



Graduate Online Writing Studio

Clarity of Expression

Clarity is essential in any effective communication, especially written communication, in which readers will not usually have the opportunity to ask clarifying questions of the author. Communication clarity can break down in many ways, but if you consider the following areas as you write, you should end up with clear, concise sentences that get your message across effectively to your reader.

Organize your ideas.

Organization can greatly enhance the clarity of your writing. If your paragraphs and ideas are well organized, your reader can see where your ideas are going and will not get lost along the way. Creating an outline before you write can help you get organized and build a roadmap for your project that will enhance the clarity of your work. All of your ideas should be clearly connected and related so that the reader never has to question why you are bringing up a topic or idea. See the Writing Studio's resource on [outlining before writing](#) for more information on this topic.

Use effective paragraph and sentence lengths.

While APA does not specify a minimum or maximum sentence or paragraph length, you should be deliberate in how you structure your sentences and paragraphs, especially when it comes to length. When it comes to sentences length, using only short sentences can make your writing feel and sound choppy, but using only long sentences can make your writing difficult to follow. Therefore, you should vary your sentence lengths to keep the reader's attention. Try to present only one idea per sentence. If you try to load your sentences up with too much information or connect too many clauses together in one sentence, your reader may get confused or lose track of what you are trying to say. Using direct, declarative sentences with simple, common words will enhance your work's clarity.

Paragraphs generally follow the same line of thought when it comes to length. One-sentence paragraphs, while not strictly prohibited, should in most cases be avoided because they are abrupt and do not allow you to develop your ideas. However, lengthy paragraphs tend to lose focus and get off topic, making it more difficult for the reader to follow your ideas. As a rule of thumb, paragraphs should be less than a page in length to keep the reader's attention while giving you enough room to fully develop your ideas. Use paragraph breaks between main ideas in your writing to create space in your writing that can give your reader a chance to breathe and absorb the information you have presented before moving on to the next paragraph.

Avoid wordiness and redundancy.

It can sometimes be tempting to use flowery language or too many words when fewer words would do (especially when there is a word count or minimum number of pages to consider). Avoid that temptation whenever possible and write concisely. You should also avoid repetition because it can distract readers from what you are saying and make them lose interest. Try to say things as simply and clearly as possible to ensure

that your reader can easily follow and understand what you are saying.

Maintain a formal and professional tone.

Formal writing should always have the goal of effective communication that strives to present ideas in a direct and straightforward way that will effectively inform or persuade the reader. When writing in an academic or professional context, you should maintain a formal tone and select formal vocabulary. As an added benefit, using a professional, formal tone can make your ideas clearer to your reader. For example, when writing formally, you should avoid using contractions and colloquialisms as they can detract from the overall professional tone of your work. Spelling out contractions and writing in a way that readers can easily understand will help your readers follow what you are saying and not be distracted or confused. Use precise, scholarly language, not approximations of quantity (very few, a whole lot of) or vague wording that can weaken your writing's impact. For more tips on avoiding a formal and professional tone, see the Writing Studio's resource on [formal academic voice](#).

Use familiar words, not unfamiliar jargon.

We have all read an article at some point where the authors are obviously very smart, but every sentence contains so much jargon or specialized terminology that we cannot follow what the authors are trying to say. Using jargon may make an author feel or sound smart, but if the reader does not understand these words, effective communication will suffer. Jargon can be confusing and distracting for the reader. When possible, you should avoid jargon and explain things in simpler terms with familiar words that the reader is sure to understand. If you must use specialized terminology in your work, be sure to define these terms for the reader so that they know what you are talking about.

Make logical comparisons using parallel structure.

Ambiguous or illogical comparisons can easily confuse the reader. These comparison issues often stem from writers leaving out key words or not using parallel structure for the sake of brevity. Parallelism dictates that every item in a list or comparison should have the same grammatical structure. These items should always look and sound similar so that the reader can easily see where each item begins and ends and how they connect.

Consider the following examples:

Not Parallel: Complex concepts presented by experienced authors are usually easier to understand than inexperienced authors.

Parallel: Complex concepts presented by experienced authors are usually easier to understand than the complex concepts presented by inexperienced authors.

Not Parallel: Reading aloud when proofreading can help you hear awkward phrasing and if a sentence is missing a word.

Parallel: Reading aloud when proofreading can help you hear awkward phrasing and missing words.

While these examples might not be too confusing for the reader, sentences lacking parallelism can easily become unclear because the reader may not be able to pick out each item in the list or may not see the actual comparison you are making.

Avoid anthropomorphism.

APA suggests avoiding anthropomorphism to enhance clarity in your writing. Anthropomorphism occurs when writers attribute human characteristics to animals or inanimate objects. For example, in the sentence, "the article

explained effective paraphrasing,” since an article is not a person, it cannot explain anything. You could revise the sentence to avoid anthropomorphism by saying, “the authors explain effective paraphrasing” or “the article includes information on effective paraphrasing.” Articles and other written works can be somewhat anthropomorphized (i.e., “this paper focuses on...”), but in most cases, if anthropomorphism can be avoided, it should be.

Use pronouns clearly.

Pronouns are words that stand in for nouns in a sentence (e.g., *he/him, she/her, we/us, it, they, them, this, that*), and writers often use them to avoid redundancy. The problem arises when pronouns do not clearly refer to another noun in the sentence. This type of vague pronoun reference can easily leave your reader confused. The best way to revise this issue is to ensure that it is clear what noun your pronoun is referring to in the sentence. Consider the following examples:

Vague: The Writing Studio provided comments with suggestions for revision. This helped improve the paper.

Clear: The Writing Studio provided comments with suggestions for revision. This feedback helped improve the paper.

Explanation: *This, that, and which* are pronouns, and they need to refer to a specific noun, not to the whole idea of a previous sentence or section of a paper. The easiest way to correct this vague pronoun reference issue is to change the pronoun to what it refers (in the example above, “feedback”).

Vague: The supervisors told the workers that they would receive a bonus.

Clear: The supervisors announced that the workers would receive a bonus.

Explanation: Since both “supervisors” and “workers” are plural nouns, the plural pronoun “they” could refer to either one, so using it could leave the reader wondering which group is receiving the bonus.

Revising the wording of the sentence to replace “they” with “the workers” clarifies this vague reference.

Be sure to use pronouns intentionally and look at your sentences during revisions to ensure that your pronoun references are not vague and open to misinterpretation.

Do not assume that your reader knows or understands something just because you do.

Making unfounded assumptions is never a good thing, and that is especially true when thinking about your reader. Even though you may know exactly what you are saying and why you are saying it, you cannot assume that your reader knows or understands things the same way you do. Make sure that you include enough background information and that your ideas are well connected and flow well to ensure that your reader can follow your train of thought. For helpful tips to ensure that your writing is easy for your reader to follow, see the Writing Studio’s resource on [considering the reader](#).

Avoid passive voice.

You should normally write in the active voice which emphasizes the active subject performing the action of the sentence (e.g., The researcher surveyed the students.) rather than the passive voice which emphasizes the object affected by the action of the sentence (e.g., The students were surveyed). Using passive voice can be unclear for the reader and can leave them asking questions about who performed the action of the sentence. To learn more about how to write in the active voice, see section 4.13 of the APA 7th Edition Manual (p. 118) and the Writing Studio resource on [Active vs. Passive Voice](#).