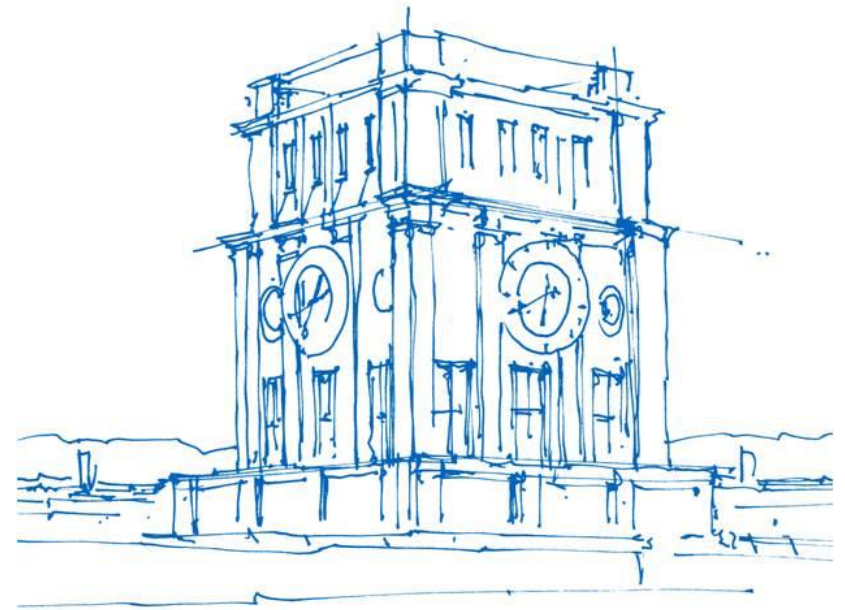


Seminar on English Writing

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Uhrenturm der TUM









Classic Style

The guiding metaphor of classic style is seeing the world. The writer can see something that the reader has not yet noticed, and he orients the reader's gaze so that she can see it for herself.

– Stephen Pinker, *The Sense of Style* (2014)

1. Action Verbs
2. Character Subjects
3. Cohesion
4. Concision

Actions & Characters

Suit the action to the word, the word to the action.

—Shakespeare, Hamlet

- ✘ Once upon a time, as a walk through the woods was taking place on the part of Little Red Riding Hood, the Wolf's jump out from behind a tree occurred, causing her fright.

Subjects

- a walk through the woods
- the Wolf's jump out from behind a tree

Verbs

- was taking place
- occurred

- ✔ Once upon a time, Little Red Riding Hood was walking through the woods, when the Wolf jumped out from behind a tree and frightened her.

Subjects

- Little Red Riding Hood
- the Wolf

Verbs

- was walking
- jumped / frightened

It works in academic writing, too:

In the 1990s, as a rise in labor prices was taking place across the US, the outsourcing of many high-tech jobs to Asia by corporations occurred, causing the loss of jobs for thousands of American workers.

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- ✗ In the 1990s, as a rise in labor prices was taking place across the US, the outsourcing of many high-tech jobs to Asia by corporations occurred, causing the loss of jobs for thousands of American workers.
- ✓ In the 1990s, as labor prices were rising across the US, corporations outsourced many high-tech jobs to Asia and thousands of Americans lost their jobs.

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First Principles of Clarity

Make the main characters your subjects.

Make the central actions your verbs.

In other words, choose *verbal style* over nominal style.

In other words, make your *grammar correspond to reality*.

So, what are “Characters”?

People (I, we, s/he, researchers, scientists, executives, etc.)

Institutions formed of people (the university, Washington, company, committee, etc.)

Things & phenomena that can *do something* (gene, laser, chassis, product, market, confirmation bias, etc.)

Umbrella nouns quasi characters (notion, argument, concept, aspect, system, process, etc.)

Character Subjects

Who (or what) are the hidden characters?

- ✘ Understanding the difference between the funding requirements of start-ups vs. mature companies is indispensable business knowledge.
- ✔ A successful *entrepreneur* understands that a *company* requires different funding sources as a start-up vs. a mature business.

- ✘ The cause of our schools' failure at teaching basic skills is not understanding the influence of cultural background on learning.
- ✔ Our *schools* have failed to teach basic skills because *curricula* do not account for how *cultural background* influences learning.

Action Verbs

What is the hidden central action?

- ✘ Apple's loss in sales was the result of its overly hasty expansion of retail stores.
- ✔ Apple *lost* sales because it *expanded* its retail stores too hastily.
- ✘ Governmental intervention in fast-changing technologies has led to the distortion of market evolution and interference in new product development.
- ✔ When a government *intervenes* in fast-changing technologies, it *distorts* how markets *evolve* and *interferes* with new product development.

Workshopping 1

1. Underline all subjects and circle all verbs.
2. Are there good character subjects and action verbs?
3. If not, can you offer ways to improve it using hidden characters and actions?

Example of text to improve

Competition by Asian companies with American companies in the Pacific is the first phase of this study. Labor costs and the ability to introduce new products quickly in particular are examined. A plan that will show American industry how to restructure its facilities will be developed from this study.

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Sample rewrite

In the first phase of this study, we examine how Asian companies compete with American companies in the Pacific region. We analyze in particular their labor costs and ability to introduce new products quickly. The study culminates in a plan that will show American industry how to restructure its facilities.

First person

“Nature journals prefer authors to write in the active voice (“we performed the experiment...”) as experience has shown that readers find concepts and results to be conveyed more clearly if written directly.”

—*Nature*

www.nature.com/authors/author_resources/how_write.html

“Use active voice when suitable, particularly when necessary for correct syntax (e.g., “To address this possibility, we constructed a λ Zap library . . .,” not “To address this possibility, a λ Zap library was constructed . . .”).”

—*Science*

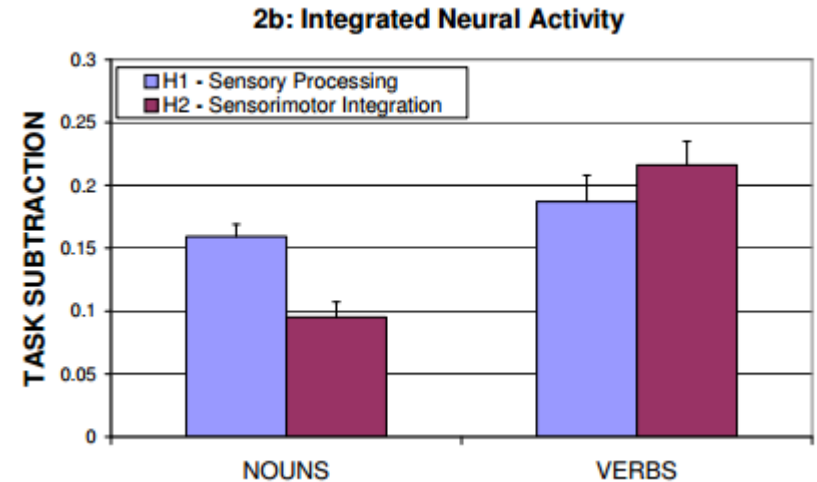
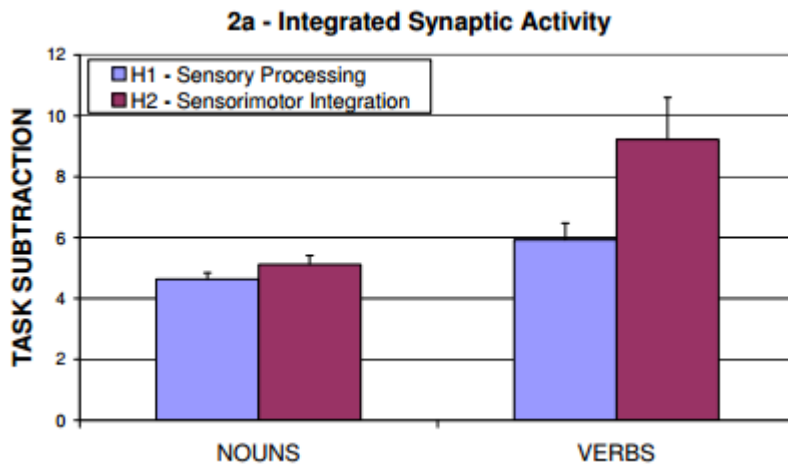
www.sciencemag.org/site/feature/contribinfo/prep/res/style.xhtml

“Write in the active and use the first person where necessary. Try to avoid long sentences that have several embedded clauses.”

—*British Medical Journal*

www.bmj.com/about-bmj/resources-authors/house-style

Verbs and the Brain



Cangelosi A., Parisi D. (2004) [“The processing of verbs and nouns in neural networks: Insights from synthetic brain imaging”](#). *Brain and Language* 89(2): 401-408

Other references:

Pulvermüller, Friedemann & Rachel Moseley. (2014). [“Nouns, verbs, objects, actions, and abstractions: Local fMRI activity indexes semantics, not lexical categories”](#). *Brain and Language* 132: 28–42.

Boulenger V., Hauk O., Pulvermüller F. 2009. [“Grasping ideas with the motor system: Semantic somatotopy in idiom comprehension”](#). *Cerebral Cortex* 19(8):1905–1914.

Paul, Annie Murphey. [“Your Brain on Fiction”](#). *New York Times*. Mar. 17, 2012.

Cohesion

If [a writer] would inform, he must advance regularly from Things known to things unknown, distinctly without Confusion, and the lower he begins the better.

—Benjamin Franklin

The basis of our American democracy—equal opportunity for all—is being threatened by college costs that have been rising fast for the last several years. Increases in family income have been significantly outpaced by increases in tuition at our colleges and universities during that period. Only the children of the wealthiest families in our society will be able to afford a college education if this trend continues. Knowledge and intellectual skills, in addition to wealth, will divide us as a people, when that happens. Equal opportunity and the egalitarian basis of our democratic society could be eroded by such a divide.

I found this difficult to follow—why?

Basic Principle of Cohesion:

Present familiar before new information

Compare the same text written with
and without this principle...

The basis of our American democracy—equal opportunity for all—is being threatened by college costs that have been rising fast for the last several years. Increases in family income have been significantly outpaced by increases in tuition at our colleges and universities during that period.

Only the children of the wealthiest families in our society will be able to afford a college education if this trend continues.

Knowledge and intellectual skills, in addition to wealth, will divide us as a people, when that happens.

Equal opportunity and the egalitarian basis of our democratic society could be eroded by such a divide.

The basis of our American democracy—equal opportunity for all—is being threatened by college costs that have been rising fast for the last several years. Tuition has significantly outpaced increases in family income.

A college education will soon be affordable only by the children of the wealthiest families in our society.

When that happens, we will be divided as a people not only by wealth but by knowledge and intellectual skills.

Such a divide will erode equal opportunity and the egalitarian basis of our democratic society.

(familiar information underlined)

What is “familiar” information?

- A set of subjects that are the theme of the text
- Subjects taken from info in previous sentence
- Introductory phrases that connect to the previous sentence
- Universal subjects (e.g. *we*, *Western culture*, *current research*).

The basis of our American democracy—equal opportunity for all—is being threatened by college costs that have been rising fast for the last several years.

Tuition has significantly outpaced increases in family income.

A college education will soon be affordable only by the children of the wealthiest families in our society.

When that happens, we will be divided as a people not only by wealth but by knowledge and intellectual skills.

Such a divide will erode equal opportunity and the egalitarian basis of our democratic society.

Concision

It is vain to do with more what can be done with less.

—William of Occam

The problem:

- ✗ “In my personal opinion, it is necessary that we should not ignore the opportunity to think over each and every suggestion offered.”

How can this be rewritten with utmost concision?

- ✓ “We should consider each suggestion.”

Three Principles of Concision

1. Delete words that mean little or nothing.
2. Delete words implied by other words.
3. Replace a phrase with a word.

1. Delete words that mean little or nothing

Productivity ~~actually~~ depends on ~~certain~~ factors that ~~basically~~ involve psychology more than any ~~particular~~ technology.

kind of

actual(ly)

particular(ly)

real(ly)

certain(ly)

various

virtual(ly)

individual

basic(ally)

general(ly)

given

practical(ly)

Note: Of course such words can be used in a useful way. Try to be aware of when they are useful and when they are not.

2. Delete words implied by other words

✘ “During that period of ~~time~~, the membrane ~~area~~ became pink ~~in color~~ and shiny ~~in appearance~~.”

✔ “During that period, the membrane became pink and shiny.”

3. Replace a phrase with a word.

✗ “As you carefully read what you have written to improve wording and catch errors of spelling and punctuation, the thing to do before anything else is to see whether you could use sequences of subjects and verbs instead of the same ideas expressed in nouns.”

edit

first

replace

clauses

nominalizations

✓ “As you edit, first replace nominalizations with clauses.”

Workshopping

...see these writing principles in action in your field

Rank these texts (1–3) for each category.

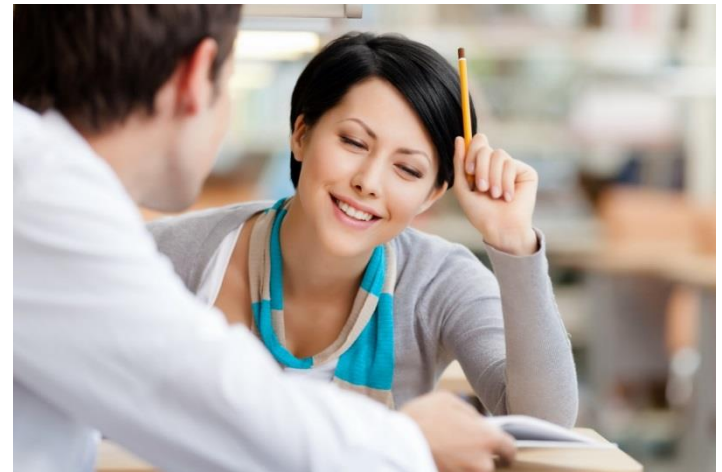
	Hargadon	Carson Marr	Kahneman
Character Subjects			
Action Verbs			
Cohesion			
Concision			

Tip: First skim through the texts, underlining the subjects and circling the verbs. This will allow you to quickly compare across texts.

Next steps to improve your writing

- Organize small groups for the English Coaching Program
- Come to the Writing Center for one-to-one consultations
- Join our Dissertation Writers' Workshop

www.tum.de/writing-center



Recommended Resources

Joseph Williams – *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace* (2014)

Stephen Pinker – *Sense of Style* (2014)

Helen Sword – *Stylish Academic Writing* (2013)

Francis-Noël Thomas & Mark Turner – *Clear and simple as the truth* (2011)