important to have a sense of the kinds of turns an argument can take, and the links that may be used to signal them. Here is a reasonably complete list of logical turns and links.

1. **Continuity** or **amplification** (*also, and, besides, furthermore, in addition, in the same way, likewise, moreover, not only . . . but also, similarly, too*)

   Recent British novels, too, have been interested in the history of the creatures as part of our natural history. (A. S. Byatt, *On Histories and Stories*)

   The king, moreover, had little reason to call Parliament into session as long as he could raise funds through other means.

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* Grammatically, conjunctions can bear some of the weight of joining clauses together, and often work with commas. But conjunctive adverbs require a full stop (like a period or semicolon) between clauses. A common mistake is to treat conjunctive adverbs like conjunctions and attach them with a comma: *The findings weren't conclusive, however they do suggest that the document was altered.* This needs a semicolon before *however* (and a comma afterward, most authorities would advise).

9. **Consequence** *(accordingly, as a result, as this suggests, by this means, consequently, hence, here, in this manner, so, then, thereby, therefore, thus)*

   None of Pythagoras' writings have survived. Consequently, we only know of him at second hand.

   Cultural awareness, thus, is a vital management skill.

10. **Conclusion** *(all in all, and so, as a general rule, finally, generally, in brief, in conclusion, in fine, in other words, in short, in sum, in the end, so, then, to conclude, to sum up)*

    In sum, there seems to be a long-standing consensus in the United States that job discrimination is wrong.

    Clinton's presidency, in short, had been critically weakened.

As you can see, there are many ways to deploy links—too many to let us boil the technique down to a few rules. Beyond these examples, the best way to learn is to read and read and read: see how good writers create flowing prose.

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2. **Contrast** *(against, although, but, by contrast, conversely, despite, however, in contrast, instead, nevertheless, nonetheless, on the other hand, on the contrary, otherwise, still, though, yet)*

   But if in some ways Arendt stands with the Frankfurt School's critique of modernity, she is simultaneously in the other camp as well. . . . (Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt*)

   Despite these setbacks, Mao's power grew steadily.

   Pagan beliefs and practices nevertheless persisted in rural areas.

   The findings were not conclusive; they do suggest, however, that the document was altered.

   Nonspecialists will have trouble with this text, however.

3. **Conditionality** *(if)*

   If one imagines oneself in Claudius' position, one realizes that he is just as much a prisoner of Elsinore as Hamlet is.

4. **Time** and **frequency** *(after, afterward, at the same time, before, during this time, earlier, eventually, later, meanwhile, now, subsequently, then, at times, frequently, often, once, once again, sometimes, rarely)*

   The duke's position was now untenable.

5. **Logical order** *(finally, first, first of all, last, last of all, less obviously, more importantly, primarily, second, second of all)*

   First of all, we should ask why the individual needs a cognitive map of his or her city.

6. **Example** *(for example, for instance, in particular)*

   Ben Jonson, for instance, extensively revised his manuscripts before publication.

7. **Reality check** *(actually, apparently, indeed, in fact, ostensibly, supposedly, to be sure)*

   In fact there is little evidence to support her interpretation.

   Ostensibly, they never discussed the lawsuit during these meetings.

8. **Cause** *(as, because, for, for this reason, since)*

   Since none of Pythagoras' writings have survived, we only know of him at second hand.

5 Gracefulness

ONE OF THE GREAT paradoxes of writing is that content is inseparable from style, even if we might formally distinguish the two. There is no such thing as "pure" content, as qualitatively neutral as a string of numbers. *What* we say, in other words, is intimately tied to how we say it. "A crowd has a generalized stink," said the poet W. H. Auden. "The public is odorless." At every turn, a writer faces a dizzying array of choices about which words to use and how to use them. We may seem to be setting out on firm ground, armed with a definite message and hard and fast rules of grammar and syntax, yet we soon find ourselves relying at least as much on our own feel for how best to put that message to any given audience.

Words matter. That is why every good writer should have some understanding of how to write gracefully—and how to use rhetoric to do so. In common parlance, *rhetoric* means bombastic, exaggerated, or empty language. But for those who think about writing and communication, it means something more specific: the science or art of persuasion by means of stylistic or structural techniques. Rhetoric has a long and checkered history. In his satire *Clouds*, the ancient Greek playwright Aristophanes associated rhetoric with making the weaker argument appear the stronger—an association it carries to this day. But rhetoric has also had its champions, like the ancient Roman statesman Cicero, for example, a great practitioner and theoretician of the art. Like it or not, all writers use rhetoric; given the nature of language, they have no alternative.

Even simplicity, which appears consciously nonrhetorical, is itself a rhetorical choice. In English literature, simplicity is most often associated with the so-called plain style, a style perfected in the 17th century and deployed in opposition to fancier—and by implication decadent—styles. George Orwell, a master of the 20th-century plain style, adapted this style to brilliant effect in his political journalism and novels like *1984* and *Animal Farm*. Orwell's bare-bone plainness gives his writing an immediacy and authenticity perfectly suited to his master theme of

individual against the system. The contemporary plain style I've been advocating is no less rhetorical and no less suited to writing effectively and gracefully in the 21st century. This chapter presents several techniques for making academic prose plainer and more graceful: (1) the historical present, (2) appositives, (3) parallelism, (4) tricolon, (5) concession, and (6) qualification (if you want to study rhetoric more thoroughly, see Corbett & Connors 1998).

1. The Historical Present

Should you discuss a text in the present or past tense? At first blush it seems natural to frame the discussion in the past tense, but most textual analysis and commentary is written in a form of the present tense called the historical present (or literary present):

Plato asks why one would choose to be good if there were no risk in being wicked.

Hamlet tells Ophelia he never loved her.

Donne frequently challenges his reader's expectations about textual integrity.

Southey undermines the meaning of this "famous victory," so that by the end of the poem the children seem wiser than the man, who just echoes conventional opinion. Not the battle but the children's unanswered question—"But what good came of it at last?"—is what the poem wants us to remember.

And just to complicate matters, the historical present isn't the only tense used to discuss a work. When presenting facts about its composition—particularly if these include a date or time reference—use the past tense. In both of the following examples the author's action is tied to a specific time, and thus the past tense is appropriate:

Original	Revision
Machiavelli writes *The Prince* in 1513.	Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* in 1513.

Original	Revision
Efforts to define and protect individual liberty have a long history. A century before the American Constitution, the English philosopher John Locke articulates a vision of liberal government in his *Second Treatise of Government*.	Efforts to define and protect individual liberty have a long history. A century before the American Constitution, the English philosopher John Locke articulated a vision of liberal government in his *Second Treatise of Government*.

Let's continue with that second example. If you went on to discuss Locke's *Second Treatise*, you would probably wish to switch to the historical present after the initial mention:

Efforts to safeguard individual liberty have a long history. A century before the American Constitution was written, the English philosopher John Locke articulated a vision of liberal government in his *Second Treatise of Government*. In this famous work, Locke locates the origins of government in the desire to protect individuals and their property from the violence and insecurity of the state of nature. . . .

Clearly, judgment is called for. The longer you discuss a text, the likelier you should do so in the historical present. The briefer the discussion (suppose for instance that in the passage above, you finished with Locke and now turned to another work), the likelier the past tense will strike the reader as appropriate.

2. Appositives

It's often useful to condense two independent clauses into one. When the two clauses share a common noun and one of the clauses merely identifies that noun, you can gracefully condense the two clauses by way of an appositive. An appositive is a noun phrase used to identify another noun; it lets you insert an identifying clause stripped of any linking verb into a sentence built upon a more interesting verb. Devoting an entire sentence to identifying a person or concept, after all, takes up space. And, as we've seen, sentences built upon linking verbs often make for dull prose no matter how interesting their content. Appositives help make your writing tighter and more interesting.

Gracefulness

Original	Revision
Huygens was one of the most remarkable Dutch personages of the 17th century. Huygens visited the young Rembrandt in 1626.	Huygens, one of the most remarkable Dutch personages of the 17th century, visited the young Rembrandt in 1626.
Slavery was already a vital part of the economy and culture of the Republic. It cannot be blamed for the subsequent decline of the Roman Empire.	Slavery, already a vital part of the economy of the Republic, cannot be blamed for the subsequent decline of the Roman Empire.
Right-hemisphere damage can leave the individual lacking a key part of what makes us human. This is the ability to understand others' feelings.	Right-hemisphere damage can leave the individual lacking a key part of what makes us human—the ability to understand others' feelings.

In the third instance, note that the appositive links back not simply to the word *human*, but to the whole phrase, *a key part.* . . .

Appositives can be linked together:

Angelou's novel ends with a return to Ghana, a powerful symbol for African-Americans—the first African nation to throw off British colonial power.

An appositive can also serve to narrow or refine your focus:

But when low-status employees, especially women, file grievances, the results are quite different.

Appositives serve to identify sources elegantly and economically:

Original	Revision
George Gamow was a noted physicist and cosmologist. He was one of the early proponents of the big-bang theory. He argued that. . . .	George Gamow, the noted physicist and cosmologist, was one of the early proponents of the big-bang theory. He argued that. . . .
Matt Drudge is a controversial Internet journalist. He says these concerns are groundless.	According to Matt Drudge, the controversial Internet journalist, these concerns are groundless.

When an appositive supplies information that is not essential to the meaning of the sentence, it must be set off by either commas or dashes. (Use dashes if the appositive consists of a list of three or more items.) None of the appositives discussed so far in this section is essential to meaning; thus, all are set off by punctuation.

If an appositive *is* essential to meaning, it should not be set off by punctuation:

Original	Revision
President Kennedy had a brother named Robert. Robert served as Attorney General.	President Kennedy's brother Robert served as Attorney General.

The appositive *Robert* is essential because it identifies which brother served as Attorney General. Had the president had only one brother, you would put commas around *Robert*.

3. Parallelism

One of the most flexible and useful of rhetorical devices, parallelism refers to the organizing of similar grammatical elements within some larger verbal structure so as to highlight the similarity of those elements. Such similarity can relate to any number of grammatical features. These might include number (singular or plural); parts of speech (noun, verb, adjective, adverb, preposition, interjection, conjunction); tense (e.g., present or past); mood (e.g., indicative or subjunctive); voice (active or passive); person (e.g., first or third), and so forth. Achieving parallelism in a sentence or paragraph requires consciously crafting key words, phrases, or entire clauses in such a way that they may be organized in parallel fashion. You might think of parallelism as involving a kind of rhetorical algebra; as the setting up of a proportion or the combining of like terms in an algebraic expression makes an equation easier to solve, parallelism makes a sentence easier to understand. Parallelism makes writing more comprehensible, graceful, and memorable.

The prince's strength is also his weakness; his self-reliance is also isolation.

In Machiavelli's world, Sheldon Wolin observes, moral ends have been replaced by ironies; answers have been replaced by questions.

The characters are all watching one another, forming theories about one another, listening, contriving. . . .

One side sees Lincoln as a bold and shrewd leader, sincerely committed to abolishing slavery; the other sees him as an opportunistic politician, concerned only to defend the union in any way possible.

We take little note of the thousands of people who are polite, pleasant, or at least predictable; but we remember and accentuate our encounters with those who are rude, disagreeable, or strange. (Edward Krupat, *People in Cities*)

We may finally define jurisprudence as the shining but unfulfilled dream of a world governed by reason. For some it lies buried in a system, the details of which they do not know. For some, familiar with the details of the system, it lies in the depth of an unread literature. For others, familiar with this literature, it lies in the hope of a future enlightenment. For all, it lies just around the corner. (Thurman Arnold, *The Symbols of Government*)

Faulty parallelism is a common problem, due mainly to carelessness. In the following examples the parallel elements in the revisions are italicized to make them easy to see:

Original	Revision
Someone acquiring knowledge is similar to finding a new path in a dense forest.	*Acquiring* knowledge is similar to *finding* a new path in a dense forest.
Machiavelli advocates relying on one's own strength, leaving as little to chance as possible, and the need to get rid of sentimental attachments.	Machiavelli advocates *relying* on one's own strength, *leaving* as little to chance as possible, and *ridding* oneself of sentimental attachments.
Touchstone satirizes courtly manners, woos Audrey, and he tries to avoid marriage.	Touchstone *satirizes* courtly manners, *woos* Audrey, and *tries to avoid* marriage.

Another common problem, this one stylistic rather than grammatical, is repeating too much in the parallel elements:

Original   Revision

Socrates led a private life, as   Socrates led a private rather than
opposed to a public life.   a public life.

When you arrange parallel elements, you can elegantly delete repeated words, leaving only the words that do not repeat. In the following examples, those words the respective writers left out have been struck through:

Augustus wished to deceive the people by an image of civil liberty, and ~~he wished to deceive the~~ armies by an image of civil government. (Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*)

Elephant shrews achieve sexual maturity in about five weeks, tenrecs ~~achieve sexual maturity~~ in two months.

Parallelism can be employed in many different ways. One technique is *chiasmus*, or inversion of parallel elements. A famous example comes from President John F. Kennedy's 1961 inaugural address:

Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.

College essays, of course, often develop arguments by presenting contrasting views. In such cases, parallelism offers a natural strategy for organizing the flow of words. In the following example, the writer identifies a particular debate, then uses parallel sentences to present each side in the debate:

This rally sparked a fierce debate on Wall Street about whether a speculative bubble was emerging, and not just in Internet stocks but in the market at large. On one side were the traditionalists, who believed that stock prices had already risen well beyond levels that could be justified on the economic fundamentals. On the other side were the New Economy enthusiasts, who argued that the time-honored methods of valuing stocks no longer worked and should be discarded. (John Cassidy, "Striking It Rich")

Repetition of a word is a related technique. Here different forms of a word are used to create a sense of reflexivity:

Tragedy explores the damage a damaged mind can do. (Ruth Padel, *Whom Gods Destroy*)

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4. Tricolon

Tricolon is a particular kind of parallelism. The idea is simple: lists tend to feel balanced and complete when they contain three items. (People who think about how we process information, both visual and verbal, have long realized that three is a powerful and resonant number for pattern recognition.) Of course that doesn't mean you should wrench your material out of its natural arrangement to make it fit a tripartite scheme. Sometimes you'll want two, four, or more items in a list. But when you have flexibility in what to say, tricolon is often effective at making a list feel complete:

Tribal or local heroes, such as the emperor Huang Ti, Moses, or the Aztec Tezcatlipoca, commit their boons to a single folk; universal heroes—Mohammed, Jesus, Gautama Buddha—bring a message for the entire world. (Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*)

A generation ago most scholars believed that an overarching worldview—conservative, deeply Christian, and essentially medieval in its commitment to order and hierarchy—shaped the concerns and defined the intellectual limits of Shakespeare and other Elizabethan dramatists.

These two examples contain lists of nouns and adjectives, but tricolon may also be used for arranging other elements, like clauses:

Coriolanus doesn't hide his contempt for the commoners; he doesn't flatter them; he doesn't try to soften his image.

Or sentences:

Like the fool of Shakespearian drama, she fawns and flatters, reserving to herself the right to speak difficult truths that her demeanor and role appear to belie. Like the trickster of Afro-American folk culture, she speaks with a double tongue. Like the exile, she re-creates her own previous life as a function of her nostalgia. (Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "My Statue, Myself: Autobiographical Writings of Afro-American Women")

5. Concession

Arguments are rarely airtight. Most admit of objections—based on, for example, the inconclusive nature of evidence cited (and thus the

luters to the north and 50 years of lax environmental oversight in Yugoslavia and the former Eastern Bloc nations. Scientists taking core sediment samples after the war have found toxins dating from the '60s, '70s and '80s—including contaminants related to the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear accident. But the NATO bombing unquestionably made the situation worse. Preexisting pollution is no reason to dismiss the environmental fallout from the war; it only makes the case for a cleanup more urgent. (Mitric 2000, B4)

Many less skilled writers would simply have avoided so fundamental an objection to their argument, hoping the reader wouldn't know of it or think about it. Instead, this writer concedes the point that much of the problem predates the events she criticizes. She even notes the data that challenge her position. But watch how she turns the reader back to her argument by throwing the weight of the objection behind her plea for environmental cleanup. With judo-like grace she turns an apparent weakness into a strength.

6. Qualification

A related strategy for strengthening an argument is to qualify, or reduce the scope of, a given claim. Qualification can make an argument more precise, more accurate, and more persuasive by narrowing the scope of objections that can be made to it. In an essay about global warming, for instance, the writer initially made a very broad claim: "Global warming is bad for everybody." As she developed her ideas, she chose a more qualified argument:

Not that global warming will be bad for everybody everywhere. In some parts of the world—Scandinavia, Russia, North America—increases in average temperatures are likely to make more land available for agriculture. A 2002 United Nations report suggests that agricultural production in these regions is likely to increase substantially. But as the same report makes clear, while these relatively rich areas may benefit, poor countries—and billions of people—will suffer greatly from climate change.

By narrowing her claim, the writer focuses attention on the strongest part of her argument.

possibility of alternative interpretations) or the existence of contravening evidence. Inexperienced writers tend to sweep such inconveniences under the rug out of fear that calling attention to them might weaken their argument. But such a selective approach to representing evidence isn't always wise—especially if objections to an argument are obvious or well-known. Sometimes by conceding the limitations of one's argument, a writer actually strengthens it:

Admittedly, there is no direct evidence that Shakespeare read Machiavelli.

Clearly, judged by modern standards, Jefferson would be called a racist.

The writer would present the objection in sufficient detail to fit the essay's depth of analysis. Then the writer would counter the objection, for instance along these lines:

But we know that many of Shakespeare's fellow playwrights did, that Shakespeare read at least some Italian, and that many of Machiavelli's works were easily available in London.

More purely rhetorical concessions, which have less to do with content and more with style and form, are also useful. Here the writer uses a concession as an elegant starting point for an essay:

It may at first seem paradoxical to suggest that a company can increase its profits by putting moral values above financial results. How can it not hurt revenues to give workers more family leave and increase spending on employee benefits?

Here a writer criticizes American-led NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 for causing massive environmental harm. A predictable objection to her argument would be that Yugoslavia's environment had been damaged long before the bombing, due to decades of careless industrialization. In fact that objection is largely true, and she confronts it head on:

In fairness, every international team doing environmental assessments in Yugoslavia has had difficulty distinguishing preexisting damage to soil and water systems from new toxins linked to the war. Long before the bombing, the Danube's viability was under siege from both industrial pol-

Wrong	Right
Rousseau's concept of "freedom" is difficult for Americans to comprehend.	Rousseau's concept of freedom is difficult for Americans to comprehend.

Use quotation marks to flag words used sardonically or ironically:

The "impartial" jury took less than twenty minutes to find the defendant guilty.

Adjectives like *supposed, so-called, would-be, ostensible,* and *putative* (or their adverbial forms) make such quotation marks unnecessary:

Wrong	Right
The ostensibly "impartial" jury took less than twenty minutes to find the defendant guilty.	The ostensibly impartial jury took less than twenty minutes to find the defendant guilty.

Use quotation marks for translations of foreign words:

Legend has it that as the seventy-year-old Galileo rose from his knees, he muttered under his breath, "*Eppure si muove*" ("Yet it moves").

Certain scholarly disciplines, notably philosophy, use single quotation marks to denote a term used as a term:

'Freedom' is an ambiguous term.

7 Paragraphs

THUS FAR we have considered essays mainly at the level of individual words and sentences (though in Chapter 3 we considered flow from one sentence to the next). Now we turn our attention to larger structural elements, starting with paragraphs.

The Function of Paragraphs

What are paragraphs? In essence, a form of punctuation—and like other forms of punctuation, they are meant to make written material easier to read. Visually, paragraphs are blocks of text marked with an indented first line (usually a half-inch indent; for college essays it's better to indent than use a blank line). Functionally, paragraphs represent pieces of an argument. Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address*, for instance, consists of just three short paragraphs: the first about the past, the second the present, and the third the future. Lincoln, a great communicator, chose this simple structure to reinforce his speech's intention. He wished to evoke in the minds of his audience an emotional link between America's founding, the present conflict, and the enduring values for which he said Americans were fighting. The harmony of the design helped make this the most famous speech in our nation's history.

Of course there are countless ways to structure arguments, and thus countless ways to arrange an essay into paragraphs. But any sound arrangement requires the writer to do three things: (1) understand your own argument (*What do I wish to say to the reader?*); (2) decide on a sensible way to lay out this argument (*From the reader's perspective, what piece-by-piece arrangement of supporting and explanatory material will best illuminate the argument?*); and (3) have the discipline to stick to this structure (*Does each paragraph—and each sentence—fit with my plan?*). (In practice there's a fourth requirement—willingness to modify your design as the need arises.) The most important thing to remember is that paragraphs are there for your reader's benefit, not because of some abstract rule of composition.

Is there an optimal length for paragraphs? In one sense, no. Whether we count by words, lines, or sentences, there is considerable variation in good writing, depending on several factors: the nature of the written text, the academic discipline, the writer's predilections, and the shifting needs of the argument for more or less detail and development. But if we keep in mind that texts are divided into paragraphs for the convenience of the reader, and that readers find great undifferentiated blocks of text highly inconvenient and inaccessible, we begin to get a sense of the ordinary "right" length. Paragraphs that typically exceed a page aren't doing much to make a text easier to read. It turns out that good academic writers typically divide a page of text into two to four paragraphs. (Some writers use the visual breaks created by set-off quotations, somewhat like paragraph marks. New paragraphs may be less frequent, but there will still tend to be two to four blocks of text per page.) In undergraduate writing, this means that typical paragraphs are likely to be somewhere in the neighborhood of 100 to 200 words, or 8 to 15 lines, long. (For reference, an average double-spaced page of 12-point text has about 300 to 350 words, and around 23 lines.)

But dividing text into two to four paragraphs per page won't help the reader much if these divisions appear arbitrary. Paragraphs break up not only the look of a text; they also break up the argument into a series of topics or steps. Paragraphs help us see an argument as a logical sequence of steps. From the writer's perspective it is better to pay attention to this sequence than to the length of any given step. As H. W. Fowler observed, "The paragraph is essentially a unit of thought, not of length" (1983, 434).

What, then, constitutes a "unit of thought"? It depends on the assignment, on the topic, on the step-by-step unfolding of the argument. Occasionally a unit of thought may be expressed in a single sentence. Here, for instance, the acclaimed neurologist and writer Oliver Sacks uses a one-sentence paragraph, as simple and graceful as an elegy, to end his discussion of a young autistic man's experiences with music:

It was as if, for a brief time, he had become truly alive.

More typically, the formulaic five-paragraph essay on which many high-school students cut their teeth has a sturdy "unit of thought" paragraph structure: an introductory paragraph with a thesis statement, three body

paragraphs that each provide one piece of supporting material, and a concluding paragraph. College writing adds detail and complexity but keeps this basic design. The opening and concluding sections of a college essay are likely to expand into more than one paragraph each (and in a thesis or a book, they become whole chapters). The three-paragraph body grows into a more complex structure, because you cover more material or explore it in greater depth (or both). Your argument will grow to include more elements, such as a consideration of contrary viewpoints (with a rebuttal or concession or both). You will delve into secondary sources. Brief summaries broaden into more nuanced, critically informed discussions. The upshot is that in college you may tackle the same topic you once dispatched in a two-page, five-paragraph essay, but now it may take you twenty pages and fifty or so paragraphs.

Opening Sentences

An opening sentence tells the reader what a paragraph is about. The opening sentence is also usually the topic sentence, or the sentence that summarizes the paragraph, but there is no rule that says paragraphs must have topic sentences, or that they must come at the beginning. Still, the beginning is the natural place to learn where a paragraph is going:

When we see a play, what is it that we see?

A popular audience for science, and for technology, blossomed in Europe and America in the 19th century.

The process of growth and change in evolution is chaotic and filled with conflict.

Historians have judged the "October Days" as the single most significant activity undertaken by women during the Revolution. (Marilyn Yalom, *Blood Sisters*)

Sometimes a topic is deployed across two sentences:

The third and final area of Theban expansion was by sea in the Aegean. Here again the enemy was Athens.

The opening sentence is also where the reader can see how the paragraph connects to what has come before. Some of the techniques we

studied in Chapter 3—in particular, characters, pointers, and conjunctions—merit a second look at this point. They can help produce opening sentences that fit well together. First, let's look at consistent characters—in this example, *model*:

The model of the iterated Prisoner's Dilemma is much less restricted than it may at first appear. . . . ¶ The model does assume that the choices are made simultaneously and with discrete time intervals. . . . (Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation*)

In the next example, we look at eight successive opening sentences (all but the first are also topic sentences). The repetition of a key term, *constancy*, lets the reader follow the developing argument:

"Were man but constant, he were perfect." . . . ¶ Constancy is a superhuman virtue, possible only in the undecaying realms above the moon. . . . ¶ Constancy is central to Shakespeare's vision of human harmony. . . . ¶ This notion is fundamental to all of the plays. . . . ¶ The ideal of constancy functions in the comedies as a moral standard. . . . ¶ Constancy is rare indeed in actuality. . . . ¶ Julia's constancy is cast in the Griselde mold. . . . ¶ Constancy is magical, however, only in female characters. . . . (Marilyn French, *Shakespeare's Division of Experience*)

A second way to link paragraphs is to use pointing words such as relative adjectives in the new paragraph's opening sentence:

This outcome seems to support Kuhn's argument.
Lincoln was very careful in framing these parallels. (Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg*)

Pronouns, however, are one kind of pointing word not so often used in opening sentences. Good writers often restate an antecedent noun in an opening sentence, for emphasis and clarity:

Original	Revision
He never forgot this lesson.	Marlowe never forgot this lesson.

The third common technique for opening sentences that help connect a paragraph to the previous paragraph is to use conjunctions and conjunctive adverbs, in all the varieties listed in Chapter 3:

Warfare was basic to the Hellenistic world, in two ways. First, the legitimacy of the Hellenistic king rested in part on his military prestige. . . . ¶ Secondly, the scope of warfare was greatly enlarged. . . . (*The Oxford History of the Classical World*)

Still, Greenleaf believed his vision of ethical leadership was practical.
The slaves also turned their satire against themselves. (Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*)

Let's look at one extended example. Here is a sequence (from Robin Dunbar's *The Trouble with Science*) that shows how ten successive paragraphs begin:

1. ¶ The business of hypothesis-testing is neither easy nor straightforward. . . .

2. ¶ What, then, defines a good theory? In his book *The Rationality of Science*, the philosopher William Newton-Smith lists eight key features. . . .

3. ¶ Newton-Smith is specifically concerned to counter the anti-rationalist views advocated by Kuhn and Feyerabend. . . .

4. ¶ Newton-Smith argues that the anti-rationalists are trying to foist much too grand a goal on to science. . . .

5. ¶ On the other hand, Newton-Smith is equally critical of rationalists like Popper and Lakatos, arguing that they have also taken too strict a view of scientists at work. . . .

6. ¶ This pragmatic line has, in fact, been argued by other philosophers of science. . . .

7. ¶ Rescher argues that this is the only rational way to proceed if we wish to live and survive in the real world. . . .

8. ¶ The philosopher Nicholas Maxwell wants to go further by insisting that there are even stronger grounds for justifying modern scientific practice. . . .

9. ¶ Maxwell calls this "aim-oriented empiricism" and contrasts it with the "standard empiricism" of conventional philosophy of science. . . .

10. ¶ The only possible recourse open to a relativist at this point is to argue that the success of a theory does not guarantee its truth. . . .

How many links can you find? I count at least twenty.

thing to be described is complex, it's important to describe it in a way that helps the reader put the pieces together: right to left, bottom to top, first to last, big to small, foreground to background, or whatever pattern fits the material, your purpose, and the reader's expectations (unless surprise is part of your design). A good writer arranges material in a way that suits his theme. Here, for instance, Paul Fussell describes World War I trenches:

> There were normally three lines of trenches. The front-line trench was anywhere from fifty yards or so to a mile from its enemy counterpart. Several hundred yards behind it was the support trench line. And several hundred yards behind that was the reserve line. There were three kinds of trenches: firing trenches, like these; communication trenches, running roughly perpendicular to the line and connecting the three lines; and "saps," shallower ditches thrust out into No Man's Land, providing access to forward observation posts, listening posts, grenade-throwing posts, and machine gun positions. The end of a sap was usually not manned all the time: night was the favorite time for going out. Coming up from the rear, one reached the trenches by following a communication trench sometimes a mile or more long. It often began in a town and gradually deepened. By the time pedestrians reached the reserve line, they were well below ground level. (Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*)

The paragraph begins with description of a static scene and then shifts to a more dynamic description that incorporates movement and people. Fussell arranges his description spatially in two ways, at least: first he ranges across the parallel and perpendicular lines of the trenches; then he imagines approaching and descending into the trenches.

Description begins with analysis, or the breaking of a whole into constituent pieces. A good writer arranges the pieces so that the reader can see how they fit and "move." In highly descriptive fields like art history, this kind of writing is an art unto itself:

> The Crucifixion (fig. 172) is shorn of all elements of pain and terror, save only for the grief of the angels. The still figure on the Cross looks almost pityingly at Mary and St. John seated on the ground below. The curves of their bodies, following those of the quatrefoil, are completed by those of the angels. All the curves are subsumed in the concave lines of Christ's arms. A typically Ghibertian composition always shows a counterpoise of the compositional elements and the directional flow of rhythms that pro-

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Designing Paragraphs

Remember that paragraphs represent units of thought within an argument. Such units of thought might include explanation, example, description, narration, definition, comparison, contrast, or analysis (see also Weston 2000). A good writer will design a paragraph to match its function. A paragraph of examples, for instance, is basically a list, with everything that implies about symmetry and parallelism. A description should be composed in a manner that accords with what you're describing—for instance, work through a visual description with some sort of spatial order, say from left to right or foreground to background. Narration, naturally, tends to unfold chronologically. Failing to match form to function is one of the more common weaknesses of student writing. Let's look at some examples of how paragraphs should match form to function.

Example. One of the most common purposes for paragraphs is to offer evidence by way of examples. A paragraph may focus on a single detailed example. Or, as here, a writer may provide multiple examples:

> A new division of labor between suppliers and customers is reinventing industries. In Spartanburg, for example, Symtech Systems and Technology no longer simply sells equipment to its manufacturing customers. It designs and oversees their manufacturing processes as they use the equipment. In Aberdeen, Scotland, oil company customers such as BP (British Petroleum) and Conoco work with suppliers such as engineering firm Brown & Root to rethink the supply chain. . . . (Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *World Class*)

> Often place-names arise from mishearings or misunderstandings—notably the West Indies, which of course have nothing to do with India. They simply reflect Columbus' startling inability to determine which hemisphere he was in. Yucatán in Mexico means "What?" or "What are you saying?"—the reply given by the natives to the first Spanish conquistadors to fetch up on their shores. The term *Dutch* is similarly based on a total misapprehension. It comes from Deutsch, or German, and the error has been perpetuated in the expression Pennsylvania Dutch—who are generally not Dutch at all but German. (Bill Bryson, *The Mother Tongue*)

Description. In crafting a description of something—a picture, a building, a scene, an event, or anything else—you have lots of choices. If the

duces a perfect and abstract unity. In the case of the Crucifixion, the opposition and swing of the rhythms raise this unity to the level of an unearthly harmony around the sacrificed Christ. (Frederick Hart, *History of Italian Renaissance Art*)

Narration. Narration describes actions unfolding over time. Clear narration usually follows chronological order. Here, the writer narrates a series of events and then draws a general conclusion:

Britain first tried to reverse its decline and decay by depending primarily on what are called demand-side measures, to no avail. Then it joined the European Economic Community, to no avail. Then it switched to what are called supply-side measures, again to no avail. No matter what Britain has tried, it has continued in the grip of unrelenting decline, much like any other faded, fabled empire of the distant past before people had economic theories and instructions and statistics to guide them. (Jane Jacobs, *Cities and the Wealth of Nations*)

Definition. There are a great many ways to define things. But one of the first things college students are expected to learn is that terms and ideas are often not amenable to conclusive definition. A definition that seems satisfactory so long as you don't think about it often turns out to be problematic when you start asking questions (blame it on Socrates). To the simple question, "What is leadership?," for instance, it turns out there is no agreed-upon answer. An academic writer, nevertheless, is expected to try to bring some measure of order to complex material:

What is leadership? There is no universal definition. Scholars have sought to answer this question in several different ways: by focusing on leaders' traits or behaviors, by analyzing the different kinds of tasks leaders perform, by looking at the relationship between leaders and followers, and by seeing whether leadership differs across different cultures.

Here, in a much more sophisticated example, a writer explores an everyday phenomenon, so that a simple question—"What is color?"—no longer seems simple at all:

Color is not a trivial subject but one that has compelled, for hundreds of years, a passionate curiosity in the greatest artists, philosophers, and natural scientists. The young Spinoza wrote his first treatise on the rainbow;

---

the young Newton's most joyous discovery was the composition of white light; Goethe's great color work, like Newton's, started with a prism; Schopenhauer, Young, Helmholtz, and Maxwell, in the last century, were all tantalized by the problem of color; and Wittgenstein's last work was his *Remarks on Colour*. And yet most of us, most of the time, overlook its great mystery. Through such a case as Mr. I's we can trace not only the underlying cerebral mechanisms or physiology but the phenomenology of color and the depth of its resonance and meaning for the individual. (Oliver Sacks, "The Case of the Colorblind Painter")

Sections

Some arguments lend themselves to being broken into larger units than paragraphs. Such sections may be marked in several ways: with numbers or asterisks centered above each section, with white space, or with headings. Avoid breaking short essays into sections.

thesis statement: to distill your argument to a single sentence. With Amazon, you might end up with a thesis statement like this one: *Amazon.com is here to stay.*

Here's another topic presented as if it were a thesis statement:

There is a common theme between Federalist essays 10 and 51: power.

So general a statement does little to help the reader. It lacks a *who-does-what* message. As the writer thought about how to turn "power" from a topic to an argument, she realized two things. First, that the more precise term "conflict" did a better job of capturing her topic than the broad "power." Second, that she was thinking about what arguments the Federalist essays made about this topic. These realizations shaped her revision, which serves as a *who-does-what* guide to her essay:

Federalist 10 and 51 both see conflict as the gravest danger to popular government. But instead of trying to eliminate or suppress conflict, they suggest ways of harnessing its power.

Context

Depending on the expertise of your intended audience, you are likely to have to provide a context for your argument. In an essay about Amazon, for instance, you'd want to make sure your reader knew some of the broad outlines of the story of Amazon's origins, rise, and troubles—the rise and fall of the Internet bubble and the collapse of many other dot-coms. Without giving all the details of your story in the beginning, create a frame within which your argument or story makes sense. Here's an example, from the introduction of a book on Islam:

Dar el-Islam, the House of Islam, embraces nearly 900 million people of every race, from Senegal to China, from Nigeria to the Soviet Union, and more than two million Americans as well. All are Muslims, sharing common religious beliefs, but they vary widely in behavior. Most of them are not leftists or fanatics or revolutionaries or extremists. They cannot be stereotyped in the image of one race or one kind of political or social conduct. Certainly it is absurd to identify Islam with Arabs luxuriating in oil wealth. The vast majority of Muslims are not Arabs and not wealthy. . . . (Thomas W. Lippman, *Understanding Islam*)

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8 Beginnings and Endings

IN EARLIER CHAPTERS we focused on words and sentences; in Chapter 7 we turned to paragraphs. Now we close with thoughts on the essay as a whole. A whole, Aristotle said in his *Poetics,* "is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end." Aristotle hit on something basic. As the stylist Sheridan Baker put it a few years ago, "Build your essay in three parts. There really is no other way" (1966, 27). An essay tries to make a reader care about, accept, and remember your argument. The beginning grabs the reader's attention, prepares a context, and states the argument. The middle (or body) works through the argument step by step: giving examples, connecting the general and the particular, unfolding causal relationships, and using good supporting materials. The ending (or conclusion) repeats key points and send the reader off feeling that she's learned something worthwhile.

Beginnings

The appropriate length for a beginning varies by discipline, assignment, and topic, but as a rule of thumb we can expect a good beginning to range from a single paragraph for a short essay, to perhaps a couple of pages for a long essay of twenty to twenty-five pages. (A book's introduction would be a whole chapter.) All good beginnings include a thesis statement, context, and a starting point.

A thesis statement is your argument in a nutshell. By contrast, a topic is what your essay is about: global warming, say, or the War of Jenkins' Ear, or Amazon.com. A common mistake is to state a topic and leave it at that: *This essay will look at Amazon.com.* Readers need more information. What are you going to say about your topic? What problem are you going to investigate? What is your argument? That's the point of a

Starting Points

Good writers usually start an essay with something small—a story, a quotation, an example, a question, a detail, or the like—that connects to something big, the argument to be pursued. For instance, Ian Tattersall begins his study of human origins (in *Becoming Human*) with the most famous images from prehistory, the cave paintings of southern Europe. Robin Dunbar begins a book about science with the following lines:

> In 1632 the Italian astronomer Galileo Galilei published his *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems*. In doing so he inadvertently set in motion one of the greatest revolutions in the history of the human race. (*The Trouble with Science*)

Rosabeth Moss Kanter's *World Class: Thriving Locally in the Global Economy*, a book on globalization and its impact on local businesses and communities, begins thus:

> A friend who lives year-round on Martha's Vineyard recounts the questions his five-year-old son asked him while walking on the beach one day:
>
> "We live on an island, right?"
> Right, my friend replied.
> "We're surrounded by water, right?"
> Right again.
> Pause.
> "Are we connected to the world?"
>
> The answer to that question is, of course, yes.

Finally, here is how the scholar Hanna Pitkin begins *Fortune Is a Woman*, a book on Machiavelli:

> Niccolò Machiavelli may well be the most political of all the great political theorists; and, like politics itself, Machiavelli horrifies and repels us, yet also attracts and fascinates. We do not know what to make of him, or how to think rightly about political life. We know that politics matters profoundly, perhaps more in our time than ever before; we suspect that somehow we have gotten it terribly wrong; but we feel powerless to change, or even fully to understand our situation. For me, thinking about

politics and thinking about Machiavelli have become interconnected enterprises, each illuminating and obscuring the other. That is the reason for this book.

The author locates her subject, raises thorny problems about politics, and involves us, her readers—our thoughts, our feelings, and our fears—in her project. A powerful beginning.

The beginning of an essay also gives your reader a first impression of what you sound like. In general the most effective tone for college essays is one of reasoned argument and fair consideration of opposing viewpoints. It is fine to argue strenuously, but remember that the point is rational persuasion. If your essay sounds one-sided or narrow, you are less likely to achieve that goal. Consider the following two opening paragraphs. They treat the same topic, school choice (programs that provide public funding for children to attend private schools). The two versions reflect the same position—strong opposition to school choice—but make crucially different claims. The original is accusatory, while the revision sticks to school choice and its alleged effects:

Original	Revision
The school-choice movement is a racist scheme to weaken public education. School-choice advocates don't care about minorities, fairness, or even children. Instead, they want to use tax dollars to support conservative religious groups and increase the massive segregation of American society. School choice is nothing more than an attack on democracy and multiculturalism.	Among the most predictable consequences of implementing school-choice would be not a public school system strengthened by competition, but one further weakened by it. Tax dollars would go to support conservative religious groups and increase the massive segregation of American society. Minorities, fairness, and children would suffer too. But the ultimate victims would be multiculturalism and democracy itself.

The original paragraph attacks the sincerity and motives of school-choice advocates. Such a personal or *ad hominem* attack, all too common in argumentative writing, is no substitute for substantive argument. The revision, by contrast, focuses on what the author thinks is wrong with the policy itself. This is not to say, of course, that motives may never be questioned. But accusations of bad faith or malicious

motive are hard to establish; voiced as mere assertion they tend to undermine the persuasive power of an essay—except for those readers who already agree.

Let's look at another beginning marred by an ineffective tone. The paragraph comes from an essay that was, on the whole, well-written—full of strong verbs and clear statements. But in this opening paragraph the writer tried so hard to list all the key points that she forgot about verbs. The result is an inert sentence in the grip of the pompous style. The revision is truer to the rest of the essay:

Original	Revision
This paper will seek to analyze the privatization effort of Ukraine and come to a conclusion about the factors contributing to the lack of success of the attempt to reform and revive the troubled economy of the country.	In the early 1990s a newly independent Ukraine, seeking to reform and revive its troubled economy, embarked on a major privatization effort. The effort proved largely unsuccessful. This paper analyzes the privatization initiatives the Ukrainian government undertook, and the reasons for their failure.

Endings

What should an ending do? The common answer—summarize the argument—is correct as far as it goes. Here's a run-of-the-mill ending that does nothing more than summarize:

Although Mark Antony seems like an unimportant character at the beginning of *Julius Caesar*, he develops into an extremely shrewd and powerful ruler who successfully utilizes Machiavellian strategies such as plotting political moves, gaining the acceptance of the common people, and never deferring war.

This conclusion is little more than a list of the points the essay covered. Better endings provide a measure of order and emphasis, encouraging the reader to look back on the whole argument, not just its various pieces. And the best endings manage to look outward—drawing some

larger conclusion and pointing to a significant implication or an opportunity for further research. Good endings possess a paradoxical quality: a sense of closure combined with a suggestion of new spaces to explore. The revision of the above example reaches for such an effect:

Mark Antony seems, at the beginning of *Julius Caesar*, a shallow and unimportant character. But by the end of the play he has been revealed as bold, shrewd, and ambitious, the play's most thoroughly Machiavellian character. Has he changed—or has Shakespeare merely allowed us to see beneath his mask? And was his love for Caesar genuine, or opportunistic? Shakespeare poses these questions about Antony without providing easy answers. Contemplating Antony, we come to see *Julius Caesar* as a deeply political play, a play that challenges and teaches us about the nature of politics and the temptations of power.

Closing the Circle

Thy firmness makes my circle just,
And makes me end where I begun.
John Donne (1572–1631)

One of the best ways to end an essay is by *closing the circle*, or returning at the end to where you began. Return to the story, example, quotation, or the like that you used in your introduction. This imparts a sense of order, elegance, and control to an essay. Remembering how you started when you finish suggests you've been paying close attention to your argument: that makes your reader more inclined to do the same. Here's an example from an essay on Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*:

Beginning

"Boy of tears," Aufidius taunts the Roman general Coriolanus near the end of Shakespeare's play (5.6.100), and the vehemence of Coriolanus' response suggests that Aufidius has hit the mark: there is something childish and sad about this fiercely proud warrior.

Ending

By the end, Coriolanus has thrown away not only his old identity but his new one as well. The "boy of tears" is left with only his immature fury

and sullen isolation. His final act of mercy leads not to reconciliation but to further suffering, loss, and death.

Another example comes from an essay about a visit to an isolated Caribbean island. The writer begins with a little detail that captures the island's isolation and slow pace: a tardy mail boat, which the writer will use to get to the island:

Beginning

The mail boat should have been here hours ago. From my stool in Blind Sonny Lloyd's tiny waterfront bar, I can see past a stand of coconut palms to the wooden deck where the boat was to have picked me up. (Tidwell 1999, E1)

At the end, the writer comes back to this opening image:

Ending

As it turns out, I'm the only passenger on the mail boat this time. I stash my gear in a tiny cabin and later recall something Percy had told me after our lobster dive as we waded ashore under the lavish Bahamian sun. "Think about what kind of world we'd have if every kid on the planet could grow up on an island like this. There'd be no more violence, mon. No more hatred. Just love for everybody. A big, big love."

If only Ragged Island could gobble up the rest of the world, in other words, instead of sliding slowly in the opposite direction. We could all be stranded together. Marooned as a way of life. The world as one big island.

And we wouldn't need mail boats any more. (Tidwell 1999, E8)

As these examples suggest, a skilled writer doesn't merely repeat what he said at the beginning. The trick is to echo the words or image with which you began while adding something that points beyond the text, that reaches out to the reader's world.

Last Thought

And so we come to our own ending. I hope that this little book has helped you better understand college writing. I hope that it has also helped you perceive the power and the beauty of words. Remember this: when you

write something worth reading it won't be because you followed the rules and conventions (as important as those are if you wish to be taken seriously). It will be because you had something real to say, and said it with clarity and grace. "Words sing," the writer Leo Rosten once said. "They hurt. They teach. They sanctify. They were man's first, immeasurable feat of magic." There is indeed a wild magic in words. Reach, and see if you can grasp it.

Appendix

Document and Citation Formats

This appendix furnishes a concise list of document and citation formats for three widely used academic styles: that of the Chicago Manual of Style (known as CMS, and common in the humanities), that of the Modern Language Association (MLA, common in literature), and that of the American Psychological Association (APA, common in the social sciences). The Nuts and Bolts website (www.nutsandboltsguide.com) has much more information and examples, especially about citing from the Internet and other electronic sources.

Generic Formats

Essays should be stapled or paper-clipped in the upper left corner. Don't fold or tear pages to hold them together—that's like shouting, "This essay wasn't very important to me!"—not a message you want to send. Most college instructors don't like binders or plastic covers. Essays should be typed or printed on blank white 8½" by 11" paper. Common fonts include 12-point Times Roman and Arial. Print in black ink.

Use one-inch margins on all sides (except for the page numbers). The essay should be double-spaced throughout (including quotations, notes, and the list of works cited, except where exceptions are noted below), with no blank lines between paragraphs. The first line of each new paragraph has a left-indent of a half-inch. Paragraphs are left-justified. In the days of typewriters and nonproportional fonts, it was common to put two spaces between sentences to improve readability. But if you print from a computer, just one space between sentences (and elsewhere) will work well (do a global search-and-replace when you're done, to get rid of the stray spaces that creep in).

Page Numbers

Place page numbers a half-inch from the top or bottom edge of the paper, flush with the right margin. Type your last name before the page number, except for APA style, which requires as a manuscript header the first couple of words from your title placed before the page number. If you have a title page, count it for purposes of pagination. Don't print the page number on the title page, except in APA style. Word processors can do all of this automatically.

Italics or Underlining

Both *italics* and underlining convey emphasis and are used for the titles of books. Use one or the other and be consistent. (Don't use bold face, except for headings of sections or figures.) Use italics or underlining for foreign words or words you are pointing to as words:

Machiavelli also uses *virtù* in its traditional sense of goodness or morality.

Yoga and *yoke* derive from a common Sanskrit root.

Some foreign words have made it into common English usage and don't take italics. If you're unsure, consult your dictionary. Using italics for emphasis should be avoided in academic writing.

Title and Identification

Your essay's title (usually between seven and fifteen words) should not be italicized or put in quotation marks (though if you are giving the title of a book or essay, or using a quotation in your title, then format those words accordingly). The title should be more than a bare-bones identifier (not "Essay #1" or "Essay on Management"). It should signal to the reader what your essay is about:

Mysteries of State: An Absolute Concept and Its Late Medieval Origins

"Hell Strives with Grace": Reflections on the Theme of Providence in Marlowe

As these examples show, titles often consist of two elements joined with a colon—typically, one of the elements is general or creative, and the other is more specific.

APA style requires a separate title page. Other formats leave it to the instructor's discretion. Short papers in the humanities usually don't have separate title pages.

Corrections

Sometimes you will discover mistakes in a final draft, with no time to print out a corrected version. In such cases, you should strike through the mistake and write the correction above the line in question, marking the insertion point with a caret:

> 1945
> The World Bank was established in ~~1947~~.
>   ^

It's usually okay to turn in an essay with one or two such corrections.

CMS, MLA, and APA Style Guide

The following is a short guide to the three most common citation styles for essay writers (though different instructors may have their own requirements or local variants). CMS is used in the humanities and history by those who prefer the traditional look of footnotes or endnotes rather than in-text citations (though CMS also has a parenthetical citation style). MLA is the most common in-text citation style in the humanities; APA, in the social sciences. Listed are the formats for the in-text citation or note and for the bibliographic reference.

In-text citations direct the reader to an entry in a list of references. Such citations consist of two elements: a signal phrase and a parenthetical. One may choose to put the citation information in either element. Experienced writers often weave the author's name into the signal phrase:

MLA: Schwartz characterizes *Hamlet* as "a war of masculine wills" (27). / This psychoanalytic perspective sees *Hamlet* as "a war of masculine wills" (Schwartz 27). **Citing whole text**: Schwartz surveys psychoanalytic readings of the play.

APA: Schwartz (1980) characterizes *Hamlet* as "a war of masculine wills" (p. 27). / This psychoanalytic perspective sees Hamlet as "a war of masculine wills" (Schwartz, 1980, p. 27). **Citing whole text**: Schwartz (1980) surveys psychoanalytic readings of the play.

See Chapter 6 for more on weaving citations into your essay.

List of References

A list of references gathers together the sources you've used, with enough bibliographic information that the reader can retrace your steps. The list comes at the end of the paper, after any endnotes. The title of the list is centered at the top of a new page, continuing the paper's pagination. Entries are set off with a hanging indent: after the first line, subsequent lines of each entry are indented a half-inch (word processors automate this task). Don't put blank lines between entries.

CMS The usual title is *Bibliography*, though other titles (e.g., *Works Cited* or *References*) are permitted. Capitalize all significant words in the titles of works listed.

MLA The usual title is *Works Cited*. Capitalize all significant words in titles.

APA The usual title is *References*. Capitalize only the first word of each work's title, the first word after a colon, and names and acronyms.

Citation and Reference Examples

1. Book
2. Journal Article
3. Two or More Works by the Same Author
4. Editor
5. Work in an Anthology
6. Item from a Collection of the Author's Work

7. Citations of Multiple Works from an Anthology
8. Anonymous Work
9. Article from an Anonymous Reference Work
10. Works by Authors with the Same Last Name
11. Preface, Foreword, or Introduction
12. Translation
13. Second or Subsequent Edition
14. Two Authors
15. Three Authors
16. Four or Five Authors
17. Six or More Authors
18. Corporate Author
19. Multivolume Work
20. One Volume from a Multivolume Work
21. Book Published before 1900
22. Classic Prose Works
23. Classic Verse Plays and Poems
24. Poem
25. Drama
26. The Bible
27. Magazine Article
28. Newspaper Article
29. Unsigned Editorial
30. Book Review
31. Pamphlet or Brochure
32. Government Publication
33. Indirect Source
34. Missing Information
35. Multiple Sources in One Note
36. Abbreviations for Frequently Cited Texts
37. Electronic Citations

1. Book

(Take title from the title page; use a colon to separate title and subtitle.)

CMS **FIRST NOTE:** David Daiches, *Moses: The Man and His Vision* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1975). **SUBSEQUENT NOTE:** Daiches, 176. / **BIBLIOGRAPHY:** Daiches, David. *Moses: The Man and His Vision.* New York: Praeger Publishers, 1975.

MLA **CITATION:** (Greenblatt) / **REFERENCE:** Greenblatt, Stephen. *Shakespeare in Purgatory.* Princeton and Oxford: Princeton UP, 2001.

APA **CITATION:** (Clasen, 1995, p. 213) / **REFERENCE:** Clasen, T. F. (1995). *Foreign trade and investment: A legal guide* (2nd ed.). Charlottesville, VA: Michie Butterworth.

2. Journal Article

(Take title from the table of contents.)

CMS **NOTE:** Julia Reinhard Lupton, "Creature Caliban," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 51.1 (2000): 17. / **BIBLIOGRAPHY:** Lupton, Julia Reinhard. "Creature Caliban." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 51.1 (2000): 1–23.

MLA **CITATION:** (Lupton 15) / **REFERENCE:** Lupton, Julia Reinhard. "Creature Caliban." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 51.1 (2000): 1–23.

APA **CITATION:** (Cronin, 2000, p. 785) / **REFERENCE:** Cronin, J. E. (2000). Convergence by conviction: Politics and economics in the emergence of the "Anglo-American model." *Journal of Social History, 33,* 781–804. **IF EACH ISSUE RESTARTS PAGE NUMBERS:** Hoellering, M. F. (1995). International arbitration under U.S. law and AAA rules. *Dispute Resolution Journal, 50*(January), 25–36.

3. Two or More Works by the Same Author

CMS **NOTES:** Richard Levin, "The Poetics and Politics of Bardicide," *PMLA* 105 (1990): 498. / Levin, "Bashing the Bourgeois Subject," *Textual Practice* 3 (1989): 79. / Levin, "Poetics," 493. / Levin, "Bashing," 82. / **BIBLIOGRAPHY:** For additional items by the same author, type five underscores instead of the name. Sort works by title, ignoring *The, A,* and *An.*

MLA **CITATION:** Include the cited work's name to avoid confusion, either in the text or in the citation: Charnes's critique has prompted a rebuttal (Levin, Poetics). / **REFERENCE:** For additional items by the same author, type three hyphens (---) instead of the name. Sort by title, ignoring *The, A,* and *An.*

APA **CITATION:** If the works have the same publication year, distinguish them with an added letter (Hoellering, 1994a, p. 89) / **REFERENCE:** Works with the same publication year are arranged alphabetically: Hoellering, M. F. (1994a). World trade—to arbitrate or mediate? *Dispute Resolution Journal, 49*(March), 67–69. / Hoellering, M. F. (1994b). The role of arbitration institutions in managing international commercial arbitration. *Dispute Resolution Journal, 49*(June), 12–18.