Developing clarity and focus in academic writing

Ways to keep your writing clear for your audience

You may already have experience writing for such purposes as entertainment or persuasion, where the writing is organised to create suspense, emotional effect or evocative description. In contrast, academic writing aims above all for clarity and precision. For this reason, it has a direct and focused style.

This leaflet will describe how you can structure sentences and paragraphs to achieve direction and focus in your academic writing.

Read the following two passages.

Which one reads better? Why?

A The English poet and playwright who is widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language and the world's pre-eminent dramatist was William Shakespeare. The "Bard of Avon" and England's national poet are other titles he is known by. Thirty-eight plays, one hundred and fifty-four sonnets, two long narrative poems, and several other poems are among his surviving works, including some collaborations. No other playwright's plays have been performed more often and his work has been translated into every major living language.

B William Shakespeare was an English poet and playwright, widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language and the world's pre-eminent dramatist. He is often called England's national poet and the "Bard of Avon". His surviving works, including some collaborations, consist of thirty-eight plays, one hundred and fifty-four sonnets, two long narrative poems, and several other poems. His plays have been translated into every major living language and are performed more often than those of any other playwright.

Most readers would agree that the second paragraph is easier to follow.

1. Begin your paragraphs with a *topic sentence* which summarises the main point of the paragraph.

The sentences which follow should give detail and evidence to support the topic sentence.

In the second example the first sentence makes a claim about the role and importance of Shakespeare: it acts as the topic sentence for the paragraph. The sentences which follow it provide evidence for this claim.

2. Establish your central topic at the beginning of the sentence, preferably as a subject.

This way, readers can relate any information which follows your topic. Compare the first sentences:

Compare:

"The English poet and playwright who is … was William Shakespeare." **and**

"William Shakespeare was an English poet and playwright …"

In the first sentence, the reader is unsure which poet and playwright is being discussed whereas in the second sentence the reader immediately relates the details (poet and playwright) to a real character.

3. Move from old to new information.

Compare:

"The "Bard of Avon" and "England's national poet" are other titles he is known by." **and**

"He is often called England's national poet and the "Bard of Avon".

In the second sentence, "he" refers to Shakespeare which is 'old' or known information for your reader. This prepares the reader for extra details about the main topic, and the sentence is easier to read.

Note that the **passive** voice is used in the second example. In this sentence, the passive is a useful device to help you focus on the subject and make the sentence clearer.

4. Keep your topics, or the beginning of your sentences, brief and simple, and put complex or detailed information at the end of a sentence.

Compare:

"Thirty-eight plays, one hundred and fifty four sonnets, two long narrative poems, and several other poems are among his surviving works, including some collaborations." **and**

"His surviving works, including some collaborations, consist of thirty-eight plays, one hundred and fifty-four sonnets, two long narrative poems, and several other poems."

In the first sentence, the reader has to hold a lot of information in their memory before they know why it is significant.

In the second sentence, the reader can predict the kind of information that is going to follow, that is, examples of different genres of writing.

5. Place less important information at the start of a sentence and more important information at the end of a sentence.

Important information may include:

- new terms that a reader may not recognise;

- information with emotional weight or high significance for your argument;

- ideas that will be further developed in the next few sentences.

Consider: *"His plays have been translated into every major living language and are performed more often than those of any other playwright."*

In this example, the writer has already established that Shakespeare writes plays, so this is less important information and should go at the beginning of the sentence to establish the focus. The sentence ends with important extra detail that the reader does not yet know.

6. Clearly emphasise your more important points, and de-emphasise minor supporting points.

Three ways that you can achieve this are:

1) Use end position in the sentences for important information.

2) Use short sentences containing a single main point for important information.

3) Use embedded clauses (see below) within main sentences for minor supporting points.

Compare:

a. *For a long time, but no longer, Japanese corporations used Southeast Asia merely as a cheap source of raw materials.*

b. *For a long time Japanese corporations used Southeast Asia merely as a cheap source of raw materials. But those days have ended.*

In **a)**, the embedded clause: "*but no longer,*" de-emphasises the change in behaviour of Japanese corporations. In **b)**, this change is given emphasis as it is placed in final position and presented as a short, separate sentence.

c. *Smith's* Methodis Differantium, *the document that contained the elements of the theory of differentiation, was created in 1667. The university re-opened after the plague in 1667.*

d. *Smith's* Methodis Differantium*, was created in 1667, when the university re-opened after the plague. This document contained the elements of his theory of differentiation.*

In **c)** the separate sentence: "*The university re-opened after the plague in 1667.*" places undue evidence on a minor detail. In **d)** the most important information is placed in a separate sentence at the end, and supporting information is presented in clauses in the sentence before it.

A further example:

Note how the following passage establishes the topic at the beginning of a sentence, and moves from old, less important information to new, more important information.

Use of 'there are' or 'it is' introduces the topic in a simple way, so you can move on to more complex, new information at the end of the sentence.

Start the sentence restating old information and then proceed to add a definition, or new information.

"**There are** three different methods of counting votes: first-past-the-post, preferential voting and proportional representation. In the "**first past the post**" system, voters put a tick or the number 1, or some other sign, beside the name of the candidate they want to vote for, and express no other preference. **The candidate** with the most ticks, etc. is elected, even if their share of the vote is less than 50%. **In other words, election requires a plurality, but not necessarily a majority**."

Repeat from previous sentence, before adding further detail.

Summary and implications of preceding information. The more abstract level of analysis represents new, more complex information.

Further Resources

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