

Self Study Programs: Writing Stylish Sentences



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This module covers:

- Identifying the characteristics of an effective sentence
- Identifying different types of sentences and their role in effective writing
- Demonstrating your understanding by constructing effective sentences



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Stylish Sentences

Sentences are the often neglected 'work-horse' of effective writing. It is impossible, however, to write an effective essay, report or practically any form of writing (!!) without effective sentences – so they deserve attention!

Effective sentences...

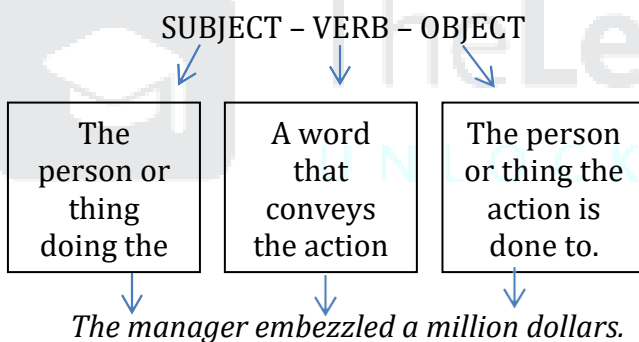
- ✓ begin with a capital letter and end with a full stop
- ✓ are a sequence of words that express a complete thought
- ✓ are clear and concise

Effective sentences avoid:

- × being vague
- × using unnecessary words
- × using the wrong words (eg. jargon, language that excludes/offends, slang)
- × being too general, and;
- × exaggeration

Get active!

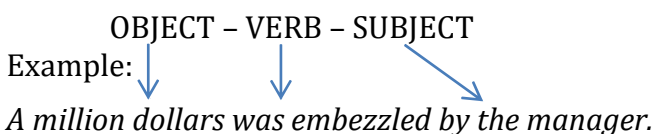
Active voice is often considered the clearest form of sentence construction.



Active voice sentences place focus on the performer of the action – 'the subject' (noun). This type of sentence promotes a strong verb and a concise sentence construction.

Passive Voice

Passive voice tends to encourage wordy sentence constructions. It is usually only preferred in some types of scientific writing.



Use passive sentences only when the object is more important than the subject, ie. *The diamond heist was reported by the journalist.*

Types of Sentences

Using a variety of sentence types (simple, complex and compound) makes your writing easier to read.

Simple sentences

Simple sentences have a subject, verb and object (we can call this a **control unit**).

The manager embezzled a million dollars, is an example of a simple sentence. Note that there is no punctuation between the subject, verb and object.

Complex Sentences

Complex sentences have a **control unit** (see the example of a simple sentence) and a **support unit**.

A support unit:

- contains additional information that is less important than the control unit information – so it is added to the back or front of the sentence
- this additional information is a sentence fragment (ie. it cannot be a sentence all by itself)
- if the unit is added to the back of a sentence it usually begins with a subordinating conjunction (although, because, since, when) or uses a relative pronoun (who, which, that), eg. *The manager embezzled a million dollars because of a gambling debt.*
- if the unit is added to the front of a sentence, a comma is used at the end of the unit, eg. *Because of a gambling debt, the manager embezzled a million dollars.*

Compound Sentences

Compound sentences contain **two control units**, which are joined by a comma and a coordinating conjunction (the FANBOYS: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so). For example, *The manager embezzled a million dollars, but auditors discovered the fraud.*

Constructing stylish sentences

1. Work out what you want to say
2. Construct a complete sentence (active is usually preferred)
3. Edit the sentence

Passive → Active

Passive: **Statistics** are loved by **business students**.

(O-V-S → S-V-O)

Active: **Business students** love **statistics**.

Editing Hints:

1. Passive verbs phrases often have some form of 'to be' followed by a past tense verb:
 - **am, is, are, were, was, be, been, being** before them, and
 - **by** after them

When you edit, you can word search these words to see if you have passive sentences you need to make active. This will help with your word count!

Example 1: The workshop notes **were** distributed **by** the lecturer (8 words)

↓
The lecturer distributed the workshop notes (6 words).

2. Check that every sentence in your writing is actually a sentence!
3. Check that you have sentence variety.

4. Check that the way you start your sentences also has variety.

Example: There is a tree. There are lots of people who like trees. There are parks with lots of trees. (19 words)

↓
There is a tree. Many people like trees. Parks have lots of trees. (13 words)

BTW: Sometimes it is just better to delete most of the 'there is/are' sentence openings – they are usually unnecessary and chew up your word count.

5. Check that each sentence is clear and concise:
 - Omit unnecessary words
 - Replace any vague words with a clear word
 - Avoid repetition

Example: The workshop notes for the learning skills workshop were *handed out* by the person in charge of the workshop.

↓
The workshop convenor distributed the learning skills workshop notes.

The average length of a sentence is around 20 words. Don't make your sentences too long!



Sentence-level editing is important as it not only improves your writing but gets rid of unnecessary words that are just 'taking up space' in your assignment. By making each and every word count you are using your word limit to the fullest extent possible. Basically: The more effectively you write ~~the more~~ → the more you can communicate within your assignment ~~word~~ limit and hence the better your final grade for the assignment.

Excellent Editing

1. The following paragraph has too many simple sentences. Edit the paragraph so that it has sentence variety.

Sentence variety is important. There are simple sentences. There are complex sentences. There are compound sentences. Sentences with a subject, verb and object are complete sentences. Sentences with a subject, verb and object are active sentences. Sentences that have an object, followed by a verb and subject are passive sentences. Active sentences are generally better in effective writing.

2. The following paragraph contains sentence fragments. Find the sentence fragments and turn them into complete sentences.

Tea, coffee and hot chocolate are common hot beverages. Some people prefer tea. Whilst others prefer coffee. Too much coffee is not supposed to be good for you. Because of too much caffeine. Tea also contains caffeine but many herbal teas are good for you. Green tea is an example of a herbal tea; that is considered good for your health.

3. The following paragraph is hard to read - mainly because the sentences are too long or not thought out very well. Edit the paragraph and shorten some of the sentences where necessary.

Writing at university can be a challenging task for some students, especially for those who have had limited experience in writing academic assignments, perhaps because they have been outside of formal educational for quite some time or just not been exposed to academic writing tasks or just not had the opportunity to learn what is expected in academic writing or to become very familiar with this type of writing. Writing is a skill, however, and can be learnt. The more a student writes at university and becomes familiar with assignment expectations the more they will improve in their writing, which is important because many assignments at university are written-based tasks that do require advanced writing skills. Writing skills are important not just in a university context but also in the workplace and in life in general as it is part of communicating effectively and communication is an important skill, especially in the 'information age' of today.

Let's Write

Choose a topic from those listed below (or make up one of your own) and write a short paragraph. After you have finished writing, edit your writing. Pay particular attention to how you have constructed sentences. If working in a group, you could also swap your writing with someone else for feedback.

Handy hint: This task is designed to encourage you to reflect on your own writing and how you can better construct effective sentences. If you already have some writing-in-progress, you can also use this for this task. Have a look at your writing – just a paragraph – and do some sentence-level editing.

Possible topics: “I prefer dogs”, “Spark”, “It was a challenge”, “This is the life for me”, “Click”, “Not ever”.

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In person

Visit a Learning Advice Desk located on the ground floor of the JCU Library (Townsville and Cairns)

Submit a request online

If you're not able to access our on-campus services, you can contact The Learning Centre for advice and remote assistance.

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