
IMPROVING YOUR STYLE

1. Use a formal tone.

- **Formal tone** is impersonal, without contractions, without slang expressions, and with avoidance of personal pronouns like you, I, me, and we (unless writing a personal narrative essay). This style is used for academic articles and essays.

2. Be precise in your writing.

- Avoid clichés and overused words or expressions.
- Don't use vague words such as *thing* and *stuff*.
- **Use active and strong verbs.** Circle all of the "be" verbs in your essay (am, is, are, was, were, be, been, and being). You are likely writing in the passive voice.
- **Change as many of the sentences around by substituting strong and precise verbs for "be" verbs.**

Examples with "be" verbs/ passive voice:

The alien remains was lost.
The car was wrecked.

Example with precise verbs:

The government lost the alien remains.
I wrecked the car.

Examples with weak verbs:

The aliens have a positive effect on our economy.
Chloe has an A in English.
Mica got a new Mustang convertible.

Examples with strong verbs:

The aliens improve our economy.
Chloe earned an A in English.
Mica bought a new Mustang convertible.

3. Avoid vague pronoun references.

- Avoid starting a sentence with the pronoun this or that unless it is followed by a noun or refers clearly and directly to a noun in the previous sentence.
- These pronouns should **not** be used to refer to the concept of the entire sentence (or paragraph, or essay) preceding it.

Example of vague pronoun reference:

A scientist's work has no value unless he shares his thoughts with the scientific community. That is the cornerstone of science. (What is *that*? Try: "That communication . . .")

Example of vague pronoun reference:

Many people are losing their jobs. This is the problem with America. (What is *this*? Try: "The failing economy and lack of unemployment for skilled workers is a major problem in America.")

Example of vague pronoun reference:

It used to be that many Americans found jobs after college. (What is *It used to be*? Try: Prior to the recession beginning in 2008, Americans easily found jobs after college.)

4. Avoid the use of 'there is' or 'there are' to begin a sentence.

For example:

There are many students who study after school and earn good grades as a result.

There is a lack of money for education, and students are struggling because of large classroom sizes and overworked teachers.

Better versions:

Students who study after school often earn good grades.

Without sufficient money for education, students will continue to struggle due to large classroom sizes and overworked teachers.

5. Combine sentences to improve the flow of your writing.

- See "Improving your Sentence Structure" handout to avoid choppy sentences.

6. Use relative pronouns correctly.

- Use "who" when referring to a person and not "that" or "which".

Students who bring their lunches to school often eat healthier than those who buy.