

The *Style* of Graduate Writing



ACADEMIC WRITING CENTER
GRADUATE WRITING WORKSHOP

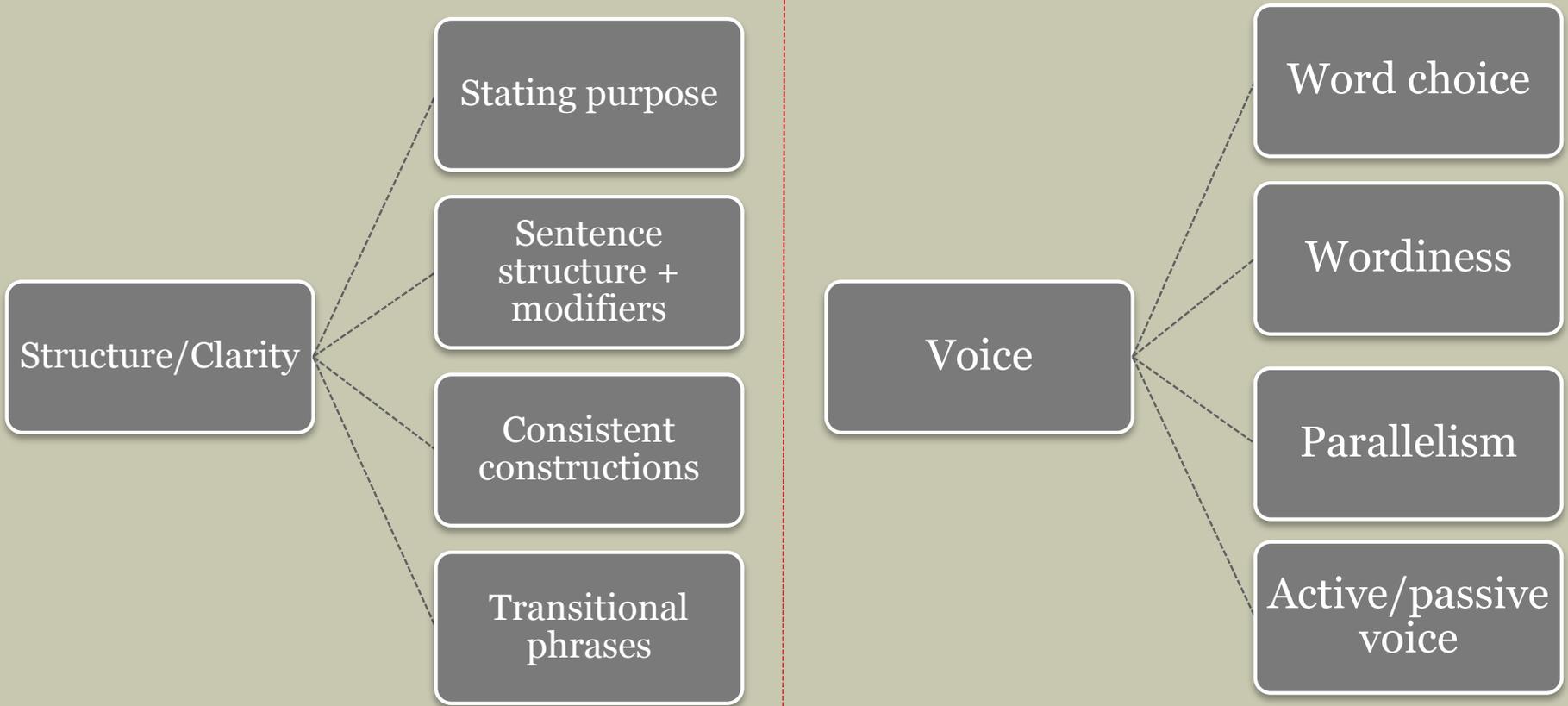


What's the difference between good graduate writing and good undergraduate writing?



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

Elements to consider...





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



Sentence Construction

- 1 or 2 ideas per sentence
- Start with old info, end with new info

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).”

Example from:

Strunk, W., Jr., & White, E.B. (2000). *The elements of style* (4th ed.). New York: Pearson Longman.



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



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:

The reason for

because, since, why

For the reason that

Due to the fact that

Owing to the fact that

In light of the fact that

Considering the fact that

On the grounds that

Find more [HERE](#)



Active/Passive Voice

- Active voice:
 - Direct, concise
 - Emphasizes who to 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

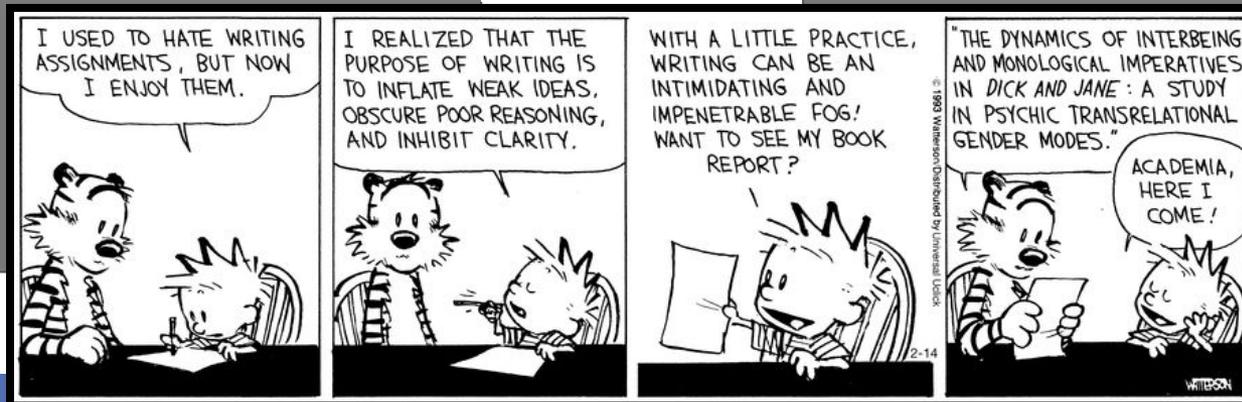
Informality could lead to the writer thinking less about precise word choice and effective structure

YOU

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!



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Appointments available

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

Drop-in available

Monday – Friday: 10am – 4pm

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"](#)

Williams, J.M. (2007). *Style: Lessons in clarity and grace* (9th ed.). New York: Pearson Longman.