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HOW TO WRITE BETTER WITHOUT HURTING MUCH:
MATERIALS FOR A SEMINAR ON WRITING

Alan Struthers, Jr.

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General Assumptions About Your Audience

Whenever you write, you must make some assumptions about your readers. The following assumptions are conventional--that is, they are implicit in most good writing. They may not always be true, but it is usually necessary to write as if they were.

1. Your readers are not obligated to read your article and are a little selfish. Therefore, encourage them by being clear and direct. Quickly let them know what your main point is and why it is worth considering.
2. They are willing to put only a reasonable effort into understanding what you have to say, regardless of how much effort you have put into your research. Therefore, make comprehension easy for them. Don't ask them to reorganize for you or draw conclusions for you. Don't try to impress them with your command of the subject. Simplify as much as you possibly can.
3. They are basically intelligent, but they don't know what you know. Therefore, you must explain yourself in great detail, carefully guiding your readers to your conclusions.
4. They are not your friends and are not easily convinced. They will nitpick and resist your conclusions if you let them. Therefore, you must foresee objections and counter them before they raise any doubts.
5. They find it easier to think about concrete things than abstractions. Therefore, whenever possible, use terms that refer to things you can see or touch. When this is not possible, give examples or use analogies.

Planning a Paper

Good planning is essential to good writing. The following approach to planning a paper is useful because it requires you to write out some of your mental steps. This forces you to be thorough, helps you see problems earlier, and makes it possible for other people to comment on your paper before you have spent a lot of time actually writing it. With experience, it is possible to do some of the planning in your head, but it is preferable to do it on paper.

1. Narrow your subject until you can deal with it in a single article (or in the desired number of pages). Usually, it is better to be too narrow than too broad.
2. Brainstorm. List all your main arguments, all the exceptions, and everything else that might be pertinent to your subject (key words, examples to use, evidence to refute, comparisons). Use your imagination here and include anything that is even a little bit related. Don't worry about order yet. You should have a long list.
3. After examining your list, decide what propositions you have the best support for and write them down. To help your thinking, you may need to rewrite your list, putting like ideas together and eliminating duplications. If some basic direction for your paper has not occurred to you, this could indicate that you need to do more research or more work on narrowing your subject or brainstorming.
4. Decide what you really want to say. Then complete this sentence: "In this paper I will show that . . ." This is your working thesis or theme statement. You should revise this thesis as you work on your paper. The final version of your thesis should omit the opening seven words of this working thesis.
5. Test your thesis. It should be restricted, unified, and precise. That is, it should be a small enough assertion that you can support and explain it in detail;

it should contain a single idea; and it should be expressed in specific, accurate terms so that it cannot be misinterpreted. (See "Testing Your Thesis.")

6. Using your list of ideas, construct a rough outline of just the main arguments of your paper. To do this, decide which points are major and which are secondary. Outline only the major points at this time. Make sure you have omitted no necessary major point. Make sure the points do not duplicate or overlap each other. Make sure they are in some rational order (temporal, spatial, inductive, deductive, cause/effect, wrong/right, least important/most important, etc.). Usually, you will end up with from two to six main points. For very short reports or memos, you may be able to write a first draft from this outline.
7. Using your rough outline as a guide, construct a sentence outline. This is the outline that you should work from when you are writing your paper. (See "Constructing a Sentence Outline.")

Testing Your Thesis

To test your thesis--to make sure it will give your paper the focus it needs--you need to ask three main questions. You haven't adequately answered these main questions unless you have considered the more specific questions that follow them.

1. Is it restricted enough?

Does it use words or phrases that are too general for your purposes (such as "incomes policy" instead of "TIP")?

Does it imply anything you can't prove or don't want to discuss?

Can you support it in the number of pages you want to fill?

What would happen if you restricted it further?

2. Is it unified?

Does it express just one well-defined idea?

Is it a single sentence?

Does it identify the main idea that runs through all the parts of your paper, or does it just name the parts of your paper?

Does it avoid using "and" to connect thoughts that are not closely related and not equal in importance?

3. Is it precise?

Is it overstated, vague, too qualified, or otherwise inaccurate?

Can it be misinterpreted in any way?

Does it emphasize the wrong things, especially in the subject and the predicate of the sentence? ("I" should not be the subject of your thesis sentence unless you are writing an essay about yourself, not an academic paper.)

Are the phrases or clauses connected clearly? (Be suspicious of vague connections like "with" and "in regard to.")

Constructing a Sentence Outline

For most papers, you will need an outline that is more detailed than a rough outline. A sentence outline is best because it demands the most thought and because it can be understood by someone besides yourself.

1. Write your thesis near the top of the page.
2. Write full sentences that express all the main arguments you have identified for your rough outline. These are major topic sentences that will govern the major sections of your paper. Each of these topic sentences should repeat a word or phrase from your thesis or should otherwise point clearly to your thesis.
3. Organize your support and explanation of each of these main points. Write these supporting ideas in full sentences in their proper positions in the outline, indenting further as the ideas get more specific or detailed. Each sentence should repeat a word or phrase from an earlier sentence or should otherwise point clearly to the sentence that it supports.
4. Think of a title that reflects your main idea; write it at the top of your outline.

When this outline is completed, let your editor or someone else comment on it before you spend any time on a rough draft. This can save you a lot of time. When you begin to write, you may need to change the outline in some ways. If you do, be sure to indicate your changes in writing on the final outline so that it remains a useful tool for you or your editor.

Note that "introduction" and "conclusion" are not parts of your outline, though they may be parts of your paper.

Checking Your Sentence Outline*

The Main Ideas

1. Is the thesis restricted, unified, and precise?
If not, your outline may ramble or never support a point convincingly.
2. Are your major topic sentences restricted, unified, and precise?
Your major topic sentences must be restricted enough so that they are mutually exclusive (or only overlap in inconsequential ways). You can test your major topic sentences by the procedure suggested in "Testing Your Thesis."

The Structure

3. Does each sentence clearly refer to a previous one?
Each of your major topic sentences should refer to your thesis; each of your other sentences should refer to the main division (or topic sentence) above it.
4. Are similar ideas expressed in similar ways?
Parallelism and repetition are rhetorical devices that can help show similarities.
5. Does the order of the parts provide a logical and effective progression?

Completeness

6. Are all the major units of your subject or your analysis presented in the outline?

*Based loosely on James M. McCrimmon, Writing With a Purpose, 6th ed. (Boston, 1976), pp. 77-79.

7. Is each main section of your outline subdivided far enough to guide you as you write?
8. Have you assumed or hinted something that should be explained forthrightly?
9. Have you mistakenly included anything that isn't necessary for supporting your thesis?

If so, you must throw it out or revise your thesis.

Writing an Introduction*

When writing an introduction, you must keep your intended audience in mind, for one key purpose of an introduction is to show readers how your subject is connected to their lives, their ideas, their experiences. The length of the introduction should depend on the length of the paper; one, two, or three paragraphs is usual.

The type of introduction suggested here is not the only possibility, but it is common, versatile, and useful.

1. First, establish a context for your subject. To discover the context, ask yourself these questions:
 - . What larger issue is my subject a part of?
 - . What broader subject or concept is my subject associated with?
2. Next, state the relation between the context you have established and the subject you want to write about. To do this, ask yourself:
 - . How does my subject fit into this broader context? How or why is it part of this larger issue?
 - . How does my subject differ from other subjects that also fit into this broader context?
3. State your thesis. If you haven't done so already, test your thesis to make sure that it is restricted, unified, and precise and check it against your outline to make sure that the thesis reflects what you actually say in your paper.
4. Finally, go back and write transitions between these three main parts of your introduction. Your transitions could be as short as a word ("however," "surprisingly") or as long as several sentences. (See "Writing Transitions.")

*Based on Ray Kytle, Composition: Discovery and Communication (New York, 1970), pp. 49-51.

Other Opening Strategies

Sometimes placing your subject in its context will not be the most effective way to open your paper. In this case, try one of these two opening strategies.

The Thesis Paragraph

A thesis paragraph contains your thesis plus a brief explanation, definition, or rephrasing of it. The thesis most often comes at the beginning of the paragraph--it may even be the only sentence in the paragraph--but it could come anywhere.

The thesis paragraph is the best way to begin if you are confident that your audience has a basic knowledge of the subject and will be interested in what you have to say. The trick of the thesis paragraph seems to be to give just the right amount of information. You must give enough so that the thesis can be understood or so that its implications are evident, but not so much that the paragraph looks unsupported or that you present an argument that you repeat later.

The Hook

A hook opening begins with something that will quickly attract a reader's attention. It ends with your thesis. In between these points, it should be as brief as possible.

The hook is the best way to begin if you want to interest a wide or poorly motivated audience or if you need to demonstrate that your thesis can affect the average person's life. Anything that will get a reader's attention will work as bait for the hook. Consider using some arresting facts, a quotation, an anecdote (or a true story, a bit of scripture, a joke, or a personal recollection), an analogy (or a metaphor or simile comparing the familiar to the unfamiliar), or a problem (which could be phrased as a question or as a paradox).

Checking Your Rough Draft

To make sure that your paper is taking shape, here's a way to check the organization of your rough draft. This should be particularly useful if you like to begin writing without a formal plan, as some writers do. This is less efficient than doing your planning first, but some people find it easier to organize their thoughts while writing.

You don't have to follow these steps in this exact order; however, it is important that every step be done carefully and thoughtfully. This should take perhaps 15 minutes to 1 hour per page of your text.

Your Main Ideas

1. Underline your thesis statement twice.
2. Underline the sentence that expresses the main point of each paragraph or section: the topic sentence. If a paragraph or section doesn't state its main point, write the point in the margin and revise the paragraph later.
3. If the topic sentence of a paragraph does not support the topic sentence of its section, circle it so that the sentence can be revised or the paragraph deleted. If the topic sentence of a section does not support the thesis, likewise circle it so that the sentence can be revised or the section deleted.

Your Paragraphs

4. Reread the paper paragraph by paragraph. Check each sentence in each paragraph to make sure that it supports the underlined topic sentence. If a sentence in a given paragraph doesn't support the topic sentence, circle it so that it can be revised, inserted where it belongs, or deleted.
5. Also check to make sure that each sentence in each paragraph has some verbal link with a previous sentence: a transition. Use words like "it," "they," "this," "these," "such," and "another," and repeat key words to make verbal links.

Don't assume that the reader can see a connection unless you have specifically expressed it. At this point, don't worry about being wordy.

6. Again, reread your paper paragraph by paragraph and consider the order of ideas in each paragraph. Is it logical? Are all necessary ideas there? Be picky and skeptical.

Your Organization

7. Now reread all your underlined topic sentences. Make sure that each supports either your thesis statement or a previous topic sentence. If you find one that doesn't do this, consider changing its wording, changing its position in your paper, or eliminating it altogether.
8. Make sure your underlined statements do not duplicate or overlap. If they do, you must reorganize.
9. Consider your progression of main ideas. Is it logical? Is it complete?

Finishing Touches

10. Decide what to do about the sentences you have circled. If this changes your paper substantially, you will have to go back and redo the nine steps listed above. Then reread your paper to make sure you haven't forgotten any necessary revisions.
11. At this point, begin to consider more minor revisions--in single sentences, words, or punctuation.

Paragraphing: Completeness*

Completeness is relative. How much explanation an idea requires depends on how much the reader needs. This is a decision the writer must make out of knowledge of the subject and of the audience. Although it is an error to give either too much explanation or not enough, usually the latter is the more serious. Giving a reader unnecessary explanation may be boring, but giving too little may block communication. Consider the following example.

Procrastinating writers wait for the deadline to get as close as possible so that the pressure upon them is as great as possible. Once started, they may turn out as fine a product as anyone else, marred only by the rough spots which time does not permit them to smooth out. Before the plunge, they occupy themselves with all kinds of diverting tasks.

If the writer stops here, all he or she has given the readers is an unsupported judgment about procrastinators. But that is not enough. Readers still need to know how and why these writers procrastinate. The rest of the paragraph explains this.

One man confessed that he never did as much housework as when he had an assignment due. Inevitably, procrastinators will be found working frantically late at night or still making last-minute changes as they submit their papers. The causes for delays are various--lack of discipline, reluctance to make the commitment that writing demands, fear of criticism, a mental block about writing, an overloaded schedule. These are writers who finally must force themselves into the act of writing, although they may be wholly satisfied with what they finally produce.

*Framing paragraph based on James M. McCrimmon, Writing With a Purpose, 6th ed. (Boston, 1976), pp. 86-87; indented paragraph based on William F. Irmischer, Ways of Writing (New York, 1969), p. 6.

What Makes a Good Paragraph?

A well-written paragraph:

1. Should contain a transition or reference to an earlier paragraph, usually the immediately preceding one.
2. Should contain a topic sentence that concisely states its purpose. A topic sentence can be judged by the criteria used to judge a thesis statement.
3. Should be complete. It should contain all the information necessary to explain its topic sentence. Usually, it should contain some concrete details or illustrations.
4. Should contain no ideas that aren't necessary to support or develop the topic sentence. That is, it should be unified.
5. Should have comprehensible order of ideas (top to bottom, past to present, least important to most important, etc.).
6. Should be built of sentences that hook together with transitional words and devices. That is, it should be coherent.

Writing Transitions

A transition is a part of a sentence that refers to an idea you have developed earlier in your paper. Its purpose is to link this idea to another idea in some logical way so that your writing is coherent. Although a whole sentence or paragraph can also serve as a transition, the term usually means something less than a sentence. You should use a transition at the beginning of each paragraph and section, unless you have a strong reason for omitting it.

Overcoming Problems With Transitions

Some transitions will come with great difficulty, perhaps because in writing you have put ideas together in an unfamiliar way. To overcome problems:

1. Decide which two ideas need to be linked. Are you connecting sections or paragraphs? Your outline may help you identify the two ideas.
2. Decide how the ideas are related. Are you focusing on one element of a larger concern? Giving an example? Drawing a conclusion? Combining several ideas expressed earlier?
3. Make sure that the first of the ideas to be linked is stated succinctly near the place where you need a transition. This is especially important when you are linking sections--you may have to summarize or repeat an idea before you can begin to write a transition.
4. Write a sentence that mentions the first idea in abbreviated form and introduces the second idea. The emphasis should be on the second idea, so that you do not appear to be repeating yourself. (Suggestions for controlling emphasis appear in "Goals for Writing and Rewriting Sentences" and "The Secret of Sentences: Important Words in Important Places.")

Examples of Transitions

The examples of transitions given below are organized, as far as possible, from the most explicit to the most implicit. Your context and your choice of words, of course, could easily make any of these transitions precise enough to serve its purpose well. In each example, you have to assume that the underlined transition accurately refers to a previous idea.

1. a dependent clause

Although the rate of inflation and the unemployment rate show a strong negative correlation in these years, we should not conclude that . . .

2. a verb phrase

This conclusion--while having considerable intuitive appeal--is, in fact, open to question . . .

3. a prepositional phrase

Despite Okun's insights, his conclusions are not supportable . . .

4. a noun phrase

The most promising of the new theories is rational expectations.

5. a transitional marker

Keynes afterward remarked that . . .

Furthermore, he never considered . . .

For example, in "Death in Venice" . . .

6. a term repeated from an earlier paragraph

Corporations do exert power, but . . .

7. a pronoun

This implies . . .

This unhealthy state of affairs . . .

Although transitions can express virtually any kind of connection between ideas, unusual or complicated connections often require longer or more explicit treatment than common, simple connections. Because of this, you should generally use dependent clauses or verb phrases for your most complex transitions and use shorter forms, such as prepositional phrases or transitional markers, for your more ordinary transitions. When in doubt, use the longer or more explicit type of transition. Occasionally, a whole paragraph may be necessary to explain the connection.

Some Ordinary Connections and Some Words That Express Them

time: afterwards, beforehand, later

addition: first, again, finally, too, furthermore

contrast: after all, on the contrary, however, in spite of

similarity: likewise, similarly, too

movement from general to specific: for instance, especially, in particular, most of these

movement from specific to general: therefore, hence, on the whole, in other words, all in all

causation: because, for, consequently, therefore

acknowledgement of counterarguments: no doubt, to be sure, granted that, of course

Goals for Writing and Rewriting Sentences

Clarity

1. Choose words that are as precise and specific as possible.
2. Give enough detail. Be prepared to expand a sentence into a whole paragraph, if necessary, to avoid vagueness.
3. Keep the sentence structure uncomplicated and unconfusing, especially with long sentences.
4. Strive for correct grammar. Be particularly careful to avoid faulty pronoun reference, misleading word order, and the omission of necessary words.

Proper Emphasis

5. Put the words that contain key ideas in important places in the sentence, such as the main verb and the simple subject. Put secondary material into less important places in the sentence.
6. Eliminate material that does not contribute to the central idea. Either put it in another sentence or throw it out (but, of course, don't eliminate all the qualifiers and all the detail needed to communicate your thought).
7. Choose words that accurately reflect the strength of your feelings or the certainty of your conclusions. Don't overstate or understate your case.

Efficiency

8. Before rewriting a sentence, place it next to other sentences on the same general subject, if there are any. Reorganize the sentences in each paragraph so that whole ideas don't have to be repeated.
9. Cross out words that do not add significant information to the sentences or the paragraph.

10. Replace whole sentences with clauses, clauses with phrases, and phrases with single words, provided that you can do this without sacrificing any meaning or any of the intended effect.

Appropriateness for Context

11. Adjust the style and tone of the sentence so that it better fits your article.
12. Modify the sentence so that it better serves its purpose within the paragraph, perhaps by adding a transition or by deleting a piece of information that will be developed later.
13. Change the sentence structure so that it works better in the paragraph. Sometimes a sentence works best if it closely parallels another sentence; sometimes it works best if it adds variety to the paragraph.

The Secret of Sentences: Important Words in Important Places

The same information, placed in different sentences, will take on quite different meanings, because the structure and arrangement of a sentence always emphasizes certain words or groups of words. The secret to writing effective sentences is to take advantage of this natural emphasis and put the important words in the places that receive the most emphasis. In short, put the important words in the important places.

Important words. The important words in a sentence are those that express the kernel of your idea or that abbreviate your main idea. To identify these words, it may help to answer these questions:

What is your real topic, the thing you want to talk about?

What is the main comment you want to make about this topic?

These questions are simple but not easy. To answer them you may have to express your idea in different ways until you find the most precise. This means that you must separate your idea from your words, no easy task.

Important places. The important places in a sentence, starting with the most important are:

the main verb

the simple subject

the direct object (or sometimes another word that follows the main verb)

words out of their normal sentence position

the closing few words

the opening few words

The first three places are based on sentence structure, the last three on position. In most cases, structure carries more weight than position. That is, your verb, subject, and object are always emphasized; your opening and closing words may not receive much emphasis.