
Academic Writing Workshop



Writing Clearly & Concisely



The aim of today's session

Today's session will explore techniques for conveying complex ideas in a clear, concise and precise way. It will also provide editing tips and strategies for sharpening up your 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? Or do you struggle to get your points across clearly to the reader? Discuss with each other and jot down your main challenges or issues.

1: Clarity

In academic writing, clarity should always take precedence over artful or flowery language. Although your essay should be pleasant to read, your marker does not want to work too hard to understand your arguments. Choose words and sentence structures that convey your ideas clearly and unambiguously.

- **Activity 2: Compare the two extracts from a physics essay below. Both are conveying similar ideas, but which does so with greater clarity? More importantly, how has the writer achieved this clarity?**

You should consider:

- Vocabulary choices
- Sentence structures
- Use of punctuation
- Sequencing of ideas and links between sentences

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 bound 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.

Extract 2

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.

Your notes:

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.

Redundant phrase

Long-winded way of saying "today"

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

Too many different points made in one sentence

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!

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!

Extract 2

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.

One main idea per sentence

Starts with the most basic information and builds up in logical layers

Subjects and verbs clearly connected. Info given concisely and clearly.

Clarity Continued

What factors can make your 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?

Meaning?

- **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?

Such as?

Meaning??

- **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 of the sentence.

- **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.

This clause needs to be sectioned off with commas for clarity

- **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 needs to be a separate sentence – and a better one!

2: Concision

“The best English is that which gives sense in the fewest words.” [1]

Although you should not under-develop your arguments or skim over important details, it is vital to explain your ideas concisely and within the word count. Conveying in depth concepts in a few carefully chosen words is an important skill for academic writers to develop. Striking a balance between clarity and concision is key: words should not be cut at the expense of clarity, but being succinct is much more important than sounding flashy.

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.

Phrase containing superfluous or redundant words	How could you improve it?
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...	

Tips for editing

- Print off your essay in a large font to do your editing – and preferably a different font from the one you used to type it
- Go through crossing out any words or sentences that are serving no purpose
- Check all words like “perhaps” or “seems” or “could be seen/said” – do you need them?
- Copy and paste any clumsy sentences onto a separate document and play around with them to find a more streamlined structure
- Read the essay aloud to check the flow

3: Precision

When writing an academic paper, it is important to choose your words carefully, avoiding vague or ambiguous vocabulary. This is particularly true in scientific disciplines, when ambiguities in language often pose even more of a problem than in other forms of writing.

Activity 4: Consider the phrases below. In what ways could they be considered ambiguous or imprecise? How could the choice of vocabulary be amended?

1. The findings are significant.
2. A large increase was seen.
3. Many people believe...
4. In conclusion, it could perhaps be suggested that...

Last-minute panic scenario!

Imagine you have two days before you submit the essay and you are 753 words over the 3000 limit. What is your strategy? Use the steps below to help you decide what do.



Step one. Stay calm

What you are going to do next is create a strategy for cutting the words. You are going to stay calm; you are going to take some rational decisions. Then, when you've weighed up the consequences, you can make the necessary cuts. On no account rush into wildly deleting entire paragraphs.

Step two. Surplus words

If at all possible, do one more edit. Go through your text and look for phrases or sentences which are surplus to requirements. It would be very surprising if you could not make a substantial difference to the word count simply by rewriting and deleting redundant, meaningless or over-wordy sentences and phrases. (You are correct; two of the three adjectives in the sentence above could be cut!)

Yes, it takes a little time, but you can save a lot of words simply through careful editing.

Step three. Quotations?

Do the quotations that you use count towards the word count? Find this out from the module handbook, or alternatively from your student handbook. If necessary, check with the module tutor. If quotations **are** included in the word count, can you make some savings by cutting/reducing the quotations and simply giving the reference? For instance:

James (2012) is dismissive of Kingsley Amis's approach:

"That's what I'd like to say. But... there are so many. How could one be guiltless of them all? Amis classifies *brutalise*, *decimate*, *crescendo*, *alibi*, *avid*, *oblivious optimistic*, *seek out*, and *refute*, among many others, as "unusable through ambiguity."

This becomes "James (2012) is dismissive of Kingsley Amis's approach". This makes an immediate saving of 40 words. Or, if you want to keep some of the quote, incorporate extracts of into the sentence, e.g:

James (2012) is dismissive of Kingsley Amis' approach, indicating that there are "so many" words that Amis classifies as "unusable through ambiguity."

Step four. Assess further choices

Your choices are either

- one or two large and dramatic cuts **or**
- many additional smaller cuts

Before you proceed, make sure that you have a copy of the marking scheme so you can be sure how the marks are allocated. Do not do this by guesswork alone.

One very large cut

- Can you cut a big portion of text without many marks?
- If you do have to cut that big portion of text, what percentage of your marks do you think you will lose? Is it worth it?

A potentially large number of smaller cuts

- Can you identify a number of areas where smaller cuts can be justified?
- For instance, retain the beginning and end of each paragraph but attempt to cut at least one sentence from the middle
- Make your cuts
- Read the text carefully to make sure that the internal logic of the text is still there. In other words make sure that you have not destroyed the connections between sentences and between paragraphs
- You will almost certainly need to do some final editing to make sure that the document flows smoothly and does not still have a number of awkward jumps in it.

Editing practice

Consider the essay extract below.

Use your editing skills to:

- Cut out any unnecessary words
- Re-word muddled sentences
- Sharpen up ambiguous or vague vocabulary

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

"By its very nature, much of policing is controversial and conflictual." (Newburn 2005:525) This can be seen in the major debate over race and racism that has continued throughout contemporary British policing for quite a few years, featuring increasingly in popular media and political debates. The growing interest in the position of ethnic minority groups in relation to the criminal justice system was the acknowledgment that they do not receive equivalent treatment as their white counterparts. This was shown in a number of high profile cases, leading to public concern over whether racism operated at the individual level or whether it was embedded in the policies and practices of the police (Easton & Piper, 2005). In this period, two inquiries were carried out: the Scarman report and the Macpherson report, investigating and probing police procedures to see if or where racism was present in the system. Both became of significant value to society, bringing, "to the surface fundamental issues concerning police powers, competence, accountability, personnel and training"(Bowling, 1998:xiv) and allowing fresh debates to surface on how to build a successful multi-cultural society in Britain. These are the areas this essay will focus on to be able to

critically analyse the concept of institutional racism in policing and evaluate policy responses to it.

To be able to present an answer effectively, this essay will first concentrate on the relations between the police and minorities understood in the context of history, through the Brixton riots, which triggered the Scarman inquiry and the Macpherson inquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence. Analysis of the concept of institutional racism will follow this. Thirdly, the paper will look at the Stephen Lawrence case and the recommendations Macpherson presented to create change in policies. Finally, it will look at the policy responses by evaluating them and concluding that a lot of work still needs to be done to overcome institutional racism.

The widely known phrase 'There is a crisis in modern policing' has clearly strong evidence against it (Wright 2002). In this section, one specific area of this crisis will be discussed: the relationship between the police and the growing black community. There was recognition of racist policing inside these communities in Britain in the 1950s, down to the failure of solving and investigating racist murders and attacks. Research done at this period showed "that racism and racial prejudice in police culture were more widespread and more extreme than in wider society." (Newburn 2005: 529). These accounts also documented the use of oppressive policing techniques, including those of mass stop and search operations in ethnic minority communities. These practices are collectively known as 'over-policing'. These increasingly strained relationships, producing tensions between the police and black communities as police practices heightened and reinforced racial tension.

References

1. Day, R.A. (1998) **How to Write and Publish a Scientific Paper** (Oryx Press: Westport)

Further Resources

Adams, R. (2008), **Scientific Writing Style**, Study Advice Service, University of Hull [online]. Available from: <http://www.bradford.ac.uk/academic-skills/resources/study/assignment-writing/write-sciences/>

Barrass, R. (1995) **Scientists Must Write: A Guide to Better Writing for Scientists, Engineers and Students**, Chapman & Hall, London

University of Bradford Learner Development Unit. (2012) **Working within your word count** [online]. Available from: <http://www.bradford.ac.uk/learner-development/media/LearnerDevelopmentUnit/Documents/AcademicSkillsResources/DraftingEditingandProofing/Editing-Skills-Managing-the-Word-Count-Activity.pdf> [Accessed 16 May 2013].

University of Plymouth. (2010) **Writing Clear Sentences** [online]. Available from: (<http://www.port.ac.uk/media/contacts-and-departments/student-support-services/ask/downloads/Writing-clear-sentences.pdf>) (Accessed 12 November 2013)

- To book a 1-1 with a Writing Skills Advisor at the Academic Skills Centre: asc@contacts.bham.ac.uk
- Or visit our website for further workshops: www.intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/asc

Suggested editing of the essay extract

Give indication of how many years e.g. "Since..."

"By its very nature, much of policing is controversial and conflictual." (Newburn 2005:525) This can be seen in the major debate over race and racism that has continued throughout contemporary British policing for quite a few years, featuring increasingly in

Doesn't make sense

popular media and political debates. The growing interest in the position of ethnic minority groups in relation to the criminal justice system was the acknowledgment that they do not receive equivalent treatment as their white counterparts. This was shown in

Give some examples?

a number of high profile cases, leading to public concern over whether racism operated at the individual level or whether it was embedded in the policies and practices of the police (Easton & Piper, 2005). In this period, two inquiries were carried out: the Scarman

Are both verbs needed?

report and the Macpherson report, investigating and probing police procedures to see if or where racism was present in the system. Both became of significant value to society, bringing, "to the surface fundamental issues concerning police powers, competence,

Could replace all this with "brought"

accountability, personnel and training"(Bowling, 1998:xiv) and allowing fresh debates to surface on how to build a successful multi-cultural society in Britain. These are the areas this essay will focus on to be able to critically analyse the concept of institutional racism in policing and evaluate policy responses to it.

Cut?

Needs re-structuring

To be able to present an answer effectively, this essay will first concentrate on the relations between the police and minorities understood in the context of history, through the Brixton riots, which triggered the Scarman inquiry and the Macpherson inquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence. Analysis of the concept of institutional racism will follow this. Thirdly, the paper will look at the Stephen Lawrence case and the recommendations Macpherson presented to create change in policies. Finally, it will look at the policy responses by evaluating them and concluding that a lot of work still needs to be done to overcome institutional racism.

Bit of an assumption?

Don't really need "clearly" if you're going to use "strong."

Vague – and was previously referred to as a singular "black community," now described in a plural way – be consistent

The widely known phrase 'There is a crisis in modern policing' has clearly strong evidence against it (Wright 2002). In this section, one specific area of this crisis will be discussed: the relationship between the police and the growing black community. There was recognition of racist policing inside these communities in Britain in the 1950s, down to the failure of solving and investigating racist murders and attacks. Research done at this period showed "that racism and racial prejudice in police culture were more widespread and more extreme than in wider society." (Newburn 2005: 529). These accounts also documented the use of oppressive policing techniques, including those of mass stop and search operations in ethnic minority communities. These practices are collectively known as 'over-policing'. These increasingly strained relationships, producing tensions between the police and black communities as police practices heightened and reinforced racial tension.

What does this phrase mean?

Cut?

Which accounts?

This sentence feels a bit repetitive. Could be said in a more succinct way