The *Style* of Graduate Writing

ACADEMIC WRITING CENTER
GRADUATE WRITING WORKSHOP
What's the difference between good graduate writing and good undergraduate writing?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Graduate Level Expectations</th>
<th>Undergraduate Level Expectations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clear, engaging, stylistic</td>
<td>Clear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presents new information</td>
<td>Does not necessarily add anything new</td>
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<tr>
<td>Moves seamlessly between points</td>
<td>Relies on transition phrases</td>
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<tr>
<td>Written for a professional audience</td>
<td>Written for general audience/teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure determined by content</td>
<td>Follows prescribed structure</td>
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<tr>
<td>Confident, articulate, and clear voice</td>
<td>Adopted tone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incorporates thorough research</td>
<td>Meets minimum citation requirements</td>
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Elements to consider...

Structure/Clarity:
- Stating purpose
- Sentence structure + modifiers
- Consistent constructions
- Transitional phrases

Voice:
- Word choice
- Wordiness
- Parallelism
- Active/passive voice
Stating Your Purpose

- State your purpose/thesis **early**
- Think of your reader – what do you want them to know?
- What are you contributing?
- Not what you did, but what you **found**

**Just a conclusion:**
“My results show that sharks are smarter than humans.”

**The facts that lead to a conclusion:**
“Results show that x is greater than y, thus sharks are smarter than humans.”

**Thesis Statements:**
- Summarize what your argument is, and why it is important
- Serve as a roadmap for the rest of your paper
Several ideas:
“Our findings suggest a practice-induced tradeoff in auditory processing rather than a general improvement that benefits perceptual dimensions relevant for survival at the expense of those that are less relevant.”

Broken into smaller sentences:
“Our findings suggest that practice does not lead to a general improvement in auditory processing. Instead, practice leads to a bias that speeds up processing in some dimensions (e.g., pitch) only at the cost of delaying processing in other dimensions (e.g., loudness).”

Modifiers

- Words, phrases, or clauses that add descriptions to words
- Should be next to (in front or behind) the word they describe

Dangling Modifiers

When there is a modifier, but no target word

Examples of sentences with dangling modifiers:
- Hungry, the leftover pizza was devoured.
- Rummaging in her giant handbag, the sunglasses escaped detection.

Fix by rearranging sentences and adding target words:
- Hungry, we devoured the leftover pizza.
- Rummaging in her giant handbag, Dolores failed to find her sunglasses.

Fear not! Shakespeare used dangling modifiers, too!

Sleeping in my orchard, a serpent stung me.
- Hamlet

Examples from Grammar Bytes: Grammar Instruction with Attitude
Transitional Phrases + Consistent Constructions

- Transition words help guide your reader
- Consistent constructions let the reader know what to expect

Examples of transitional phrases:
- furthermore; whereas; moreover; yet; finally

Purdue OWL provides a helpful list

Examples of consistent constructions:

“In this essay I will address issues A, B, and C...” and then you address those issues in the stated order

“Our first hypothesis was proven” and then subsequent paragraphs begin the same way, e.g. “Our second hypothesis was not proven”
Word Choice

- Common problems:
  - Unclear pronouns
  - Unnecessary jargon/technical language
  - Words with unintended connotations
  - Undefined or general terms
  - Clichés
  - Verb issues

Unclear pronoun:
- My dog Tiny licked my friend Dan, even though he doesn’t like him all that much.
Revised: My dog Tiny licked my friend Dan, even though Tiny doesn’t like Dan all that much.

Unnecessary jargon/technical language:
- The dialectical interface between “dog people” and “cat people” in amorous relationships offers an algorithm for understanding interpersonal compromise.
Revised: Communication between “dog people” and “cat people” in romantic relationships is model for understanding compromise.

Words with unintended connotations:
- The accommodations were cheap but comfortable.
Revised: The accommodations were inexpensive but comfortable.

Undefined or general terms:
- Society teaches us that pink is only for girls.
Revised: Contemporary American culture, including media and advertising, teaches children that pink is only for girls.

Clichés:
- Scholars agree to disagree about the age of the universe.
Revised: Scholars disagree about the age of the universe.
List of Clichés
Verbs

- Avoid:
  - Nominalization
  - Weak verbs

Nominalization (making verbs and adjectives into nouns):
- The marine biologists engaged in an argument about the chemical properties of jellyfish.  
  *Revised*: The marine biologists argued about the chemical properties of jellyfish.

- The students handled the jellyfish with great carelessness.  
  *Revised*: The students carelessly handled the jellyfish.

To fix: Locate all the nouns in your sentence, if there are several, consider replacing the nominalized noun into an action verb.

Weak verbs (e.g. “to be” or “have”):
- Trees have an effect on the community landscape.  
  *Revised*: Trees beautify the community landscape.

To fix: Locate the “weak verbs” in your sentence and replace with a more specific, descriptive verb.
Tips for Effective Word Choice

When you’re writing and can’t think of the right word, just put in the best word you can think of at the moment, highlight it, and return to find the best word.

If you can’t think of the right word, try rewriting the entire sentence.

Ask yourself if you are using the strongest nouns, verbs, and adjectives – is there a replacement that is more specific or accurate?

Explain your argument aloud in your own words – compare what you say to what you wrote and ask if your writing is as clear as how you’d explain it while speaking.

Read your work aloud to hear where it sounds awkward, redundant, or unclear.

Use a thesaurus with caution – look up replacement words in the dictionary to make sure they mean what you want them to mean.
Wordiness

- Common problems:
  - Excessive qualifiers (e.g. really, mostly, very, etc.)
  - Redundant words
  - Excessive prepositions (e.g. of, to, at, etc.)
  - Wordy stock phrases (e.g. “It is crucial that”)

Excessive qualifiers:
- A lot of sharks often think that fish are really quite tasty. 
  Revised: Most sharks think fish are tasty.

Redundant words:
- The ocean looked gorgeous and beautiful at sunset.
  Revised: The ocean looked beautiful at sunset.

Excessive prepositions:
- The fish in the ocean to the north of the coral fell prey to the traps set by the boat from the fishing company.
  Revised: The fishing company’s traps captured fish north of the coral.

Stock phrases:

Find more HERE
Active/Passive Voice

- Active voice:
  - Direct, concise
  - Emphasizes who did/said what and to whom

- Passive voice:
  - Emphasizes the process, materials, or objects, instead of the actor
  - May help connect sentences more clearly

Active voice (the subject does the action):
- The baseball player hit the ball over the fence.

Passive voice (the subject is acted upon):
- The ball was hit over the fence by the baseball player.

Active voice:
- We added water to the test tube.

Passive voice:
- Water was added to the test tube.
General Notes on Tone

Too informal
Slang or colloquialisms could distract from the smart point you are trying to make.
Informality could lead to the writer thinking less about precise word choice and effective structure.

Too “ostentatiously erudite”
Trying to sound intelligent may get in the way of expressing your intelligent academic discoveries.
The goal is to communicate your smart ideas, not to show how well you can write with an “academic” tone.
THANK YOU!

Sources

Grammar Bytes
"The Dangling Modifier"
"The Misplaced Modifier"
"Parallel Structure"

Association for Psychological Science
"Teaching Graduate Students How to Write Clearly"

The Writing Center at UNC-Chapel Hill
Word Choice + Wordiness
"Style"


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Appointments available
Monday – Thursday: 9am – 8pm
Friday: 9am - 5pm

Drop-in available
Monday – Friday: 10am – 4pm