



UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM



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.



Clarity

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

Redundant phrase

Long-winded way of saying "today"

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

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.

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

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

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

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



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.



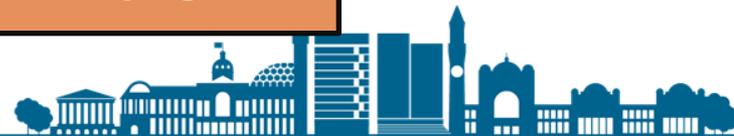
Examples of factors that make writing less clear

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

Convolutd 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.



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.*

This subordinate clause interrupts the flow of the sentence. It would be better moved to the beginning or end of 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.
2. A large increase was seen.
3. Males performed better in condition A.

Ambiguous language –
has a mathematical
meaning as well as
meaning important.



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.

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



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**.

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

Location

1st floor, main library

Telephone

(0121) 414 3666

Email

asc@contacts.bham.ac.uk

Web

intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/libraryservices/library/skills/asc

The screenshot shows the University of Birmingham Intranet page for the Academic Skills Centre (ASC). The header includes the University of Birmingham logo, the text 'UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM | INTRANET', and navigation links for 'Main website', 'Login', 'For students', and 'For staff'. A search icon is also present. The breadcrumb trail reads: 'University of Birmingham Intranet > Academic Services > Library Services > Library > Skills and training > Academic Skills Centre'. The main heading is 'Academic Skills Centre (ASC)'. The page is organized into a grid of service tiles and a right-hand navigation menu. The tiles include: 'Academic skills' (Workshops and guides to develop your skills), 'Mathematics Support Centre' (Maths and stats support), 'Library and information skills' (Find and cite resources for your study and research), 'Digital Skills' (Training in stats software, digital images, spreadsheets and more), 'One-to-one appointments' (Develop and improve your academic skills), and 'PASS' (Peer Assisted Study Sessions for first year undergraduates). The right-hand menu is titled 'In 'Academic Skills Centre'' and lists various resources and events.

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM | INTRANET

Main website Login

For students For staff

University of Birmingham Intranet > Academic Services > Library Services > Library > Skills and training > Academic Skills Centre

Academic Skills Centre (ASC)

- Academic skills**
Workshops and guides to develop your skills
- Mathematics Support Centre**
Maths and stats support
- Library and information skills**
Find and cite resources for your study and research
- Digital Skills**
Training in stats software, digital images, spreadsheets and more
- One-to-one appointments**
Develop and improve your academic skills
- PASS**
Peer Assisted Study Sessions for first year undergraduates

Academic Skills Gateway Feedback Contact us

In 'Academic Skills Centre'

- > Academic Skills Centre
- > New Taught Student Welcome events
- > Events and workshops
- > Transition to University
- > Mature undergraduate students
- > Taught Postgraduates
- > What to expect
- > ASC resources
- > Top tips for revision
- > Appointments
- > Maths Support
- > Academic skills support
- > Contact us



Academic Skills Gateway

The screenshot shows the Academic Skills Gateway website. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links: Home, Learning how to learn, Maths and statistics, Research skills, Working with others, and Writing skills. The main content area is divided into several sections:

- Library Services Academic Skills Gateway**: A header section with a green and orange gradient.
- Learning how to learn**: A section with a lightbulb icon and a link to "Learning how to learn".
- Maths and statistics**: A section with a "1+2" icon and a link to "Maths and statistics".
- Research skills**: A section with a magnifying glass icon and a link to "Research skills".
- Working with others**: A section with a group of people icon and a link to "Working with others".
- Writing skills**: A section with a quill pen icon and a link to "Writing skills".

Below these sections are social media icons for Facebook and Twitter, and the University of Birmingham Library Services logo.

On the right side of the page, there is a sidebar with the following sections:

- Academic Skills Centre**: A header section.
- Confidential 1-1 appointments**: A section with links to "Academic Skills appointments" and "Digital Skills appointments".
- Workshops and classes**: A section with links to "Academic Skills workshop registration" and "Digital Skills workshop registration".
- Library and Information Skills**: A section with a list of links to various college guides: "A-Z list of Guides", "College of Arts and Law", "College of Engineering and Physical Sciences", "College of Life and Environmental Sciences", "College of Medical and Dental Sciences", and "College of Social Science".
- Stand-alone resources**: A section with links to "Guide to Effective Learning (GEL)", "Successfully transitioning to postgraduate studies", and "Skills4Study Campus".
- Feedback**: A green button with the text "Feedback".
- Accessibility**: A black button with the text "Accessibility".
- Mathematics Support Centre**: A black button with the text "Mathematics Support Centre" and a circular logo.
- FindIt@Bham**: A black button with the text "FindIt@Bham" and a magnifying glass icon.



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libguides.bham.ac.uk/asg