Writing Clearly: Perfect Sentences

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SID Student Information Desk

STUDENT SERVICES FACTSHEET

Writing is a difficult process, which involves forming grammatically correct sentences while trying to express complex thoughts. Good writers often rework their sentences several times in order to find the clearest way to express their ideas. The Study Development Team rewrote this paragraph about six times, and we're still not sure whether it sounds right!

How can I write more clearly?

Knowing how to structure a good sentence can make all the difference. Here are a few basic rules:

- A well-structured sentence makes sense on its own, so it can stand alone without sounding incomplete.
- A sentence begins with a capital letter and ends with a full stop.
- Any references cited in your sentence must be included before its final full stop, as they belong to the sentence.

What makes a sentence sound 'complete'?

A complete sentence needs to have a grammatical subject and a verb, in order to tell us who is doing what, or what is happening. The grammatical subject is generally the person or thing doing the action. The verb is the word that expresses the action or state, e.g. to read, to think, to be. Keeping the subject and the verb close together greatly improves clarity. For example:

The student wrote an essay.
[Subject] [Verb]

How long is a good sentence?

Sentences generally become hard to follow when they go over 3 lines, or string together a lot of phrases for actions without clear subjects or verbs. Long-winded phrases can be moved or replaced by simpler phrases, to make your sentences shorter and clearer. E.g.

Once upon a time, as a walk through the woods was taking place on the part of Little Red Riding Hood, the Wolf's jump out from behind a tree occurred, causing her fright.

Can be replaced by:

Once upon a time, Little Red Riding Hood was walking through the woods, when the Wolf jumped out from behind a tree and frightened her.

(Colomb and Williams, 2010, p. 29)

Top Tips

- Proofread by reading each sentence aloud.
- If you run out of breath, it's probably too long! Split it into shorter sentences.
- Make sure each sentence says who is doing what.

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How can I write complex sentences?

Complex sentences have two or more clauses or 'units', i.e. groups of words containing a verb. The core of a complex sentence is called the 'main clause': it has a subject and a verb, can stand on its own, and acts as a 'control unit'. A sentence becomes complex when you add subordinate clauses, or 'support units' to the main clause.

Take this example: 'I am writing an essay, although I am finding it hard'

'Although I am finding it hard' is a support unit: it only makes sense if it is attached to the control unit 'I am writing an essay'. Note that support units often start with a connecting word (e.g. 'although').

A control unit can only keep track of a small number of support units: if it has more than 2 support units, the sentence can easily get out of control, especially if you keep adding things to the end of it (like I am doing here), which are not really giving the reader any more information, or are merely providing further examples which make the sentence more and more confusing!

What are 'fragments' and how do I avoid them?

Fragments are incomplete sentences: when you read them out on their own, they do not sound quite right. This is usually because they should form part of a nearby sentence (e.g. subordinates separated from their main clause by a full stop). For example:

Sentences can be too long. Which leads to the reader losing the thread.

In this example, the second sentence does not make sense on its own without the first one, and your word processor may highlight it as a 'fragment'. Try attaching the fragment to the sentence directly before or after it, and check if it then sounds like a complete sentence.

Sentences can be too long, which leads to the reader losing the thread.

Resources

YSJ Study Development Self-Help Resources:
https://www.yorksj.ac.uk/student-services/study-skills/

Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL). Improving Sentence Clarity:
https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/mechanics/sentence_clarity.html

Williams, Joseph M., and Gregory C Colomb (2010). *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace*. 10th ed. Boston: Longman.

Support

Study Development offers workshops, short courses, 1 to 1 and small group tutorials.

To book an appointment, contact the Student Information Desk on:

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