Guidelines on Grammar and Style

by Bruce Jaffee

Contents

I. Revision Notes

Many teachers list the most important things to remember when writing prose. Here is my list. To understand it, you must know be able to identify nouns, subjects, verbs, clauses, and phrases.

II. Action and Static Verbs

Most of you have learned a static, 'noun-based' writing style, but you should master a more vigorous, verb-based style.

III. Verbs and Verbals

This section provides more background on how verbs work.

IV. Subordination

Excessive subordination ('clausiness') characterizes inefficient, murky prose. But subordination helps us to rank and connect ideas and to smooth choppy prose. To effectively use subordination, you must understand what a clause is and how independent and dependent (or subordinate) clauses differ.

V. Phrases

VI. Use of Passive Voice

Although we have emphasized action verbs and active voice, you will want to use the passive voice in some situations.

VII. Other Common Problems

VIII. Index
I. REVISION NOTES

We will discuss these throughout the quarter. Remember, we write not only to communicate with readers but also to organize, clarify, and develop our ideas.

A. Use action verbs (transitive verbs in the active voice and intransitive verbs).

B. Eliminate unnecessary words.

C. Avoid prepositional phrase strings (compound prepositional phrases).

D. Don't bury the action in nouns.

E. Use 'to be' verb forms and passive voice only when you have good reason.

F. Keep the subject and verb close together.

G. Connect adjacent sentences and paragraphs.

H. Check for rhythm and emphasis by reading the draft out loud.

I. Vary sentence length.
J. Discuss only one topic in a paragraph. Discuss only one topic in a sentence.

K. Read your draft as if you were an ignorant but intelligent reader. That reader will not understand the intended sense and logic unless the sense and logic are in the words. When the reader reads, you won't be there to fill gaps or explain inconsistencies. Most early drafts, even those from excellent writers, contain gaps and inconsistencies.

L. Although you must use subordinate (= dependent) clauses, you should deliver the most important information in the independent clause. Learn to rapidly identify independent and dependent clauses. When you delete everything but the subject and verb of the independent clause, that subject and verb should convey information. Use dependent clauses sparingly.

M. Have something worthwhile to say. Writing and revising will help you decide what you want to say, but you are unlikely to write well if the topic bores you.

N. Place familiar material at the start of a sentence and new material at the end. The same applies to paragraphs.

O. Use parallel structure: express similar things in similar ways.

P. Avoid familiar, prefabricated expressions.
II. Action and Static Verbs

Use 'action verbs' as much as possible in this course. Action verbs are transitive verbs in the active voice or intransitive verbs. Avoid static verbs (transitive verbs in the passive voice and 'to be' verbs).

A. Transitive verbs (these are usually are not complete unless followed by a noun or a phrase).

1. Transitive verbs in the active voice are followed by a noun (direct object). The subject (the kicker) does the action and the direct object (the kickee) receives the action.
   example: The lion ate the zebra.

2. Transitive verbs in the passive voice are followed by a phrase.
   example: The zebra was eaten by the lion.

To decide whether a sentence with a transitive verb is in active or passive voice, ask 'Who is kicking who?' If the kicker is the subject, the voice is active. If the kickee is the subject, the voice is passive.

Do not confuse active/passive voice with active/passive tense.

B. Intransitive verbs (these are not followed by nouns but are usually followed by adverbs or adverbial phrases - adverbs and adverbial phrases indicate where, when, why, or how).

example: The lion ran quickly.

example: The lion ran through the trees.

example: The lion was running through the trees.
C. The verb 'to be' does not describe action but defines or describes a noun.

1. The 'to be' verb is usually followed by an adjective (predicate adjective) or a noun (predicate nominative).

example: The lion is fierce.

example: Lions are efficient predators.

2. Beginning writers will build long-winded sentences around ‘to be’ verbs.

example: The reason why leopards hunt at night is so that they can surprise their prey.

Note that the clause following is functions as a noun and defines reason. The main verb of the independent clause is is.

revision: Leopards hunt at night to surprise their prey.

revision: To surprise their prey, leopards hunt at night.

3. Auxiliary verbs: verbs such as ‘is’, ‘are’, ‘was’, ‘will be’, and ‘am’ are not ‘to be’ verbs when used with transitive or intransitive verbs (see preceding section). For example, in 'The lion was eating the zebra', the transitive verb is 'was eating'. Was is an auxiliary verb and not a ‘to be’ verb here.

4. Expletives: Beginning writers often use ‘expletives’ rather than concrete nouns and action verbs. These expletives are ‘there are’, ‘there was’, ‘it is’, ‘it was’, ‘this is’, etc.

example: There are occasional cases in which the lion's attempt to capture prey is not successful. This sentence is poor because the subject and verb of the independent clause (There are) are weak and convey no information.

revision: Lions sometimes fail to capture prey.

Expletives are not grammatically wrong, but you should use them sparingly and consciously.
D. Four basic sentence structures in English:

1. With a transitive verb in the active voice

Subject (actor) + transitive verb (active voice) + direct object (recipient of action).
example: *The lion ate the antelope.*

2. With a transitive verb in the passive voice

Subject (recipient of action) + transitive verb (passive voice) + phrase.
example: *The antelope was eaten by the lion.*

3. With an intransitive verb

Subject (actor) + intransitive verb + adverb.
example: *The lion ran quickly.*

4. With a ‘to be’ verb

Subject + ‘to be’ verb + predicate adjective or predicate nominative.
example: *Antelope are graceful.*
example: *Antelope are prey.*

(5). Linking verbs (look, feels, seems) are similar to 'to be' verbs.

Subject + linking verb + predicate adjective
example: *Lions seem ferocious.*
III. Verbs and Verbals

(modified from Mightier Than the Sword by C. Edward Good)

Verbs do five things in the English language

They serve as main verbs, infinitives, present participles (and gerunds), past participles, and one-word adjectives.

A. Main verbs

Main verbs are conjugated (they show tense or time) and serve both in independent and dependent clauses. A clause is a cluster of words with a subject and a main verb combination (or subject-predicate combination).

example: The lion hunted the antelope. Hunted is the main verb in an independent clause.

example: After the female lion moved onto the plain, she hunted antelope. Moved is the main verb of the dependent clause and hunted the main verb in the independent clause.

The other forms of verbs are verbals (B-E below).

B. The Infinitive Phrase

Infinitives are nonconjugated forms of verbs. The infinitive form of the verb hunt is ‘to hunt’. A phrase functions as a single part of speech and, unlike a clause, lacks a subject main verb combination.

example: To hunt antelope was the lion's main desire. Here the infinitive phrase functions as a noun and subject.

example: To hunt antelope, the lion first hid in the tall grass. Here the infinitive phrase functions as an adverb. Remember, adverbs indicate where, when, why, or how.

example: The best way to hunt antelope depends on the season. Here the infinitive phrase functions as an adjective (to hunt antelope modifies way).
C. The Present Participial Phrase

Present participles are formed by adding *ing* to the base verb.

example: *Hunting antelope*, the lion fed herself and her cubs. The present participial phrase acts as an adjective.

example: The lions *hunting on the plains* did not reduce antelope numbers. The present participial phrase acts as an adjective.

example: *Hunting antelope* can be difficult. The present participle *hunting* is a noun and a subject. Used as a noun, the present participle is called a *gerund*.

D. The Past Participial Phrase

Form the past participle of a regular verb by adding *ed*. The past participle of *hunt* is *hunted*.

example: *Hunted by lions*, the antelope scattered into the trees.

The phrase ‘hunted by lions’ could be presented as a clause in the passive voice. When the antelope were hunted by lions, they scattered into the trees.’ The participial phrase often is more direct than the clause.

E. One Word Adjectives

example: The *hunting lion* focuses on her prey. *Hunting* is a present participle functioning as an adjective.
IV. Subordination – Clauses

This discussion of subordination owes a lot to *Mightier Than the Sword* by C. E. Good.

Introduction

To write logically and smoothly, we connect ideas and also label some ideas as more important than others. This connecting and labeling can be accomplished by joining dependent (or subordinate) and independent clauses into one sentence. Effective writers understand how clauses work, ineffective ones don't.

First, what's a clause? According to Good, a clause is ‘bunch of words containing a main verb’ see IIIA for a variation of this definition. There are two main kinds of clauses:

An independent clause is complete and can stand alone.
examples: Lions prefer to eat antelope. or Lions seldom eat zebra.

A subordinate or dependent clause is not complete and cannot stand alone.
example: Although lions eat zebra, ...

An independent clause may be introduced by a coordinating conjunction (*and, but, for, nor, or, so, yet*) or may not need introduction.

Subordinate clauses are more complex than independent clauses. There are three kinds of subordinate clause (*adverb clause, adjective clause, and noun clause*). Let's consider how each is introduced and how each can cause problems.
IV A. Adverb Clauses (one kind of subordinate clause)

1. Remember, adverbial clauses indicate where, when, why or how. How do adverbial clauses start?

Adverbial clauses start with subordinating conjunctions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subordinating Conjunctions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>after</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>although</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as long as</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as soon as</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as well as</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>because</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>before</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>even though</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>if</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>insofar as</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>since</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>though</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>where</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>whereas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>whether</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>while</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>when</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

example: After the lions drank at the river, they slept.

The example above has two main verbs: drank in the dependent clause and slept in the independent clause. Although adverbial clauses seldom cause problems, sometimes you may wish to reduce the adverbial clause to a phrase. After drinking at the river, the lions slept. After drinking at the river is not a clause because it lacks a main verb - it is a participial phrase functioning as an adverb.

2. Using subordination, you can combine two independent clauses into one sentence. ‘The lions drank at the river.’ ‘The lions slept.’ After they drank at the river, the lions slept. Subordination has accomplished two things here. First, it has connected two related ideas - thinking in general and developing arguments in particular depend on these connections. Second, subordination has allowed us to change sentence length and rhythm.
IV B. Noun Clauses (a second kind of subordinate clause)

1. Beginning writers have lots of problems with noun clauses. To understand why, remember that nouns function as subject, direct object, object of preposition, object of verbal phrase, appositive, and as subject complement (I am skipping a few other functions).

Subject: Lions do not live in jungles.

Direct Object: We watched the lion.

Object of Preposition: We quietly walked by the lion.

Object of Verbal Phrase (a participle in this case): Watching the lion, we remained hidden.

Appositive: The antelope's main predator, the lion, does not live in jungles.

Subject Complement: In this food chain, the predator is the lion.

2. Like nouns, noun clauses function in all these ways. To demonstrate, let's use the clumsy noun clause The fact that lions eat antelope in the following sentences (modified from Good's book):

Subject: The fact that lions eat antelope did not impress Walt Disney.

Direct object: We stated the fact that lions eat antelope.

Object of Preposition: Disney was not concerned by the fact that lions eat antelope.

Object of Verbal Phrase: Stating the fact that lions eat antelope, we waited for Disney's response.

Appositive: We stressed one thing, the fact that lions eat antelope.

Subject Complement: The truth was the fact that lions eat antelope.
3. What should you do with noun clauses? First, learn to recognize them. Noun clauses often start with the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>That</th>
<th>why</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>the fact that*</td>
<td>where</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What</td>
<td>whether</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How</td>
<td>whoever</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*the fact that* is wordy and hackneyed. It can always be reduced to *that*, leaving a more compact noun clause.

4. After recognizing noun clauses, determine whether they sound clumsy and whether they are helping or hurting the independent clause. Finally, reduce noun clauses to nouns or to phrases.

Example: *The fact that the lions live in groups* partially explains their hunting success.

Revision: *The social behavior of* lions partially explains their hunting success. We replaced the noun clause with the noun *behavior*.

Revision: *By living in groups*, lions increase their hunting success. We replaced the noun clause with the participial phrase ‘by living in groups’.
IV C. Adjective clauses (a third kind of subordinate clause)

1. Like adjectives, adjective clauses modify nouns. They are introduced by relative pronouns:

   That  whom
   Which  whose
   Who

   example: The lion, *which rested by the river*, seemed well fed.
   example: The lion *that rested by the river* seemed well fed.

2. Adjective clauses starting with *that* and *which* cause lots of trouble.

   a. Use *which* to introduce a clause that is parenthetical (nonessential = nonrestrictive).
   example: The lion, *which rested by the river*, seemed well fed.

   b. Use *that* to introduce a clause that restricts the meaning and is essential.
   example: The lion *that rested by the river* seemed well fed.

   In example 2a, commas set off the adjective clause because the sentence concerns only one lion and the thought remains complete even if the adjective clause is removed; moreover, the adjective clause is not essential. In example 2b, no commas are used because the sentence concerns several lions, one of which is by the river. Here the pronoun *that* tells us to focus on a subset of the whole: *that* restricts the meaning of lion and is essential for understanding which lion.
c. There is nothing wrong with the examples 2a and 2b above. Beginning writers, however, use too many adjective clauses and confuse which and that.

3. Scan your drafts for excessive and incorrect use of *that* and *which*. Replace adjective clauses with adjectives and phrases and adverbial clauses. These are more compact and less distracting than clauses.

   example: We studied the lions *that were young*.
   
   revision: We studied the *young* lions. (adjective clause replaced by adjective)
   
   example: *That leopards can swim across rivers* means that they can cover much territory during rainy season.
   
   revision: *By swimming across rivers*, leopards can cover much territory during rainy season. (adjective clause replaced by participial phrase)
   
   example: The leopard, *which was crossing the creek*, could not detect the antelope.
   
   revision: *Because the leopard was crossing the creek*, she could not detect the antelope. (adjective clause replaced by adverbial clause)

4. ‘That away’. If the adjective clause is short and has a subject other than *that* or *which*, you can often delete the *that* or *which*.

   example: The antelope *that the lion hunted* was injured.
   
   revision: The antelope *the lion hunted* was injured.
   
   example: The research project *that we proposed* concerned predator-prey dynamics.
   
   revision: The research project *we proposed* concerned predator-prey dynamics.

But be careful. *That* also introduces noun clauses. Retain the *that* if the noun clause follows a ‘cognitive verb’ (know, assume, learn, remember, etc).

example: Lions learn *that zebra* can be dangerous prey.
V. Phrases

What's a phrase? According to Crews, a phrase is a ‘cluster of words functioning as a single part of speech and lacking a subject-predicate combination.’ A phrase is a bunch of words without a main verb.

A. **Prepositional phrase** - The zebra ran to the river.

B. **Infinitive phrase** - The lion's attack caused the zebra to run toward the river.

C. **Participial phrase** - Running toward the river, the zebra escaped.

D. **Gerund phrase** - Attacking zebras was seldom successful.

By recognizing clauses, phrases, and other elements, you will be better able to modify your sentences and therefore increase your writing’s effectiveness.
VI. Use of Passive Voice

Use the passive voice:

A. When the actor (the kicker) is irrelevant, not important, or unknown.

example: The fumigant must be stored in a locked and posted building.

B. When you want to be general and do not want to overuse 'one' or 'you' or 'I'.

example: I spun the sample at 1000 g in a centrifuge. I adjusted the pH of the supernatant and placed it on an agarose gel. I then ran an electric current through the gel.

vs

The sample was spun at 1000 g in a centrifuge. After the pH was adjusted, the supernatant was placed on an agarose gel and subjected to an electric current.

C. When you wish to use the actor as the punch of the sentence.

example: The question was asked by the President.

D. When you want to hide the identity of the actor. For example, suppose that as an EPA employee, you approved a soil fumigation that injured school children. When the newspaper reporters ask whether the fumigation was approved and by whom, you might say:

The soil fumigation was approved by an EPA official.

vs

I approved the soil fumigation.
VII. Other Common Problems

A. Dangling modifiers (especially dangling participles)

Keep modifiers near the words they modify. Make sure that the connection between the modifier and the modified word is unambiguous. (Note how I dropped the *that* in the first but not in the second sentence)

example: While *drinking our* coffee, the *lions* approached our camp site. Because *drinking is* near *lions, drinking* modifies *lions*. They probably drink their coffee black.

example: *After running* across the plains, the cool *water* was refreshing to the lions. Who was running, the water or the lions?

B. Faulty pronoun reference

The pronoun's antecedent (the word it replaces or refers to) should be unambiguous.

example: The lion sat beneath the tree; *it* was old and weak. The pronoun is *it*, but is the antecedent *lion* or *tree*? Only the writer knows.

example: Lions a) hunt on the plains and b) exhibit complex social behavior; *that* is why I study them. Does the pronoun *that* refer to a, b, or both?

C. Failure to use parallel structure

Within a sentence, say similar things in similar ways. Here are some examples of faulty parallelism (saying similar things in different ways):

example: The lion was large, powerful, and had an appearance that was frightening.

revision: The lion was large, powerful, and frightening.

example: Antelope learn to run from lions and avoidance of leopards.

revision: Antelope learn to run from lions and to avoid leopards.
In the first example, three elements (the adjectives large, powerful, and frightening) were not grammatically similar: frightening appeared in an adjective clause, the other two did not. To revise, we expressed all three as simple adjectives. In the second example, to run is an infinitive and avoidance is a noun. To revise, we changed avoidance into an infinitive.

Parallelism can be a powerful tool. Whereas unintentional repetition of words, phrases, or clauses can confuse the reader, intentional repetition can build rhythm and focus attention. Although not from science, the following examples illustrate the power and poetry of parallel structure. I have arranged the parallel elements for emphasis.

*From the Declaration of Independence* (Thomas Jefferson et al.):

We hold these truths to be self-evident,

that all men are created equal,

that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights,

that among these are

life,

liberty,

and the pursuit of happiness.

*From the United States Constitution*:

We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union,

establish justice,

insure domestic tranquillity,

provide for the common defense,

promote the general welfare, and

secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity,
do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

**From the Gettysburg Address** (Abraham Lincoln)

... and that government

of the people,

by the people,

for the people,

shall not perish from this earth.

(In this case, the sequence of prepositional phrases is not a prepositional phrase string - why not?)

**D. Excessive modification (in particular, excessive use of very and almost any use of totally)**

Inexperienced writers do not appreciate the value of adjectives such as beautiful, interesting, dull, sharp, confused, etc. or adverbs such as quickly, slowly, gracefully, clumsily, etc. These writers attempt to intensify the description by adding very or totally (totally momentarily substitutes for very, at least in some suburbs of California): a paper is not interesting but very interesting. Although very is a legitimate adverb (and sometimes an adjective), use it sparingly or the critical reader will conclude that you are overstating the condition. In several cases, very should never be used. Thus, the adjectives unique, rare, awful, bogus, etc. imply an exceptional condition, and addition of very is redundant and weakens the original adjective.

example: That chicken is very dead. Unless we are considering vampire chickens, chickens are either dead or not.

example: That professor is totally bogus. Bogus describes an extreme condition, making degrees of bogosity inappropriate.
E. Prefabricated expressions

Avoid using familiar and hackneyed expressions such as:

‘the fact of the matter is ...’ ‘the fact that ...’

‘window of opportunity’ ‘send a message’ (to anyone about anything)

‘empowerment of’ (anyone or anything) ‘a warm, caring environment’

‘global’ (anything) ‘the take home message is ...’

‘the bottom line is ...’ (unless you are an accountant)

These words appear so often that they lack meaning and often substitute for thought. Select your own words and build your own thoughts - they will be stronger than the prefabricated kind.
VIII. INDEX

active voice I IA
adjectives IIC1, IID4-5
adjective clauses IVC adverbs 11B
adverb clauses IVA
appositives IVB1
auxiliary verbs IIC3
Blah, blah, blah is ...IIC2
clauses IIIA, IV
coordinating conjunctions IV
dangling modifiers VIII A
dependent clauses IV
direct objects HA, IVB1
expletives IIC4
gerunds I11C, VD
gerund phrases VD
  independent clauses IV
infinitives IIIB, VB
  infinitive phrases IIIB, VB
intransitive verbs IIB it is .... IIC4
main verbs IIIA
nonrestrictive elements IVC2
nouns IVB1
noun clauses IVB
parallel structure VIIIC
participles VC
past participial phrases IIID
present participial
phrases IIIC, VC
passive voice IIA, VII
phrases IIIB, V
predicate adjectives IID4
predicate nominatives IID4
prefabricated expressions VIIIIE
prepositions VA, IVB1
prepositional phrases VA
pronoun reference VIIIIB
relative pronouns IVC1
restrictive elements IVC2
subordination IV
subordinating conjunctions IVA1
that vs which IVC2

There are ... IIC4

'to be' verbs IIC

totally VIIID

transitive verbs IIA

verbals IIIB-D

very VIIID