"Have something to say, and say it as clearly as you can. That is the only secret of style."

— Matthew Arnold

WRITING TIPS[1]

This handout contains some general thoughts and ideas on writing academic papers and on writing in general. No matter what your level of skill or experience I think you will find that this information will help to enhance the clarity of your writing. Please feel free to see me if you have any questions.

WRITING AN INTRODUCTION

You should pay special attention to the introduction of your paper because a good introduction will do a great deal to help your paper. If the reader understands where you plan to go at the outset, he/she will have a much easier time understanding the rest of your paper, even if it is not as clear as it should be.

If you spend the beginning of the paper summarizing the literature and do not get to your argument until the end, you risk doing irreparable harm to your paper. The reader will arrive at the end of the paper feeling lost, confused, or frustrated because they had to wade through your entire paper before they learned what it was about. If you discover the argument as you write the paper, remember to re-write the introduction.

The Introduction Should:

- Be thematically explicit. It should contain a general overview of the whole paper. Introduce the themes that will run throughout the paper. Give the reader an idea of the big picture.
- Contain the problem you wish to discuss. This problem can be a gap in current knowledge, a puzzle, a contradiction, unaccountable or conflicting data, etc.
- Establish the cost to the reader of not solving this problem. In short, it should answer the question: So What? Typical costs could be misunderstanding, unpredictability, etc.
- The end of the introduction should outline your response or solution to this problem. This is called the "paper point."

An Example of a Very Simple Introduction:

> As scientists have explored environmental threats, many of their concerns have proved exaggerated, such as the effect of acid rain and the imminence of the Greenhouse Effect. [context] But recently they have discovered a threat that is all too real: the ozone layer has been thinning, thereby allowing sunlight to reach the earth unfiltered.[problem] Unfiltered sunlight causes skin cancer, which will raise mortality rates and medical costs.[cost to reader] We can avoid these consequences only if we ban chemicals that degrade ozone. [solution]

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[1]Excerpts from course materials for the Little Red Schoolhouse (Academic and Professional Writing), a course taught by Joe Williams at the University of Chicago

Paragraphs and essays, like sentences, have a definite structure. Paragraphs, sections or papers that readers feel are clear and organized have certain characteristics:

- They have two distinct sections:

  1) An opening segment, called the *Issue Position,* that sets up the paper, section, or paragraph.
  2) The body, called the *Discussion,* that completes, develops, or discusses that opening segment.

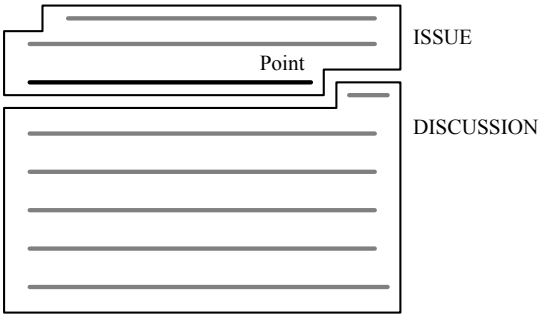
- They have a single, thematically explicit, and predictably located point:

  A point sentence is a sentence *on the page* that defines the main idea of the current unit of discourse (paragraph, section, or paper).

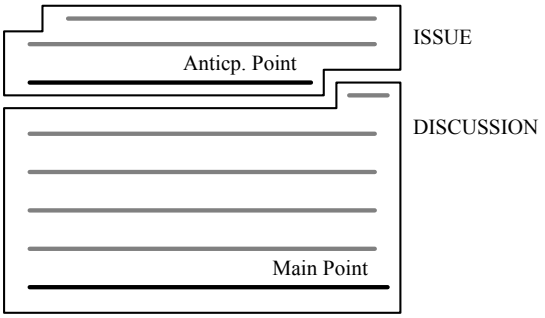
  Points may appear in only one of two places:
  1) At the end of the Issue
  2) At the end of the Discussion

  This means that units of discourse have only three possible formats:

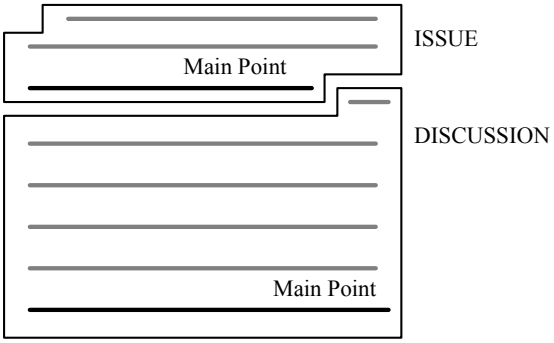
Point First: Use this pattern in single paragraphs, because it is the easiest to do well. *Each paragraph should discuss one, and only one, point from your outline.*



Point Last: Requires an anticipatory point that introduces the topic but does not discuss your main point. This pattern characterizes two kinds of writing: 1) Clever writing in which the writer carries you toward a conclusion that the writer has in mind. 2) Bad writing, in which the writer has no idea where they are going until they get there.



Point first and Last: A pattern typical of entire papers (i.e. point at end of the introduction and at the end of the conclusion). Not usually used at the paragraph level.



How to Edit for Point Sentences:

Editing for point sentences is one of the most important things you can do. If you don't have time to do any of the other techniques outlined here, do this and write a clear introduction.

Make sure that each paragraph has a point explicitly stated on the page and that this point appears at either the beginning or end of the paragraph. Highlight this sentence. Once you have repeated this procedure for the entire section or paper, read only the point sentences. The reader should get a clear understanding of your entire argument from reading only these highlighted sentences. If not, you need to patch the holes in your argument by adding information in the appropriate places or by splitting up your paragraphs so that each one deals with a separate topic.

SENTENCE STRUCTURE

Like paragraphs and papers, sentences can be well or poorly organized. You should watch out for some of the following:

Nominalizations:

Read the two paragraphs below. Then think of a few words that describe the way you as a reader feel about each paragraph:

A. John's *argument* that Bill's *failure* to provide for *reduction* of the royalty rate upon *expiration* of the patent discourages the licensee from *challenging* the patent has no *application* here.

B. John has *argued* that because Bill *provided* no way to *reduce* the royalty rate when the patent *expired*, the licensee could not *challenge* the patent. But that argument does not *apply* here.

Nominalization: When you turn a verb or an adjective into a noun, you nominalize.

Readers usually feel that reports or papers that contain sentences similar to sentence A are confused, complex, or difficult to understand. Sentence A confuses readers because it contains a large number of verbs and adjectives expressed as nouns (words in italics). In sentence B, we have removed the nominalizations and replaced them with verbs or adjectives, making the sentence clearer and easier to read.

Some Examples:

Verb	**Nominalization**	**Adjective**	**Nominalization**
Fail	Failure	Precise	Precision
Argue	Argument	Hesitant	Hesitancy
Reduce	Reduction	reasonable	Reasonableness

Verb	Nominalization
Challenge	Challenging
Steal	Stealing

Clear writing expresses crucial actions not as nouns but as *verbs*.

To Edit Out Nominalizations: Scan your paper and circle all the nominalizations you find. Then simply turn the nominalization back into a verb, find the verb's subject, and rewrite the sentence.

NOT THIS:
Sufficient *tests* were conducted on the equipment by the staff.

BUT THIS:
The staff *tested* the equipment sufficiently

The Exception to the Rule:

Not all nominalizations are bad. In fact, good writing often requires a few nominalizations. You can use a nominalization:

- If it refers to frequently used and well known concept:
  A major issue in the past *election* was the Equal Rights *Amendment.*
- If it is a subject and refers to something in the previous text:
  These *arguments* all depend on the new data my report has uncovered.

PASSIVE VERBS:

Read the following paragraphs. Notice that, although the content does not change, paragraph B is much easier to understand:

A. In regard to *reporting* about the *effects* on the environment, it was believed that despite *retention* of the same regulations, there had been a *shift* in policy. There was then a *requirement* for de novo studies and *estimates* as to the *effect* on the environment, if the amounts of petroleum *products* might be considered material.

B. When X reported how its projected petroleum production facilities would affect the environment, it believed that while the EPA had retained the same regulations, the EPA had shifted its policy. The EPA then required that companies like x conduct de novo studies and estimate how their new facilities would affect the environment if they produced amounts of petroleum that the EPA considered material.

As before, paragraph A generally leaves readers feeling confused. Not only does paragraph A contain a number of nominalizations (italics), it also contains a large number of passive verbs. Passive verbs <u>are easy</u> to spot because they <u>are preceded</u> by some form of the verb *to be*. You should replace this form of verb with an active form whenever possible.

Some Examples:

Active	**Passive**
We[agent] analyzed[action] productivity.	Productivity was analyzed.[action] (by us)[implied agent]
The headhunter[agent] phoned [action]the company.	The company was phoned.[action] (by the headhunter)[implied agent]

To Edit Out Passive Verbs: Scan your paper for forms of the verb *to be.* Underline all the passive verbs you find. Don't worry if your writing contains a few passive verbs. You might try rephrasing the sentences, but a few passive verbs scattered throughout your paper probably will not hurt you much. Large numbers of them, however, will confuse the reader. If you do find a lot of passive verbs, rewrite the sentences so these verbs assume their active form.

Notice that nominalizations and passive verbs often appear together. Removing nominalizations will often force you to remove passive verbs, and vice versa.

How Does This Help?

It helps you to write specifically and concretely: Passive writing like paragraph A above often seems vague or abstract because it has missing or implied subjects. Paragraph B uses actives verbs. These verbs force us to include explicit subjects and help clear up exactly what we are talking about.

It helps you to order your ideas logically on the page: When you use subjects to name characters and verbs to name their actions, you are more likely to match your syntax to your logic.