

Technique



Ponder the Plain Positives

Keep it simple, and you'll find your writing becomes more focused.

By Rosemarie Ostler

Having trouble controlling your word count? Take a tip from the plain language movement. Lawyers, business people and even those folks at the IRS are cleaning the debris from their writing with plain language.

They've discovered that clear, concise English doesn't mean lack of style. In fact, tight writing highlights good style more effectively than wobbly, verbal meanderings. Plain language works for professional writers, too. Next time you're stuck with an article or a chapter that bulges at the seams, apply these plain-writing rules.

Get to the point

Don't waste time with meaningless introductory sentences. Instead of easing into your topic with generalizations ("We've all heard it said that first impressions are important"); introduce your theme immediately ("Inappropriate dress can cost you jobs and promotions").

Shorten complex sentences

Variable sentence length adds inter-

est to a piece of writing. However, most sentences should be 20 words or fewer. If you find yourself breaking this rule, consider dividing the sentence. Your work will be more readable. You'll save on "ands," "buts," "whiles" and "althoughs."

Use active voice

Many of us learned in grade school that passive sentences are more formal or elegant. Really, they are less precise. Compare this paragraph's opening sentence with: "Passive sentences have often been considered more formal or elegant." Unless you have a reason to use passive, choose active voice.

Two valid uses of passive voice are when you don't know who performed the action ("These apartments were built in the 1930s.") or when the agent is not the point ("Your work will be published more frequently as your writing improves").

Avoid empty subjects

"It is" and "there are" make weak lead-ins. Instead of "There are many

people who believe the earth is flat," say, "Many people believe the earth is flat." Besides focusing on the real subject of the sentence, you save three words.

Drop the waffle words

"Somewhat," "very," "rather" and other adverbs of degree are hedges that weaken a piece of writing. Let's face it. People who believe the earth is flat are not somewhat strange or rather strange—they are strange, period. An easy way to reduce wordiness is to delete every adverb unless its absence changes the sentence's meaning.

Replace multiword verbs

You can replace most verb-particle combinations like "leave out" with stronger, more precise verbs like "omit," "drop," "avoid" or "erase." After you've removed the adverbs, check each multiword verb, and try to replace it with a single word that packs more punch. **WD**

Rosemarie Ostler, a linguist and a former librarian, has been writing for magazines for about two years.

Citing Documents from the Internet

According to the *MLA Handbook*, Internet sites "lack agreed-on means of organizing works" and "are not as fixed and stable as their print counterparts" (207). This makes your job more difficult. To make it easier, keep a few rules in mind as you conduct Internet research.

Whenever possible, print out a copy of each Internet source you're using. If not, write down the author and title of each online article, information about each article's prior print publication (if applicable), the title of each website, the date of electronic publication or latest update, the name of any institution or organization that sponsors the site, the date you accessed each source, and the URL address for each source.

You may find that some of the requested information about an electronic source is not listed on the site; therefore, cite whatever information is available. The URL address and date you accessed the site are always available and must always be cited. A complete entry follows this order:

Author's name (last name first). "Title of Document." Information about print publication. Information about electronic publication.
Access information.

Example of an article that was first published in print but you found online:

Zeki, Semir. "Artistic Creativity and the Brain." *Science* 6 July 2001: 51-52.
article title, quotes magazine title, date, page no.
Science Magazine. 2002. Amer. Assn. for the Advancement of
website sponsoring organization
Science. 24 Sept. 2002. [date you accessed source](http://www.sciencemag.org/cgi/content/full/293/5527/51)
<<http://www.sciencemag.org/cgi/content/full/293/5527/51>>
date you accessed source URL address inside brackets

Example of an article published only online (with no author listed):

"This Day in History: August 20." *History Channel.Com*. 2003. [date of electronic publication or last update](http://www.historychannel.com/tarih/)
article title, quotes website title
A&E Television Networks. 8 May 2003
sponsoring organization date you accessed source
<<http://www.historychannel.com/tarih/>>
URL address inside brackets

Citing Documents from Media Center Subscribed Services

Joel Barlow High School's Library Media Center offers a variety of Internet-subscribed database services such as EBSCO, ProQuest, and SIRS which students can use for Internet research and access through the school's web site. Use "Find It All" to search all of these services at once.

As with any outside resource, you must cite the documents you find through these services if you use language or ideas from them in your own paper. For in-text citations, where you credit your sources immediately following a direct quotation or paraphrased material, include the author's last name in parentheses. If the document has no author listed, instead use the title of the document. You may abbreviate long titles.

Use the following format when including a document from a subscribed service on your Works Cited page. Begin with information about the original print publication, then list the name of the subscribed service, the name of the library or library system, and the date you accessed the document. End with the URL of the service's home page in angle brackets.

Example of an article found online via the Media Center:

Koretz, Gene. "Economic Trends: Uh-Oh, Warm Water." *Business Week* 21
author article title in quotes magazine title, date, page no.
July 1997: 22. Electric Lib. Joel Barlow High School Media Center.
subscribed service library offering subscribed service
17 Oct. 2003 <<http://www.elibrary.com/>>.
date you accessed main URL for service in angle brackets

Links to the Library Media Center's subscribed services can be found at the following URL address.

<http://www.er9.org/jbhs/LearningResources/learning.html>

Books and Pamphlets

List: the author's name, the title of the book or pamphlet, the city where it was published, the publishing company, and the year it was published.

Example of how to punctuate:

Vann, Ted. *Starflight Handbook*. New York: Orion, 1998.

If two or three authors: list second and third authors with first name first.

If four or more authors: list first author followed by "et al."

If no author: list editor followed by "ed." or begin with title.

If book is on a CD-ROM or cassette: after the title, include the words "read by" followed by the reader's name.

Work in a Collection

List: the author's name, the title of the piece, the title of the collection, the editor preceded by "Ed.", the city where it was published, the publishing company, the year it was published, and the page number(s) of the piece.

Example of how to punctuate:

Plath, Sylvia. "Mirror." *The Harper Anthology of Poetry*. Ed. John Frederick Nims. New York: Harper, 1981. 753.

If no author: begin with title of the piece.

Magazine Articles

List: the author's name, the title of the article, the name of the magazine, the issue date, and the page number(s). (Do not place punctuation between the magazine name and issue date.)

Example of how to punctuate:

Magnusson, E. "Baseball's Drug Scandal." *Time* 16 Sept. 1985: 26-28.

Newspaper Articles

List: the author's name, the title of the article, the name of the newspaper, the edition date, the section number, and the page number(s). (No punctuation between the newspaper name and issue date.)

Example of how to punctuate:

Emmons, Mark. "Playing Hurt." *Detroit Free Press* 25 July 1996, F1, 10.

If more than one edition for that date: list the name of the edition before the section number (example: city ed. or late ed.).

Film or Video

List: the title, the director's name preceded by "Dir.", the distributor, and the year distributed.

Example of how to punctuate:

It's a Wonderful Life. Dir. Frank Capra. RKO, 1946.

Television or Radio Program

List: the title of the episode, the title of the program, the title of series (if any), the name of the network, the call letters and city of local station (if any), and the broadcast date.

Example of how to punctuate:

Middlemarch. *Masterpiece Theatre*. PBS. WGBH. Boston.
10 Apr.-15 May 1994.

Personal Interview

List: the interviewee with his or her title, the words "Interview by author" next, the date of the interview, and the location of the interview.

Example of how to punctuate:

Weicker, Lowell, U.S. Senator. Interview by author. 9 Sept. 1988, Easton.

IN-TEXT CITATIONS

When you copy someone else's exact words, it is a direct quotation. You must put the words in quotation marks and cite the source. When you write in your own words about someone else's ideas, it is paraphrasing. You must cite the source when paraphrasing as well. You cite your sources for quotations and paraphrased ideas by including brief in-text citations in your paper that correspond to a Works Cited list at the end of your paper. Citations generally include the author's last name and the page number. If there is no author, use the first few words of the title. Citations go inside parentheses.

Example with author's name included in your sentence:

At the conclusion of *Lord of the Flies*, William Golding writes that Ralph is overcome by "...shuddering spasms of grief that seemed to wrench his whole body" (186).

Example without author's name included in your sentence:

At the conclusion of *Lord of the Flies*, Ralph experiences "...shuddering spasms of grief that seemed to wrench his whole body" (Golding 186).

Example of paraphrasing:

At the conclusion of *Lord of the Flies*, Ralph cries uncontrollably as his emotions absolutely overtake him (Golding 186).

Example of lengthy quotation:

At the conclusion of *Lord of the Flies*, Ralph and the other boys realize the horror of their actions:

The tears began to flow and sobs shook him. He gave himself up to them now for the first time on the island; great, shuddering spasms of grief that seemed to wrench his whole body. His voice rose under the black smoke before the burning wreckage of the island; and infected with that emotion, the other little boys began to shake and sob too. (Golding 186)

PREPARING A WORKS CITED/WORKS CONSULTED LIST

The Works Cited list is an alphabetical listing of all the sources you cited within your paper. Your in-text citations should correspond directly to this list. The following pages outline the format for this list and give examples of the most common citations you will use at Barlow. Because of the complexities of MLA format and style (especially when it comes to citing online sources), we have made our best effort with these examples based on current standards. We ask students to do the same.

If your teacher requires it, important sources you read and used while researching your topic but did not cite within your paper should appear on a separate page (titled: Works Consulted) after your Works Cited. Other than the page title, the following format is the same for a Works Consulted.

center and bold title

double spaced

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Works Cited

Britt, Albert. *Great Indian Chiefs*. New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1969.

Drake, Benjamin. *Mass Violence in America, Life of Tecumseh*. New York: Arno Press & The New York Times, 1969.

Eckert, Allan W. *A Sorrow in our Heart, The Life of Tecumseh*. New York: Bantam Books, 1992.

Edmunds, David R. *Tecumseh and the Quest for Indian Leadership*. USA: Harper Collins Publishers, 1984.

"Great American Native American Leaders." 5 May 2001. <<http://members.tripod.com/~RFester/chiefs.html>>.

Mintz, Steven. *Native American Voices*. New York: Brandywine Press, 1995.

The Shawnee Prophet. USA: University of Nebraska Press, 1985.

double space

type first line a margin indent following lines 1/2 inch

arrange your entries in alphabetical order; do not number them

indent quotes of 4 lines or more 1 inch from left margin

no quotation marks