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# IMPROVING YOUR STYLE

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## 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.