

Constructing Sentences

The four guidelines you just read focus on social aspects of style: the way you present yourself in your writing and the relationship you establish there with your readers. The following six guidelines for constructing sentences are based primarily on what researchers have learned about the way the human mind processes information when it reads.

Guideline 1: Simplify Your Sentences

By simplifying your sentence, you can ease the work your readers' short-term memories must perform to understand your message:

1. Eliminate unnecessary words.
2. Substitute one word for several.
3. Keep modifiers next to the words they modify.
4. Avoid using interjections between related words.
5. Combine short sentences to clarify meaning.

Guideline 2: Put the Action in Your Verbs

Most sentences are about action. Consider the following sentence:

Our department accomplished the conversion to the new machinery in two months.

It could be improved by putting the action into the verb.

Our department converted to the new machinery in two months.

Guideline 3: Use the Active Voice Unless There is Good Reason to Use the Passive Voice

Another way to focus your sentences on action and actors is to use the active voice rather than the passive voice. To write in the active voice, place the actor — the person or thing performing the action — in the subject position. Your verb will then describe the actor's action.

Research shows that readers understand active sentences more rapidly than passive ones. The active voice helps them see immediately what action a sentence describes and who performed it, thereby avoiding the vagueness and ambiguity that often characterize the passive voice.

Guideline 4: Emphasize What's Most Important

Another way to write clear, forceful sentences is to direct your readers' attention to the most important information you are conveying:

1. Place the key information at the end of the sentence.
2. Place the key information in the main clause.
3. Emphasize key information typographically.
4. Tell readers explicitly what their key information is.

Guideline 5: Smooth the Flow of Thought from Sentence to Sentence

As your readers begin reading each new sentence, they need to figure out how the *new* information it contains relates to the *old* information in the preceding sentence. You can help them do that in several ways:

1. Avoid needless shifts in topic.
2. Use transitional words.
3. Use echo words.
4. Place transitional and echo words at the beginning of the sentence.

Guideline 6: Vary Your Sentence and Structure

If all the sentences in a sentence group have the same structure, two problems arise: monotony sets in, and (because all the sentences are basically alike) you lose the ability to emphasize major points and de-emphasize minor ones.

You can avoid such monotony and loss of emphasis in two ways:

1. Vary your sentence length.
2. Vary your sentence structure.