Revisiting the Basics II: Clarity in Academic Writing

Graduate Research and Innovation Center (GRIC)
University of Puerto Rico, Mayagüez Campus

https://goo.gl/e5z53p

Effective academic writing is both informative and persuasive. Its ability to engage the intended target audience and convince it of the author's claims depends not only on the quality of the evidence provided but also on the clarity of the argument.

This interactive workshop will discuss how to craft sharp, clear, concise, intelligent academic content to grasp your audience’s attention.
So, how do you make your writing crystal clear? ...This workshop will help you get started!

Clinic Roadmap

PRETEST

CREATIVE VS ACADEMIC WRITING

CLARITY IN WRITING

CLARITY IN ACADEMIC WRITING
Lexical Density, Fillers and Unnecessary Words

QUESTIONS

TIPS

PUNCTUATION

PRACTICE EXERCISES EXAMPLES

BE POSSESSIVE, ACTIVE AND CONCISE
Eliminating Prepositional Phrases and Nominalizations
Clarity Clinic – Pretest
https://goo.gl/vyFisY

3:00

MEET THE TEAM!
More info @ http://libguides.uprm.edu/gric/gwf

Angelia Caro
GWF
MS Student in Biology with focus in Human Genetics
My major focus areas are Human Evolutionary Genetics, Microbiology and Biological Sciences

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GWF
MA Student in English Education
My area of interest centers in Children's Literature and ESL Education

Luisa Feliciano
GWF
PhD Student in Civil Engineering
My research interests include Renewable Energy Systems, Environmental Reconnaissance and UAVs (drones)

Jocelyn Geliga
GWF Coordinator
Professor - English Department
GWF - Graduate Writing Facilitator

The Graduate Writing Facilitators are graduate students of the University of Puerto Rico in Mayagüez that come from various concentrations and disciplines of study. They have been trained to offer academic services of oral and written communication in English. The multidisciplinary diversity of our Facilitators is meant to attend to the needs of every graduate program of UPRM and its students.

We can help with:

• Prewriting (brainstorming and outline)
• Revision of journal articles, academic proposals, grant proposals, summaries, posters, essays, theses, dissertations, fellowship/scholarship applications, resumes, CVs, etc.
• Practice for interviews, academic presentations, seminars, conferences, oral theses and dissertation exams, etc.
• Help with grammar, style, tone, audience, genres, organization, structure, etc.
**First things first!**

Do you think in Spanish while writing in English?

- Quit translating from Spanish. Every language has words and concepts with no single equivalent in other languages.
- Start writing in English, even if sentences turn out to be extremely simple.
- Develop rich vocabulary.
- Apply grammar rules to your writing.
- Use punctuation appropriately.

“To be a successful writer I know of only two methods: read a lot and write a lot” – Stephen King

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**First things first!**

Silly example to stop you from thinking in Spanish and learn a few vocabulary words along the way!!

una experiencia **patibularia**

a **harrowing** experience

You need an English dictionary, NOT an English-Spanish dictionary!

You’re a graduate student trying to learn English, not a translator!
Creative vs Academic Writing

• Creative writing is known for setting up ambiguity, inserting the unexpected, omitting the expected, and suddenly shifting the topic, tense, voice, or person. Think Harry Potter!
• This can confuse or disturb readers of scientific prose who are expecting less redundancy, wordiness, jargon, evasiveness, overuse of the passive voice, and clumsy prose.
• Read on to master the skills needed to be a precise, clear, smooth, and economic academic writer!

Clarity in Writing

• Clarity means making your content easy to understand to your target audience.
• If people can’t understand what you’re trying to say, then your content will not be useful.
• On the other hand, if you can produce sharp, clear, intelligent content, it becomes much easier for people to see the value of it and to keep reading.

https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/write-with-clarity-tips
Clarity in Writing reflects on clarity in thought. Science is far more than mere fact recording.

- Written communication is key to transmitting knowledge and rendering an impact on the field.
- Without clear and proper language, readers will not grasp the full message or impact of your work.

WRITE BEFORE YOU REVISE
- Clarity and conciseness are not usually addressed during a first draft.
- You might feel overwhelmed trying to apply all these guidelines as soon as you start to write that it would be hard to get anything on paper.
- Concentrate on these guidelines during the final stages of the writing process, while revising and editing (keep the organization of headings and subheadings in mind).
Clarity in Academic Writing

What should I avoid?

• It’s okay to use short sentences, but avoid choppy sentences that make your writing seem vague.

  • Choppy: Wind is an enduring source of power. Water is also an unlimited energy source. Dams produce hydraulic power. They have existed for a long time. Windmills are relatively new.

  • Revised: Both wind and water are enduring sources of power. Dams have produced hydraulic power for a long time, but windmills are relatively new.

http://thewindlike.blogspot.com/2013/11/choppy-sentences.html#.WqABPuj4-ix

Clarity in Academic Writing

What should I avoid?

Jargon. Ejemplo de jerga médica “traducida” al español.

• idiopático(a)

  Médico: Señora, tiene usted hipertensión.
  Señora: ¿Yo? Sí me cuido mucho, fíjese casi ni le echo sal a la ensalada.
  Médico: Ya, pero es que su hipertensión es idiopática...
  Señora: Ah...

  Significado: No tengo idea de cuál es la causa.

Clarity in Academic Writing

• It’s okay to avoid jargon, but do use scientific terms if they help you explain a concept more precisely and efficiently.

• It’s okay to say idiopathic hypertension if a doctor is presenting at a conference, but not if he’s talking to an old lady who most probably won’t understand what the term means!

Clarity in Academic Writing

What should I avoid?

• Avoid fillers, because they are words that add no meaning to a sentence and merely “fill the space.”
  • Lexical density
  • Fillers and unnecessary words
  • Nominalizations
  • Prepositional verbs
Lexical Density

• All writing is made up of lexical words and grammatical words
  • Lexical (content) words – nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs– carry meaning.
  • Grammatical words – conjunctions, prepositions, articles, auxiliary verbs, some adverbs, determiners, and interjections—glue all the words together.
  • Lexical density is defined as the number of lexical words divided by the total number of words in a sentence.

Example:
• She told her to get him.
  • Again, coloring the lexical words in blue we have the following:
    • She told her to get him.
  • The lexical density of the above sentence is 2 lexical words out of 6 total words, for a lexical density of 33%.
    • Maggie told Carol to get Rick. 83% lexical density.
Lexical Density

- As a general rule, texts with many lexical words tend to be specialized academic texts only comprehensible to well-educated people in specific fields.
- Low numbers of lexical words result in easy-to-understand writing.
- If the number of lexical words is too low, writing becomes meaningless and vague.

Cutting fillers and unnecessary words

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e_gnX7DhEYw
Cutting fillers and unnecessary words

What should I avoid?

- The habit of writing how we speak.
  - Speaking tends to be more casual than writing because we don't have as much time to prepare, craft, and revise our spoken communication, which results in the use of filler words.
  - Writing the way you speak is called informal or conversational writing, and it's generally not the clearest or most effective way to convey your thoughts.

Nominalizations

What should I avoid?

- Once recognized, nominalizations are easy to correct.
- Whenever you see general-purpose verbs such as carry out, perform, undertake, or conduct, with extra words, look for the word which names the action.
- Turning the name of the activity back into a verb will undo the nominalization, and make the sentence more direct and easier to read. Mind verb tenses!
Nominalizations

Nominalization Examples

• The researcher carried out an analysis of the samples. → The researcher analyzed the samples.

• The investigator will perform measurements on the carbon nanotube samples. → The investigator will measure the carbon nanotube samples.

• The research group conducted an investigation into the relationship between... → The research group investigated the relationship...

• analysis → analyze, analyzes, analyzed, will analyze

• investigation → investigate, investigates, investigated, will investigate

Practice Exercise #1: Nominalizations
PRACTICE EXERCISE #1: Nominalizations

Nominalizations are nouns that are created from adjectives or verbs. They are grammatically correct, but can make sentences wordy.

1. Select the sentence that has a nominalization:
   - She suggested that we go out to dinner.
   - She made the suggestion that we go out to dinner.
2. Select the sentence that has a nominalization:
   - Sara has a great collection of butterflies.
   - Sara collects butterflies.
3. Can you spot the nominalization? intention, intended, or intend
4. Can you spot the nominalization? disagreed, disagree, disagreement
5. Can you change the nominalization back to a verb? discussion
6. Can you change the nominalization back to a verb? decision

Be Possessive, Active, and Concise

Some of the best ways to reduce word count and tighten your sentences is to:

**BE POSSESSIVE:** In many situations where there is a close connection, like a possessive relationship between two nouns, you can eliminate the preposition.

...in the environment *of* the animal... → ...in the animal’s environment...
...the effects *of* the drug... → ...the drug’s effects...

A test *of* strength was performed. → A strength test was performed.
The characterization *of* the material... → Material characterization...

Remember that possessives are not contractions!
Practice Exercise #2: its or it's

PRACTICE EXERCISE #2: its and it’s

Work out which version of it is/ it has/ its should be used in the following phrases.

1. The department takes good care of [ ] graduate students.
2. The consumer group understands the product and [ ] benefits.
3. [ ] usual to wait in line at the bank.
4. [ ] business plan was drawn up by an accountant.
5. [ ] been interesting to conduct research in the field of nanoparticles.
6. The department will lose funding if [ ] judged as a poor information provider.

Remember to never use contractions in academic writing.
In this case, use it is or it has.

https://goo.gl/hG1oyn
Be Possessive, Active, and Concise

Some of the best ways to reduce word count and tighten your sentences is to:

**BE ACTIVE:** Use active voice by default. It is more concise and reduces nominalizations.

- Passive constructions are often wordier than active constructions.
- Research shows active voice is easier to understand than passive voice.

But, use passive voice when:

- **the action is more important than the subject**, such as when you're describing methodology (research, experiments or tests you have performed).
  - Soil samples were collected and weighted  ➔  I collected the soil samples and an undergraduate student weighted them.

- **the subject is unknown** or when you don't want to identify the subject.
  - Mistakes were made while processing data.  ➔  I made a mistake!
If you're interested in explaining a process (passive):

First, the virus strains most likely to cause disease are identified and three are selected for vaccine development. The virus samples of each selected strain are injected into separate batches of fertilized eggs to amplify the amount of virus. Each virus strain is grown separately inside the eggs over the course of several days, after which it is harvested, inactivated, and purified. The purified virus strains are then combined to create the vaccine, blended with a carrier fluid and dispensed into vials.

If you want emphasis to shift to the agents (active):

First, researchers identify the virus strains most likely to cause disease and select three for vaccine development. Technician 1 injects virus samples of each selected strain into separate batches of fertilized eggs to amplify the amount of virus. Technician 2 grows each virus strain separately inside the eggs over the course of several days, after which the technician harvests, inactivates, and purifies it. The technicians then combine the purified virus strains to create the vaccine, blend it with a carrier fluid and dispense it into vials.

Check with your advisor or journal which voice and person you should use.

Note that:

- Active voice does not imply using I or We.
- You can write in active voice using the third person.
- Each type of voice has its place in writing clearly and concisely.
- It is a matter of preference.
Be Possessive, Active, and Concise

Some of the best ways to reduce word count and tighten your sentences is to:

**BE CONCISE:** Substitute prepositional verbs for single-word verbs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phrasal verbs</th>
<th>Example uses</th>
<th>Replacements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>back out of</td>
<td>Several subjects backed out of their treatment.</td>
<td>abandoned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>look into</td>
<td>You must look into other possible explanations for this occurrence.</td>
<td>research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>make sure of</td>
<td>A researcher must make sure of the subject’s consent.</td>
<td>secure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Clarity in Academic Writing

- It’s okay to be concise, as long as it doesn’t interfere with clarity! They don’t always go together.
- These results also demonstrate that the nanoparticles increased in hardness 10% and 15%, by adding 1% and 2% to Zn-Mg mixture, respectively.
- Results demonstrate that nanoparticle hardness was increased by 10% when incorporating an additional 1% of nanoparticles to the Zn-Mg mixture, whereas, it increased by 15% when an additional 2% of nanoparticles was incorporated.
Practice Exercise #3: Prepositional Verbs

Think of single verbs that could be used in place of the one in italics. In each case, try to find two possibilities and be prepared to discuss them.

1. Researchers have **come up with** a number of models to describe the effect certain drugs have on the nervous system.
2. Cancer researchers have **run into** a variety of unexpected problems in their efforts to develop effective treatments.
3. Recent studies on cancer have **brought up** the question as to whether preservatives in food can induce tumor formation.
4. Problems with the new data management software **showed up** soon after it was launched.
5. In the past five years, many studies have **looked at** the effect of different drug management practices.

https://goo.gl/EvVqvw
Extra Tips for Clarity in Writing
Commonly confused words, judgmental words and parallel constructions

Useful Tip #1
Do not confuse these words!! Possessive pronouns do not have an apostrophe!
Remember that you should not use contractions in academic writing!

- They’re = They are
- There = specifies location
- Their = possessive pronoun
- You’re = You are
- Your = possessive pronoun
- It’s = It is or it has
- Its = possessive pronoun
- We’re = We are
- Where = specifies location
- Were = Past tense of “are”

They're right there in their car.
You're in your car.
It's lost its brakes!
We're right where we were five minutes ago!
Useful Tip #2
Avoid using personal judgement words

- Do not refer to what you think; refer instead to what the evidence suggests.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Using personal words</th>
<th>Use words referring to the evidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I think</td>
<td>From examining the findings,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel</td>
<td>In light of the evidence,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I believe</td>
<td>From previous research,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am convinced that</td>
<td>Considering the results,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I disliked</td>
<td>According to the figures,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I liked</td>
<td>As shown in the diagram,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I agree</td>
<td>The data shows that,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I disagree</td>
<td>However, this theory is unlikely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am sure that</td>
<td>Given this information,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is my belief that</td>
<td>Some theorists argue that</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Useful Tip #3
Mind parallel constructions, a.k.a. parallelism or parallel structures

- Use the same pattern of words to show that ideas have the same level of importance.

- The usual way to join parallel structures is with the use of coordinating conjunctions such as "and" or "or."

  - Correct: Mary likes hiking, swimming, and bicycling.
  - Correct: Mary likes hiking, swimming, and riding a bicycle.
  - Incorrect: Mary likes hiking, swimming, and to ride a bicycle.
Useful Tip #3

Mind parallel constructions, a.k.a. parallelism or parallel structures

A parallel structure that begins with clauses must continue with clauses. Changing to another pattern or changing the voice of the verb (from active to passive or vice versa) will break the parallelism.

Incorrect: (present tense/past tense – passive voice)

Objectives
- Study the effect of two protocols, based on set conditions...
- Protocols were monitored and evaluated to verify....

Correct: (present tense/present tense)

Objectives
- Study the effect of two protocols, based on set conditions...
- Monitor and evaluate protocols to verify....

Clarity Clinic – Post-test

https://goo.gl/yXerCk

3:00
Homework?!?

- Check with your advisor which is the most appropriate manual of style (APA, MLA, Chicago, AQS, etc.), as well as which voice and person is preferred in your particular discipline.

- Find and download two or three journal articles from your field that you think are well written so that you can gain an understanding of the writing conventions in your field. If you’re having difficulty deciding, ask your advisor for assistance.

References

Any Questions???
Thank You!

Clinic Evaluation (Online Survey)

Clinic: Revisiting the Basics II: Clarity in Academic Writing
Facilitator: Luisa I. Feliciano Cruz
Link: http://uprm.libsurveys.com/tiger
Password: 2016
NEXT WEEK!!!

Clinic: Revisiting the Basics III: Transitions in Academic Writing
Facilitator: Angelia Caro
When: March 16, 2018 @ 2:00 pm
Where: GRIC