Writing clearly and concisely

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Session aims

- To explore techniques for conveying complex ideas in a clear, concise and precise way.

- To provide editing tips and strategies for sharpening-up academic writing.
Activity 1

- What are your writing habits?
- Are there certain words that you know you over-use?
- Do you have a habit of using lengthy sentences or redundant phrases?
- Do you struggle to get your points across clearly to the reader?

Discuss with each other and jot down your main challenges or issues.
Successful academic writing should be:

- Clear
- Concise
- Precise
Clarity

- Clarity should take precedence over flowery language.
- Although your writing should be interesting and engaging, your reader does not want to work overly hard to understand your arguments.
- Think about how to convey complex ideas clearly and accessibly.
Activity 2
Compare the two extracts from an essay. Both are conveying similar ideas, but which does so with greater clarity? How has the writer achieved this clarity?

You should consider:
- Vocabulary choices
- Sentence structures
- Use of punctuation
- Sequencing of ideas and links between sentences
A few thoughts on the writing style of the two extracts

Extract 1

It can be said that, in addition to the knowledge that the vast majority of visible matter in the Universe in the present day is found inside neutrons and protons within the nuclei of atoms, it is now well known that neutrons and protons consist of quarks, with a neutron containing two down and one up quark and a proton incorporating two up and one down. These are held together by the strong nuclear force, transmitted by gluons. In all, there are a total of six flavours of quarks - up, down, strange, charm, bottom and top, with the latter four of these being heavier - and each quark additionally has an antiquark which has exactly the same mass but opposite charge.

The writer has tried to vary his/her vocabulary by using alternative words for 'containing' but it seems imprecise and inconsistent in this context.

Don't really need “in all” or “a total of” – certainly not both!

Long, hard to follow sentence, with ideas poorly sequenced so that they become confusing.

It is not clear precisely what “these” refers to – or what “transmitted by gluons” refers to later in this sentence. Or, in fact, what gluons are!
The bulk of visible matter in the Universe today is found in the nuclei of atoms, confined inside neutrons and protons. It is now well known that neutrons and protons are made up of smaller particles called quarks. A neutron contains two “down” quarks and one “up” quark, while a proton contains two up quarks and one down quark. The quarks inside the proton and neutron are held together by the strong nuclear force, which is transmitted by uncharged particles called gluons. There are six types (flavours) of quarks. The other four are heavier than the up and down and are known as strange, charm, bottom and top quarks. In addition, corresponding to each quark is an antiquark which has the same mass, but opposite charge.
Examples of factors that make writing less clear

Unclear subject in a sentence, or use of vague pronouns

This essay aims to discuss measurements traditionally used (historic cost) and the now primary measurement of fair value and evaluate the impact this will have on financial statements and their users.
Examples of factors that make writing less clear

Unclear subject in a sentence, or use of vague pronouns

This essay aims to discuss measurements traditionally used (historic cost) and the now primary measurement of fair value and evaluate the impact **this** will have on financial statements and their users.

What, exactly?
Examples of factors that make writing less clear

- Assuming the reader will know what you mean

*The difference between implicit stereotyping and implicit prejudices (or evaluations) is that stereotyping focuses on the cognitive representations of culturally held beliefs about outgroup members while prejudices are about the negative affective responses.*
Examples of factors that make writing less clear

Assuming the reader will know what you mean

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Meaning? Such as?
Examples of factors that make writing less clear

Assuming the reader will know what you mean

*The difference between implicit stereotyping and implicit prejudices (or evaluations) is that stereotyping focuses on the cognitive representations of culturally held beliefs about *outgroup members* while prejudices are about the *negative affective responses*. 

Such as?  
Meaning?
Examples of factors that make writing less clear

Convoluted sentence structures

The age range identified, given that MS has its peak incidence between twenty-five and thirty-five (Stokes 2004), would only accommodate younger MS sufferers.
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Convoluted sentence structures

The age range identified, given that MS has its peak incidence between twenty-five and thirty-five (Stokes 2004), would only accommodate younger MS sufferers.

This subordinate clause interrupts the flow of the sentence. It would be better moved to the beginning or end or the sentence.
Examples of factors that make writing less clear

Too many ideas or clauses within one sentence

These standards seek to bring the financial statements of companies all over the world into line, so that comparison of performance and financial positions can be compared and contrasted straightforwardly, allowing the users of accounts to make greater informed management performance evaluations, assess enterprise and make sound investment decisions.
Examples of factors that make writing less clear

Too many ideas or clauses within one sentence

*These standards seek to bring the financial statements of companies all over the world into line. This would ensure that* comparison of performance and financial positions can be compared and contrasted straightforwardly. *In addition, this would allow* the users of accounts to make greater informed management performance evaluations, assess enterprise and make sound investment decisions.
Examples of factors that make writing less clear

Poor punctuation

However the argument here is that compared to historic cost fair value does offer more relevance as the accounts will be more up-to-date, consider for instance the extreme rising prices of buildings.
Examples of factors that make writing less clear

Poor punctuation

*However the argument here is that compared to historic cost fair value does offer more relevance as the accounts will be more up-to-date, consider for instance the extreme rising prices of buildings.*

This clause needs to be sectioned off with commas for clarity.

This needs to be a separate sentence – and a better one!
Concision

- Conveying in depth concepts in a few carefully chosen words.

- Identify and cut ‘idle’ words.

- Words should not be cut at the expense of clarity.

- Edit work in order to find the most succinct way of expressing your content.
Concision

Activity 3

Consider how the wordy phrases or sentences below could be made more concise.

Remember: a key part of the editing process is removing idle words.

- Exactly identical
- The general consensus at the present time appears to be…
- The results provide an indication of…
- A necessary prerequisite
- One factor of paramount importance is…
Editing Techniques: a few to try

- Once you have written your paper, put it away for a few days before rereading.

- Print your work in a different font. Enlarge the text for the editing process. Making your work look alien is good for objectivity.

- Check all words like “perhaps” or “seems” or “could be seen/said” – do you need them?

- Paste individual paragraphs into separate docs and insert line breaks. This helps identify lengthy sentences, repetition and errors in sequencing & logic.

- Read your work out loud (and record it).
Precision

- Choose your words carefully.
- Avoid vague or ambiguous vocabulary.
- Quantify things, be concrete & give examples.
Precision

Activity 4

Read the three phrases below. In what ways could they be considered ambiguous or imprecise in the context of an academic paper? How could the choice of vocabulary be amended?

1. The findings are significant.
2. A large increase was seen.
3. Males performed better in condition A.
Precision

Activity 4
Read the three phrases below. In what ways could they be considered ambiguous or imprecise in the context of an academic paper? How could the choice of vocabulary be amended?

1. The findings are **significant**.
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Ambiguous language – has a mathematical meaning as well as meaning important.
Precision

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Why not use a figure here? It is more precise.
Activity 4

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1. The findings are significant.
2. A large increase was seen.
3. **Males** performed better in **condition A**.

Compared to females? Compared to condition B?
Last-minute panic scenario!

- Step 1: stay calm
- Step 2: surplus words
- Step 3: quotations?
- Step 4: assess further choices

- One very large cut
- A potentially large number of smaller cuts
Editing practice

Consider the essay extract:

“Critically analyse the concept of institutional racism in policing and evaluate policy responses to it.”

Use your editing skills to:
- Cut out any unnecessary words
- Re-word muddled sentences
- Sharpen up ambiguous or vague vocabulary
Academic Skills Centre

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