



8 TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE SENTENCES

(Adapted from materials at the University of Wisconsin Writing Lab.)
Revised August 2013

Use the following eight tips for organizing your sentences for greater clarity, grace, and effectiveness.

1. Unless you have a reason not to, use the active (vs. passive) voice.

Passive: It is believed by the candidate that a ceiling must be placed on the budget by Congress.
Active: The candidate believes that Congress must place a ceiling on the budget.

Passive: It was earlier demonstrated that heart attacks can be caused by high stress.
Active: Brown earlier showed that high stress can cause heart attacks.

Use the passive voice only if you have a good reason.

- To emphasize the action rather than the actor.
 After long debate, the proposal was endorsed by the long-range planning committee.
- To be tactful by not naming the actor.
 The proposal was somehow misinterpreted.
- To describe a condition in which the actor is unknown or unimportant.
 Thousands of people are diagnosed as having cancer every year.
- To create an authoritative tone.
 Visitors are not allowed after 8:00 p.m.

2. Put the action of your sentence in the verb; convert nouns or adjectives created from verbs back into verbs or verbal forms.

is aware, has knowledge	⇒	knows
is taking	⇒	takes
are indications	⇒	indicate
are suggestive of; make a suggestion	⇒	suggest
the recruitment of staff	⇒	recruiting staff

Watch out especially for nominalizations (verbs that have been made into nouns by the addition of -tion, -sion, -ment, -mence, -ance, -em, -ure).

Original: An evaluation of the procedures needs to be done.
Revised: The procedures need to be evaluated.
 We need to evaluate the procedures.

Original: The stability and quality of our financial performance will be developed through the profitable execution of our existing business, as well as the acquisition or development of new business.
Revised: We will improve our financial performance not only by executing our existing business more profitably but by acquiring or developing new business.

3. Use expletive constructions (it is, there is, there are) sparingly.

Original: It was their last argument that finally persuaded me.
Revised: Her last argument finally persuaded me.

Original: There are likely to be many parents asking questions about the new billing procedures.
Revised: Many parents are likely to ask questions about the new billing procedures.

4. Reduce clauses beginning with “who,” “which,” and “that” to simpler noun phrases when possible.

Original: The errors that were made by the accountant have been corrected.
Revised: The accountant’s errors have been corrected.

Original: We must notify those staff members who are absent.
Revised: We must notify absent staff members.

5. Try to avoid writing long strings of nouns unless your readers are likely to be familiar with your terminology.

Original: MHS has a hospital employee relations improvement program.
Revised: MHS has a program to improve employee relations.
MHS has a program to improve relations among employees.

6. Try to avoid using unnecessarily inflated words.

ascertain	⇒	find out
endeavor	⇒	try
cognizant of	⇒	know
facilitate	⇒	help
impact on	⇒	affect
implement	⇒	start
initiate	⇒	begin
optimum	⇒	best
subsequent to	⇒	after
terminate	⇒	end
utilize	⇒	use

7. Put wordy phrases on a diet.

the reason for		
for the reason that		
due to the fact that	⇒	because; since
considering the fact that		
on the grounds that		

despite the fact that even though it's true that regardless of the fact that	⇒	although
in the event that if it should transpire/happen that under circumstances in which	⇒	if
on the occasion of in a situation in which under circumstances in which	⇒	when
as regards in reference to with regards to	⇒	about
it is crucial that it is necessary that there is a need to it is important that it is incumbent upon	⇒	must, should
is able to has the opportunity to is in a position to has the capacity for has the ability to	⇒	can
it is possible that there is a chance that it could happen that	⇒	may, might, can, could
prior to in anticipation of subsequent to following on at the same time as	⇒	before, after, as

8. Try to avoid using vague, all-purpose nouns (e.g., factor, aspect, area, situation), which often lead to wordiness.

Original: Consumer demand is rising in the area of services.
Revised: Consumers are demanding more services.