

# Improving Style

## Use Strong Verbs

The verb is the engine of the sentence. To strengthen your style, pay attention to the verbs you choose. Avoid using too many “to be” verbs, such as is, are, was, were, am, being, been, etc... There is nothing wrong with “be” verbs, but when possible, choose to convey detail and action rather than indicate a state of being.

Weak: The sun was really bright on the snow.

Stronger: The sun shone brightly on the snow.

Weak: Being a nice person is a good way to be happy.

Stronger: Kindness leads to happiness.

## Avoid Passive Voice Constructions

“Passive voice” is a backward sentence that focuses too much on the recipient of an action, rather than the doer of the action (the subject). To fix this problem, be clear about who is doing what: determine what the real subject of the sentence is, and what it is doing, then reword accordingly.

Passive: The election’s outcome was decided by the Supreme Court. (What is the subject? The Supreme Court. What did it do? It decided the election’s outcome. Reword accordingly.)

Active: The Supreme Court decided the election’s outcome.

Passive: The suspect was being held in custody by the police. (What is the subject? The police. What did they do? They held the suspect in custody. Reword accordingly.)

Active: The police held the suspect in custody.

Passive: Accusations were made and feelings were hurt. (Who accused? Whose feelings were hurt?)

Active: The supervisor accused his coworkers and hurt their feelings.

There are instances when the passive voice is appropriate, but its overuse becomes very wordy and dry. Use sparingly.

## Avoid Excessive Intensifiers and Qualifiers

Intensifiers are words that attempt to add force or weight to a sentence (i.e. make it more intense). These words are very effective, but used too often, their effect can be artificial and weak.

It is **really** amazing how intensifiers make sentences **very** cumbersome.

I am **so** glad I know how to avoid making this **extreme** mistake **so** often.

Qualifiers are words which indicate the limits of your claim. They are often appropriate and necessary, but too many make your writing sound wishy-washy.

Gun laws are **probably** a good idea **most of the time**.

**Occasionally** torture **might** be necessary **in some cases**.

**For the most part** it has been a **somewhat** good year.

## Vary Sentence Structure

Good writing combines a variety of sentence patterns. Avoid repeating the same construction too often within a paragraph. In the following example, the writer gets into a rut of starting too many sentences with dependent clauses.

While I enjoy skiing, I like snowboarding as well. Although fresh powder is best for snowboarding, well-groomed

slopes are best for skiing. Since I can't do both, I have to choose which one I will do. Before I hit the slopes, I check to see how much it snowed the night before.

There are many ways to increase sentence variety, but notice how a mixture of sentence structures makes the paragraph less tiresome to read.

I enjoy skiing and snowboarding. They're really different though. Fresh powder is best for snowboarding, but well-groomed slopes are great for skiing. Unfortunately, that means I have to choose between them. Before I hit the slopes, I check to see how much it snowed. The conditions make all the difference.

## Vary Sentence Length

Too many short, simple sentences make writing sound childish. Too many long, complex sentences wear on the reader's attention. In the above example, notice how the short, simple sentence tacked onto the end provides a nice contrast to the longer sentences throughout the first part of the paragraph. Varying the length and complexity of your sentence helps provide rhythm and interest in your paragraphs.

I like him. He is the most attractive man I have ever met.

## Rambling Long Sentences

Some sentences just seem very long and cumbersome. It is best to simply break these long and rambling sentences into smaller, more manageable sentences.

Rambling: They were going to have a picnic but it started to rain, so everyone decided to go to a restaurant on the other side of town that had lots of space for big families even though some people in the group just wanted to wait and see if it would stop raining. (one sentence)

Better: They were going to have a picnic, but it started to rain. Everyone decided to go to a restaurant on the other side of town with space for big families. Some in the group, however, wanted to wait and see if it would stop raining. (three sentences)

## Avoid Word and Phrase Repetition

Sometimes writers latch onto a nice word or phrase and then wear it out. Two repeat offenders appear in this short paragraph: some variation of "successful implementation" and "democracy/democratic."

America was the first country to **successfully implement a democracy** guaranteed by a constitution. The process was not easy and involved a lot of debate among the Founding Fathers, but eventually they were able to **successfully implement democratic** elections. The **successful implementation** of the Bill of Rights eventually brought reluctant colonies into the new **democracy**.

Instead, consider using synonyms (different words, same meaning) or simply a fresh approach to the same concept. Notice how the word "successful" is not used below; instead, the success is evident. Effective word choices essentially speak for themselves.

America was the first country to **implement a democracy** guaranteed by a constitution. The process was not easy and involved a lot of debate between the Founding Fathers, but eventually they were able to hold **democratic** elections. Passing the Bill of Rights eventually brought reluctant colonies into the new nation.

## Avoid Clichés

Clichés are overused phrases that have become predictable and dull. When people read, they want to hear new and fresh language that provides an original point of view. Clichés make writing stale. Here are just a few examples of the many clichés.

Clichés are a dime a dozen.  
Her words cut like a knife.  
Beauty is skin deep.  
I couldn't believe my eyes.

The room was as dark as a cave.  
What goes around comes around.  
Seeing is believing.  
I felt like I had just been hit by a ton of bricks.