

# The Writing Centre at



Support and advice for all  
kinds of writing

- ? Writing workshops
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## **Common problems**

1. Long sentences, often trying to cover several points

### **Example – how not to do it**

‘Writing in short sentences is very important because if you do not do this your reader will find it very difficult to follow your line of argument and therefore they may become confused meaning that your writing is not as effective as it should be meaning that your marks may not be as good as they ought to be.’

### **Example – how to fix it**

‘Writing in short sentences is very important. If you write in long sentences your reader will find it very difficult to follow your line of argument. Therefore your reader may become confused. This means that your writing is not as effective as it should be. The result is that your marks may not be as good as they ought to be.’

**Solution:** Use shorter sentences, each dealing with one main point. Make each sentence serve a precise purpose.

## 2. Verbiage (unnecessary padding-out of sentences)

### **Example – how not to do it**

‘Obfuscation, ambiguity, lack of clarity, waffle and other things can lead to the central idea getting lost in irrelevant, unnecessary and extraneous detail that is of no consequence, account or relevance to the central tenet or thesis of what it is that you are actually attempting to communicate or get across to those people who may cast their eyes across the fruits of your academic efforts.’

### **Example – how to fix it**

‘Lack of clarity can lead to the central idea getting lost in unnecessary detail that is of no relevance to what you are attempting to communicate to your reader.’

**Solution:** use the fewest number of words necessary to express the meaning precisely. (Unnecessary words can be interpreted in a way the writer had not intended – be careful!)

### 3. Confusion (where is this sentence going?)

#### **Example – how not to do it**

‘While it could be argued that Jones’s theory (2002) is useful in addressing this situation, it is important to bear in mind that Smith’s theory (1970) is also relevant, although Smith’s work is now over 30 years old and therefore it could be argued that it is no longer as relevant as Jones’s more recent work it is still helpful in a number of ways and we also need to think about what Marsh (2000) has to say on the matter because Marsh’s thinking has been very influential in this area, especially in relation to Johnson’s recent publication (2004).’

## **Example – how to fix it**

‘There are four main theorists whose work needs to be considered. Jones’s theory (2002) is useful in addressing this situation. However, it is important to bear in mind that Smith’s theory (1970) is also relevant. Smith’s work is now over 30 years old and therefore it could be argued that it is no longer as relevant as Jones’s more recent work. Nevertheless, it is still helpful in a number of ways. We also need to think about what Marsh (2000) has to say on the matter because Marsh’s thinking has been very influential in this area, especially in relation to Johnson’s recent publication (2004).’

**Solution:** Get your ideas clear in your mind before you start to write. Ask yourself ‘what am I trying to say?’ and then ‘have I said it as clearly as possible?’

## 4. Over formality

### **Example – how not to do it**

‘Thus, as has hitherto been extrapolated, one might be so bold as to assert that this is indeed the case.’

### **Example – how to fix it**

‘It could therefore be argued that this is correct.’

**Solution:** use the simplest word that expresses the meaning precisely. For example, why say ‘seating apparatus’ when ‘chair’ would do just as well? However, sometimes a complex or unfamiliar word will be the best word for the job.

## **It is not all about you!**

Do not make statements you cannot justify. Unless you are a famous Professor, you cannot get away with stating your personal opinion and leaving it at that. Everything you say must be justified with evidence or a quotation from another academic or researcher in your field. The ability to weave sources, quotations and other people's ideas (properly referenced!) into your writing is one of the most important aspects of academic writing.



## **And finally - the 'so what?' factor**

Facts do not speak for themselves. Nor will most of the people reading your work have psychic abilities. If you quote someone, or refer to a source, you must explain why. What does it add to your argument? Think of the materials you refer to as bricks. Your argument is the mortar that holds them together. It is not what you know, but how you use it to build an argument and reach a conclusion. Use facts and evidence selectively. Use them to prove a point or develop an argument – go somewhere!