

Basic Writing Effectiveness Guidelines: “Rules” to Write and Revise By

You probably thought that you were beyond the stage in which rules for writing would be helpful. The following suggestions seem simple, but properly applied, they can do wonders for your prose. Keep in mind, some of these suggestions will be most helpful for your longer, final paper—but most will be helpful for assignments long and short.

What does Dr. J mean when she suggests I strengthen my topic sentences, clarify my organization and/or transitions, or my thesis doesn’t address the “so what” question? How can I write more powerful and focused arguments? Consider the following:

- **Significance:** Your paper should pose a QUESTION or PROBLEM and answer or solve it. No question? No focus, and no conclusion. If your paper has significance, then you probably have answered your “so what” question. Ask yourself: who cares about this analysis? If you can’t think of an audience who would care, then you probably don’t have an argument or topic with significance.
- **Framing/Organization:** Your argument needs RHETORICAL FRAMING. This consists of the signposts you set up to help the reader assimilate your argument.
 - Early on, you indicate what you are up to and why.
 - You tell readers the units you will be discussing and the order in which they will come up.
 - You establish the importance of your endeavor, and signal what makes it *original*.
 - At the end, you signal that you are reaching a conclusion.
 - Some formatted forms of tech writing do this with headings: INTRODUCTION, METHOD, HYPOTHESIS, CONCLUSION, etc. Other forms have to build such framing into the prose.
- **Signals:** These are small rhetorical signs that tell readers how to receive your material.
 - Words like: *however, unfortunately, in addition, finally, most important*
 - These words all tell your readers what matters and why:
 - If you say, “Unfortunately, the X turned out to be a Y,” they know that this is bad, whereas the lack of such an indicator may leave such an audience wondering, “So what?”
 - Such signals, skillfully handled, do not insult the intelligence of experts; indeed they simply make your points easier to assimilate.
 - *Skill with such signals is one of the most important tools of a good writer.*
- **Topic Sentences:** *Good topic sentences are the key to effective communication.* If your topic sentence is in simple English, you can afford to give the technical details in carefully chosen jargon, yet even a non-specialist reader will still follow the gist of your argument.
 - Strongly focused topic sentences that create each step in your argument will give you an *authoritative voice*, one that readers will trust.
 - Topic sentences are the place in which you “tell the story” or what you are doing: they construct the skeleton of your argument.
 - If your “story” advances with a simple statement at the beginning of each paragraph, you can be as technical as you need to in the rest of the paragraph, but readers will still be carried along, not lost.
 - *HINT:* Only read the first sentence of each paragraph in your paper. What “story” do these sentences tell? Is the purpose (argument) and organization clear? If not, revise the topic sentences.

What does Dr. J mean when she writes: “Use more specific language” or “Vague” or “Wordy”? How can I write more concretely and efficiently? See below for several concrete ideas about making your writing more active and concrete:

- **Passive Voice:** Get rid of the passive voice whenever possible. Passive voice weighs down your prose (and your argument).
 - Passive Voice: He had gone to the store.
 - Active Voice: He went to the store.

 - **Constructions to Avoid:** Avoid the following constructions
 - “It is” or “It was” (where “it” lacks a specific referent)
 - It is a good idea to study for exams.
 - Possible Revision: Studying for exams produces stronger grades. (I’ve eliminated the “it is” and replaced the nonspecific verb “is” with a more specific and vivid verb.)
 - Possible Revision: According to students in Dr. J’s classes, studying for exams increases your likelihood of receiving a passing grade. (Here I’ve eliminated the “it is” and nonspecific verb and clarified according to whom this is a good idea. I’ve made the context of this statement more concrete and specific.)
 - “There is,” “There was,” “There are,” “There were” and variations. All of these produce inherently vague sentences.
 - *HINT:* To quickly find and revise these sentences, use the “Find” feature in MSWord.

 - **John Gardner’s Rule:** A sentence has three parts: *subject, verb, object*. You can complicate **one** of these parts, but only **one**. When you find two parts, or even all three, complexified, rewrite the material as two or more sentences.

 - **Keep your SUBJECT and VERB close together in the sentence.** Keep them near the beginning of the sentence.

 - **Nominalizations:** Avoid nominalizations, also known as *smothered verbs*:
 - Give preference to (prefer)
 - Make an enquiry (enquire)
 - Make a calculation (calculate)
 - Give consideration to (consider)
 - Conduct a survey (survey)
 - Effect a change (change), etc.
- These endings signal a smothered verb: *-ment, -ence, -ency, -ance, -ancy*. These endings are our means of turning verbs into nouns. For stronger prose, you want to turn them back into the original verbs and get rid of the colorless and vague place-holding verbs created by nominalization.
- **Prepositional Phrases:** Avoid sentences pasted together out of prepositional phrases:
 - “Therefore the reversals and changes IN configurations OF compensatory fantasy OF violence evident IN the revisions OF adventure formulas IN contemporary fiction BY men may be understood AS intervention IN the shared construction OF power negotiated BY culture.” Whew!
 - *Suggestion:* Read Richard Lanham’s *REVISING PROSE*, the first 30 or so pages, for a fine discussion of how to rewrite sludgy sentences like this one.

 - **Abstraction:** (two senses) makes meanings hard to assimilate.
 - **Abstract words:** usually polysyllabics (e.g. signification, advancement)
 - **Non-specific words:** “Facility” is abstract and vague; it could mean “easy skill,” “loading platform,” “toilet,” etc. “Cultural production” is non-specific, whereas *film, testimonio, novel, protest quilt* (all types of cultural production) are specific.

- **Common non-specific words:** *thing, feature, aspect, factor, element, nature, and concept.*
 - When you find yourself using one of these words, see if you can rewrite to get rid of it. (Again, use the “Find” function to locate and revise.)
- **Fog Index:** The number produced by applying the fog index equation produces a crude measure of readability. If the resulting number is 12, that means that it takes 12 years of education to read the passage comfortably.

The number is based on American education, so 12 years means 12th grade or someone ready to go to the university. If the passage registers 22 (22 years of education) you are writing *gobbledygook*; nearly anything can be written to 15 or 16, and you should work on your prose until you can write at that level.

The variables that determine the rating are:

- **Percentage of “hard” words:** three or more syllables
- **Average Sentence length**

Fog Index=(%hard words + Average Sentence Length)x0.4.

If you have 20% hard words and average sentence length of 20, you get 40x.04 or 16, meaning that someone with a college degree can assimilate it with adequate ease.

Finally . . . A Few Silly Errors that Hurt your Ethos (Authority):

- *Not Using Proper Marking for Novels, Short Stories, etc.:*
 - Titles of books are underlined or *italicized*: *Little Women* (not both)
 - Titles of short stories and poems are put in “quotation marks.”
- *Not Using Proper MLA Citation (parenthetical and bibliography)*
 - Dr. J says, “Follow MLA guidelines for parenthetical citation” (Jacobson 3).
- *Not Using Proper MLA Citation for Poetry (in-text citation)*
 - For example, when you quote from a poem you need to mark the line breaks and put in the lines: Linda Pastan poem “love song” begins “I want to write you/ a love poem as headlong/ as our creek” (lines 1-3).
- *Not Introducing Quotations:*
 - Don’t just leave a quote sitting there on the page . . . introduce it!
 - Usually the sentence preceding a long quotation introduces the quotation for the reader. This introduction might suggest what the reader should look for in the quotation or explain a key point—like why this quotation is important.
 - For shorter quotations, a short phrase often works well. You might need to introduce the authority/author of the quotation. You might need to simply state: The author does x cool thing is this quotation: “Insert quotation here” (Last-name PG).
 - Many times the sentence you write before you include the quotation is already primed and ready to serve as the introductory sentence: “Add a colon to connect the sentence and signal to your reader the quote is related” (Jacobson 3).
- *Not Fleshing Out Quotations:*
 - Don’t just leave a quote sitting there . . . trying to explain itself! Don’t trust that your reader will come to the exact same reading as you. Pick that sucker apart bit by bit! If you don’t . . . why quote it at all? After you introduce and then include the citation, say something about it.
- *Using Lots of Long Quotations:*
 - Don’t let the urge to quote take over your paper. Your voice should be the featured and strongest voice in the paper.
- *Not Using Quotations:*
 - Close reading is the bread and butter of literary analysis. If you don’t include a well-selected quotation to support and flesh out your argument, you are missing a key element. Your argument will not be as sharp.