

# Four (Easy) Steps to Better Writing

A Handout from the EcoTeach Center, Duke University

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**M**ost writing advice is rather unhelpful. “Be clear!” the guidebooks say. Or, “Say what you mean!” Easier said than done, right?

Here are four principles that you can actually use and that can help you produce better writing. They come from *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, by Joseph M. Williams—the best writing guide I’ve ever seen. For anyone who is truly interested in improving their writing, it is the book to get.

## **PRINCIPLE 1: Keep your complete grammatical subjects short.**

Readers like to get past the subject to the verb as quickly as possible. Therefore, as much as possible, structure your sentences so that they have complete grammatical subjects that are short. Here are two versions of the same sentence, the first with a long complete subject (italicized), the second, with a short one:

Long subject: *A full explanation of why the model cannot accommodate this particular case of omitted variable bias* is given in the appendix.

Short subject: *The appendix* explains in full why the model cannot accommodate this particular case of omitted variable bias.

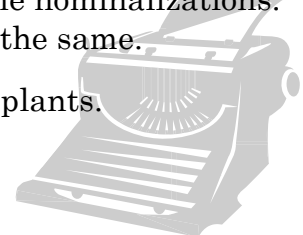
Needless to say, the occasional sentence with a long grammatical subject is fine and may even be desirable. But generally speaking, keep your complete subjects short.

## **PRINCIPLE 2: Express key actions as verbs, not as nouns.**

Express key actions as verbs. That may sound obvious. But we often do not express key actions as verbs. Rather, we often “hide” key actions in abstract nouns or, as they may also be called, nominalizations—noun forms of words that can also be verbs. Examples of nominalizations are *analysis* (the nominalization of *to analyze*), *assumption* (*to assume*), and *resistance* (*to resist*). Many nominalizations end in *-tion*, *-ment*, *-ence*, and so on. Here are some examples of sentences with nominalizations, along with those same sentences revised to eliminate the nominalizations. Note that for some words, the verb form and the noun form are the same.

There is *opposition* among many voters to nuclear power plants.

Many voters *oppose* nuclear power plants.



Economists made *attempts* to formulate a *definition* of full employment.  
Economists *attempted* to *define* full employment.



We conducted a *review* of the matter.  
We *reviewed* the matter.

The model makes the *assumption* that people engage in utility *maximization*.  
The model *assumes* that people *maximize* utility.

### **PRINCIPLE 3: Begin sentences with “old” information.**

Here are two passages that say the same thing. Which flows better?

1a. Some astonishing questions about the nature of the universe have been raised by scientists studying black holes. The collapse of a dead star into a point perhaps no larger than a marble creates a black hole.

1b. Some astonishing questions about the nature of the universe have been raised by scientists studying black holes. A black hole is created by the collapse of a dead star into a point perhaps no larger than a marble.

Most readers consider 1b to flow better. Why? Because in 1b, the second sentence begins with a term that the reader has already encountered: *black holes*. In other words, in 1b, the second sentence begins with *old information*.

Clear writing is writing that *flows*. In order to create flow, begin sentences with old information. Old information is information—names, words, phrases, and their equivalents—that your reader has already encountered or can reasonably anticipate; it is information that refers back to something already stated. Here is an example. The old information is in boldface; the information it refers back to is italicized.

### **PRINCIPLE 4: End sentences with new information.**

Just as it is wise to begin sentences with old information, it is wise to end them with new information. New information is just that: information that your reader has not encountered yet or could not anticipate. Generally speaking, new information is the most important in a sentence; it thus should receive the most emphasis by being placed at the end of the sentence.

