Style – A few lessons in clarity and grace

Holger Karl
Holger.karl@upb.de
Goals of this chapter

- This chapter is about constructing (writing) texts “in the small”
  - How to form sentences
  - How to form paragraphs
  - How to pinpoint and achieve readable prose

- It is about principles, not prescriptions
  - Not meant as rules
  - Help in predicting how readers will react to your writing
  - Incentive to act on those predictions

- Overall: Sharpen awareness of language
  - “It is good to write clearly, and anyone can.” (J. Williams)
Overview

• Understanding style
• Correctness
• Clarity & actions
• Clarity & characters
• Clarity, cohesion & coherence
• Clarity & emphasis
Material

  • Highly recommended!
  • Almost all the material here is verbatim quoted from Williams’ book!

• Also useful
  • W. Schneider, *Deutsch für Kenner*
  • B. Sick, *Der Dativ ist dem Genitiv sein Tod*
  • … and many more
Principles and aims

• Compare two sentences
  • “An understanding of the causal factors involved in excessive drinking by soccer fans could lead to their more effective treatment.”
  • “We could more effectively treat soccer fans who drink excessively if we understood why they do.”

• How to get from the first sentence to the second sentence?
  • Or avoid writing sentences like the first one in the first place
  • This is “writing in the small”
  • “Writing in the big”, on the other hand
    • Organize ideas clearly
    • Give structure to the overall text
    • Address valid questions & objections of readers
Unclear writing

• A problem with a history

• “If use and custom, having the help of so long time and continuance wherein to refine our tongue, of so great learning and experience which furnish matter for the refining, of so good wits and judgments which can tell how to refine, have griped at nothing in all that time, with all that cunning, by al those wits which they will not let go but hold for most certain in the right of our writing, that then our tongue has no certainty to trust to, but write all at random.”

R. Mulcaster, The First Part of the Elementary, 1582
Common sense

• Yet some people knew how to write even in the past:

“In the following pages I offer nothing more that simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense.”

Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, 1776
Bureaucratese

• Such preparation shall be made as will completely obscure all federal and non-federal buildings occupied by the federal government during an air raid for any period of time from visibility by reason of internal or external illumination. Such obscuration may be obtained either by blackout construction or by termination of the illumination.

• Revision (Franklin D. Roosevelt): Tell them that in buildings where they have to keep the work going to put something over the windows; and, in buildings where they can let the work stop for awhile, turn out the lights.
The language of sciences

• A turgid and polysyllabic prose does seem to prevail in the social sciences… Such a lack of ready intelligibility, I believe, usually has little or nothing to do with the complexity of thought. It has to do almost entirely with certain confusions of the academic writer about his own status.

  C. W. Mills, The Sociological Imagination

• It now appears that obligatory obfuscation is a firm tradition within the medical profession … [Medical writing] is a highly skilled, calculated attempt to confuse the reader… A doctor feels he might get passed over for an assistant professorship because he wrote his papers too clearly – because he made his ideas seem too simple.

  M. Chrichton, New England Journal of Medicine

• There are times when the more the authors explain [about ape communication], the less we understand. Apes certainly seem capable of using language to communicate. Whether scientists are remains doubtful.

  D. Chadwick, New York Times
Confusion in textbooks

• Textbook on translations (!):
  Recognition of the fact that systems [of grammar] differ from one language to another can serve as the basis for serious consideration of the problems confronting translators of the great works of world literature originally written in a language other than English.

• Simpler (in half as many words):
  When we recognize that languages have different grammars, we can consider the problems of those who translate great works of literature into English.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text von Jürgen Habermas</th>
<th>„Übersetzung“ von Karl Popper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Theorien sind Ordnungsschemata, die wir in einem syntaktisch verbindlichen Rahmen beliebig konstruieren.</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Sie erweisen sich für einen speziellen Gegenstandsbereich dann als brauchbar, wenn sich ihnen die reale Mannigfaltigkeit fügt.</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Zitiert nach Schneider, *Deutsch für Kenner*
Private causes of unclear writing

- Try to impress (confuse?) people with a dense style to hide the lack of thought
- Fear of grammatical subtleness
- Writing about a poorly understood topic
- Time limits – not enough time to revise a text
  - Few people get it right the first time; writing is re-writing!
- Ignorance – of the reader and his needs
  - We read in our own writing what we want it to mean, not what it actually does mean
  - First lesson: Read your own writing as others would

- Writing in a foreign language
  - False friends, bad dictionaries, incorrect figures of speech, unfamiliar idioms, grammatical problems, …
Overview

• Understanding style
• **Correctness**
• Clarity & actions
• Clarity & characters
• Clarity, cohesion & coherence
• Clarity & emphasis
Correctness

- In some matters of correctness, there is no choice
  - Firm rules of any given language
  - Either right or wrong
  - Example: “Book the is the on table”
- Some rules distinguish Standard English from nonstandard variations
  - “He don’t have no money”
- Other “rules”: pliable, arguable!
  - “Do not split infinitives”
  - Are these rules, customs, or artifacts of some grammarian’s mind?
  - Many of these rules appeared out of thin air in grammar books, often in last half of 18th century
  - Only established use by respected writers is a guideline here – often making these rules void
  - These “rules” require some experience, taste, courage to break them
Invented rules – Folklore

• Few readers will notice or even care (except some bone-dry grammarians)

• Examples
  • “Don’t begin sentences with and, but, or because.”
  • “Use the relative pronoun that, not which, for restrictive clauses.”

One of the most common mistakes for German native speakers!

• Restrictive clause: A relative clause that defines and cannot be left out without corrupting the sentence’s meaning.
• Non-restrictive clause: A clause, which is not really needed, that adds more information to the sentence and can be left out without harm.
• Non-restrictive clauses always require which
• Punctuation: restrictive clauses no comma, non-restrictive clauses require a comma

• “Use fewer with nouns you count, less with nouns you can’t.”

• These rules are essentially bunk!
Invented rules – Options

• Examples
  • “Do not split infinitives”
    • “To go boldly where nobody has gone before.”
    ✓ Nonsense – “To boldly go where nobody has gone before.”
  • “Use whom as object of a verb or a preposition”
  • “Do not end a sentence with a preposition”
    • The peculiarities of a legal English are often used as a stick to beat the official with.
    • … a stick with which to beat … - correct but formal
    • “This is the sort of nonsense up with which I will not put.” (Churchill?)
    • “The man I spoke with was the man I had written to.”
      • Formal version: “The man with whom I spoke was the man to whom I had written.”
  • “Use the singular with none and any”
    • None of the reasons are sufficient to end the project.
    • None of the reasons is sufficient to end the project.
    • Both correct
Some words to watch out for

- Some words have specific meanings, but are often confused
  - Not only by non-native speakers
- Singular and plural (often for Latinate nouns)
  - Datum/data, Criterion/criteria, medium/media, phenomenon/phenomena
- Use good one-language dictionaries!!
  - Not the nonsense found on leo.org; sadly, it often gives wrong connotations
  - American Heritage or Oxford are good sources

Examples

- Aggravate (not annoy)
- Anticipate (not just expect)
- Anxious (not eager)
- Comprise
- Continuous (not continual)
- Disinterested (not uninterested)
- Enormity (not enormous)
- Fortuitous (not fortunate)
- Notorious (not famous)
- Imply, infer
- Principal, principle
- Accept, except
- Affect, effect
- Proceed, precede
- Discrete, discreet
Pronouns & numbers

• Basic rule: Verbs agree in number with subjects
  • Peter *is* a boy. Dogs *are* animals.

• What about pronouns? Have to agree with noun they replace
  • Wrong: Early *efforts* to oppose the hydrogen bomb failed because *it* ignored political issues. *No one* wanted to expose *themselves* to anti-Communist hysteria.
  • Correct: Early *efforts* to oppose the hydrogen bomb failed because *they* ignored political issues. *No one* wanted to expose *himself* to anti-Communist hysteria.
Pronouns & numbers

• Problem 1: noun singular in grammar, plural in meaning?
  • The *committee* has met but has not yet made *its* decision.
  • The *faculty* have the memo, but not all of *them* have read it yet.
  • Both uses are acceptable – one refers to the entity as a whole, the other to the set of its members

• Related issue: a number of / the number of …
  • A *number of* students *object* to the grading of the example.
  • The *number of* students *is* high this year.

• Problem 2: which pronoun for someone, everyone, … or words with no gender indication?
  • *Everyone* realizes that *he* must be responsible for *himself*.
  • When *a person* is on drugs, it is hard to help *her*.
  • When *a node* in a network is done, *it* cannot receive packets.
    • Auf gar keinen Fall “he” – das ist ein “germanism”
Pronouns & numbers & sexism

• Problem in previous examples: English lacks a gender-neutral singular pronoun
  • Plural pronoun “they” is gender-neutral, but cannot be used because of number agreement
  • Always using “he” can be considered sexist
  • Clumsy “she or he”, “his or her” constructions are not satisfactory

• Revise
  • Use plurals instead of singular
    • When *writers* ignore the ethnicity of *their readers*, *they* may respond ...
      • But. Ambiguity can arise – does “they” refer to readers or writers?
  • Try a first-person construction: “If we ignore the ethnic …”
  • Use plural pronouns where singular is actually required (?)
    • *No one* should turn in *their* writing unedited.
Overview

- Understanding style
- Correctness
- **Clarity & actions**
- Clarity & characters
- Clarity, cohesion & coherence
- Clarity & emphasis

Alles was überhaupt gedacht werden kann, kann klar gedacht werden.

Alles was sich aussprechen läßt, läßt sich klar aussprechen.

Ludwig Wittgenstein
Telling stories: characters & actions

• 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 freight.

• 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.
Use characters as subjects
Telling stories: characters & actions

• 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.

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

Predicates

Actions

walk

causing

was walking

jumped

frightened
Use actions as predicates
Exercise

• Rephrase:
The Federalists’ argument in regard to the destabilization of government by popular democracy was based on their belief in the tendency of factions to further their self-interest at the expense of the common good.

• Possible solution:
The Federalists argued that popular democracy destabilized government, because they believed that factions tended to further their self-interest at the expense of the common good.
Nominalization

• Rephrase:
  Our lack of data prevented evaluation of UN actions in targeting funds to areas most in need of assistance.

• Possible reformulation:
  Because we lacked data, we could not evaluate whether the UN had targeted funds to areas that most needed assistance.

• Action is hidden in a nominalization
  • Verbs or adjectives turned into nouns
Actions in adjectives

• Problem: Action hidden in adjectives

• Rephrase:
The data are indicative of the problem

• Possible reformulation:
The data indicate the problem

• Other examples
  • “is applicable” → applies
  • “is dependent” → depends
  • “is deserving” → deserves
Exercise – Subject/character & predicate/action patterns

• There is opposition among many voters to nuclear power plants based on a belief of their threat to human health.

• Many voters oppose nuclear power plants because they believe that such plants threaten human health.
Curing the problem

• Diagnose – analyze – revise

• Some common patterns
  • Subject is nominalization, followed by empty verb
    “The intention of the committee is to audit the records.”
  • Nominalization follows “there is” or “there are”
    “There is no need for our further study of this problem.”
  • Nominalization + be/seems/has the result + nominalization
    “Their loss in sales was a result of their competitors’ expansion of outlets.”
  • Unspecific verb + nominalization
    “The agency conducted an investigation into the matter.”
Exercise – Revise

• There has been speculation by educators as to the role of a good family environment in the improvement of educational achievement
  • Educators have speculated that a good family environment improves educational achievement.

• There were predications by business executives that the economy would experience a quick revival.
  • Business executives predicted that the economy would revive quickly.
Overview

• Understanding style
• Correctness
• Clarity & actions
• Clarity & characters
• Clarity, cohesion & coherence
• Clarity & emphasis
Characters as subjects

- Recall: Use characters as subjects

- Question: how to find characters, how to turn them into subjects?
Example: unburying characters

- Example:
  Governmental intervention in fast changing technologies has resulted in distortions of market evolution or interference in the development of new products.

- Unbury:
  governmental intervention → The government intervenes
distortion → Government distorts
market evolution → markets evolve
interference → Government interfere
the development of new → market develops new products
Reconstructing absent characters

• Characters can be entirely deleted:
  A decision was made in favor of doing a study of the disagreements.

Who made the decision, who studies anything here? !?!?!?

• Re-introduce the actual characters again!

• Example:
  There are good reasons that account for the lack of evidence. →
  I can explain why I have not found any evidence.
Exercise

- Revise:
  Decisions about forcibly administering medication in an emergency room setting despite the inability of an irrational patient to provide legal consent is usually an on-scene medical decision.

- Possible revision (invent characters!):
  When doctors decide in an emergency room to forcibly administer medication to an irrational patient who cannot provide legal consent, they usually decide based on on-scene medical reasons.
Characters and passive voice

- Active: I lost the money.
  Passive: The money was lost by me.

- In addition: grammatically active sentences that “feel” passive because of nominalizations
  - We investigated why they interviewed so few minority applicants.
  - We conducted an investigation into why they did so few interviews of minority applicants.
  - An investigation was conducted into why so few interviews were done.
How to choose between active and passive

- Must readers know who is responsible for the action?
  - “The president was rumored to have considered resigning.” – who spreads the rumor is not the point of the sentence!

- Would the active or passive verb help your readers move smoothly from one sentence to the next?
  - Beginning of sentence should give context of what is to come
  - New information at start can be confusing
  - “We must decide whether to improve education in the sciences alone or to raise the level of education across the whole curriculum. *The weight* given to industrial competitiveness and the value we attach to the liberal arts will influence *this decision*.”
  - “We must decide whether to improve education in the sciences alone or to raise the level of education across the whole curriculum. *This decision* will be influenced by the weight given to industrial competitiveness and the value we attach to the liberal arts.”
How to choose between active and passive

• Would the active or passive give your readers a more consistent and appropriate point of view?
  • For example, perspective when telling a story

• Do no overly depend on the passive voice
  • But it does have its legitimate uses!
The so-called “objective” passive

• Scientific prose is cursed by seemingly “objective” passive sentences
  • Experiments were done (by some mysterious entity), simulations were performed, …
• First person active voice (both “I” and “we”) are perfectly legitimate in scientific writing
  • Usually in metadiscourse – writing about thinking & writing, writer’s
  • Do not overuse it for hedges and intensifiers (I think, feel, believe)
• Typical first person use
  • “We, the authors” or “I, the author” – always acceptable
  • “We, you the reader and I the author” – mostly acceptable, but be careful
  • “We, the community of sages and savants” – usually objectionable
Exercise – Rephrase

• It is believed that a lack of understanding about the risks of alcohol is a cause of student bingeing.

• The creation of a database is being considered, but no estimate has been made in regard to the potential of its usefulness.
Overview

• Understanding style
• Correctness
• Clarity & actions
• Clarity & characters
• Clarity, cohesion & coherence
• Clarity & emphasis
Clarity versus coherence

• See distributed text example

• **Cohesion:** Sequence of sentences are *cohesive*, depending on how each sentence ends and the next one begins

• **Coherence:** Whole passage is *coherent*, depending on how all sentences in a passage cumulatively begin
Cohesion – A sense of flow

- Cohesion is about maintaining flow of text over several sentences
- Example:
  - Some astonishing questions about the nature of the universe have been raised by scientists studying black holes in space. *The collapse of a dead star into a point perhaps no larger than a marble creates a black hole.*
  
  So much matter compressed into so little volume changes the fabric of space around it in puzzling ways.
  
  - Some astonishing questions about the nature of the universe have been raised by scientists studying black holes in space. *A black hole is created by the collapse of a dead star into a point perhaps no larger than a marble.*
  
  So much matter compressed into so little volume changes the fabric of space around it in puzzling ways.
Cohesion – First principle

• Sentence is cohesive with following sentence when second one takes up information that appeared at the end of the previous one.

• First principle of cohesion:

  Begin sentences with information familiar to your readers.
Cohesion – Second principle

- Flip side of the first principle: how to *end* a sentence?
- Second principle of cohesion:
  
  *End sentences with information readers cannot anticipate.*

- Think of cohesion as fitting together two Lego blocks
Exercise

• Two aims – the recovery of the American economy and the modernization of America into a military power – were in Reagan’s mind when he assumed the office of the presidency. The drop in unemployment figures and inflation, and the increase in the GNP testifies to his success in the first. But our increased involvement in international conflict without any clear set of political goals indicates less success with the second. Nevertheless, vast increases in the military budget and a good deal of saber rattling pleased the American voters.
Coherence – the bigger picture

- Cohesive sequences are Lego blocks fitting together
- How to turn them into Lego bridges, castles, … ?
  → Coherence

- For coherence, readers need to quickly find
  - Topics of individual sentences and clauses
    - Essential: grammatical subjects and content-wise topics should coincide
  - How the topics in a whole passage constitute a related set of concepts
Coherence – Example

• The particular ideas toward the beginning of sentences define what a passage is “about” for a reader. Moving through a paragraph from a cumulatively coherent point of view is made possible by a sequence of topics that seem to constitute a limited set of related ideas. A seeming absence of context for each sentence is one consequence of making random shifts in topic. Feelings of dislocation, disorientation, and lack of focus in a passage occur when that happens.
Coherence – Example

• **Readers** look for the topics of sentences to tell them what a whole passage is “about”. If **they** feel that its sequence of topics focuses on a limited set of related topics, then **they** will feel they are moving through that passage from a cumulatively coherent point of view. But if **topics** seem to shift randomly, then the **readers** have to begin each sentence from no coherent point of view, and when that happens, **readers** feel dislocated, disoriented, and the **passage** seems out of focus.

• Topics in this paragraph are ONLY “topics” and “readers”
Exercise – Go for coherence

• **Vegetation** covers the earth, except for those areas continuously covered with ice or utterly scorched by continual heat. Richly fertilized plains and river valleys are places where **plants** grow most richly, but also at the edge of perpetual snow in high mountains. The ocean and its edges as well as in and around lakes and swamps are **densely vegetated**. The cracks of busy city sidewalks have **plants** in them as well as in seemingly barren cliffs. Before humans existed, the earth was covered with **vegetation**, and the earth will have **vegetation** long after evolutionary history swallows us up.
Starting a sentence – Throat-clearing

• A sentence like:

And, therefore, politically speaking, in Eastern states since 1980, **acid rain** has become a serious problem
  • *Topic* far too late, after bloated phrases

• Revise:

Since 1980, therefore, **acid rain** has become a serious political problem in Eastern states.
Faked coherence

• One attempt to fake coherence:
  Put in phrases like thus, therefore, however, and, moreover, …

• Drop it, rely on intrinsic logic of a flow
  • Use a but, however when you contradict or qualify what you said
  • Use a therefore, consequently, …
  • But sparingly!
Overview

- Understanding style
- Correctness
- Clarity & actions
- Clarity & characters
- Clarity, cohesion & coherence
- Clarity & emphasis
Clarity & complexity

- Complex versus “simple” sentence structure

A sociometric and acturial analysis of Social Security revenues and disbursements for the last six decades to determine changes in projecting deficits is the subject of this study.

In this study, we analyze Social Security’s revenues and disbursements for the last six decades, using sociometric and acturial criteria to determine changes in projecting deficits.
Two kinds of complexity

- Two main types of complexity in sentences
  - Complex grammar
  - Complex, unfamiliar terms

- Move complex phrases & new information/technical terms towards the end of a sentence
Sentence layout

- Basic sentence layout

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Stress</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Short, simple, familiar</td>
<td>New, long, complex</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Rhetorical emphasis is on the end of a sentence
Managing endings for emphasis

• Tactical revisions
  • Trim the end
  • Shift peripheral ideas to the left
  • Shift new information to the right

• Syntactic devices
  • Use passives if it lets you move important parts to the right
  • There is/there are construction
  • “what” shift: What we need is a monetary policy that …
  • “it shift”: It once seemed inevitable…
  • Not only X, but Y – “but” puts emphasis
  • Repeated words and pronoun substitution
Exercises

• Emphasize the boldface phrases:

• The judiciary’s tendency to **rewrite the Constitution** is the biggest danger to the nation, in my opinion, at least.

• A new political philosophy that could affect our society **well into the twenty-first century** may emerge from these studies.
Conclusions

• These slides should give some rough guidelines for recognizing problematic texts

• The only real help is practice, practice, practice
  • In reading text as well as in writing/revising text

• Many finer points still to be covered
  • Strive for grace, not just clarity or coherence