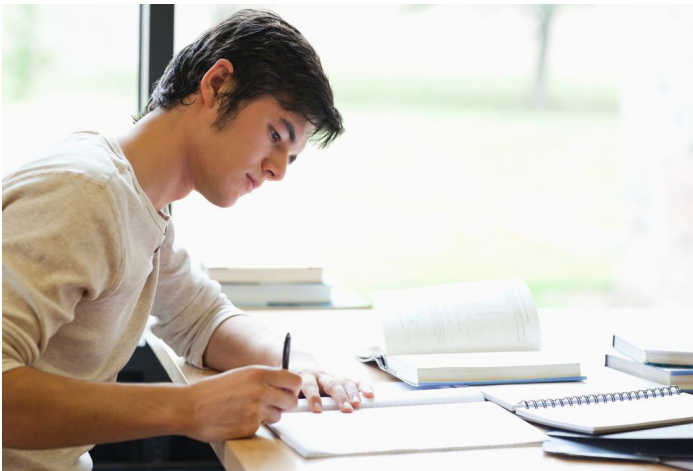

5 strategies for writing simply: Focusing on ideas first



Writers new to English begin by learning very simple sentence structures. These structures are used to express ideas in straightforward ways, but do not allow for much complexity. Because of this, they are often regarded as “low-level” English.

In school, native and non-native speakers of English are encouraged to use more “sophisticated” written English to reflect their growing proficiency in the language. Sophisticated language is especially important to use when trying to pass standardized tests of English. Using only “simple” sentence structures will result in a low score. This situation encourages the idea that more complicated grammar is evidence of more elevated thought. At universities around the world, students are taught to write

with “powerful” words and “complex” grammatical structures.

Of course, using more complex, sophisticated English is not a bad thing in itself, but it can make complex ideas more difficult for less proficient readers to understand. This is particularly important to consider when we are writing up our research, because we often need to express complex ideas and arguments clearly. Writing in a simple way lets us distinguish between complexity of *expression* and complexity of *meaning*.

In this article, we’ll look at some of the ways to write simply but still with authority in your field.

It is easy to write simple things simply. It is a bit harder to write simple things in complicated ways, but there are many courses that teach students how to do this. And, of course, most complex subjects will be written about in complicated and complex ways. Why? Because it is very difficult to write about complex subjects simply.

There are, however, some writing strategies to make your writing simpler without sacrificing your ideas.

We discuss 5 writing strategies below. We’ll return with more strategies in later articles.

5 strategies for writing simply but authoritatively

- 1) Use simpler words and phrases
- 2) Minimize the number of negatives in a sentence
- 3) Write shorter sentences, but avoid choppiness
- 4) Use important key terms consistently
- 5) Balance the use of simple and sophisticated language

1. Use simpler words and phrases

It's obvious that using simpler words while keeping the same sentence structure results in simpler writing. What's not obvious is that the more complicated words and phrases can sometimes mean something *different* than what they seem to mean.

The following table gives some examples. Each row of the table shows two words or phrases, one "high-level" and one "low-level", that can be found in the academic literature and notes any differences in use or meaning.

High-level word/phrase	Low-level word/phrase
<i>Utilize/utilization</i> : To <i>utilize</i> a thing is to derive <i>utility</i> (or value) from it. The <i>utilization</i> of a vehicle is a measure of how much value the vehicle provides, and how.	<i>Use</i> : To <i>use</i> a thing is to derive some <i>use</i> (or capability) from it. The <i>use</i> of a vehicle allows traveling to places that might otherwise be inaccessible.
<i>Heretofore</i> : Until the 1980s, "heretofore" was actually more common than "until now", and "until" was 150 times as common as "heretofore".	<i>Until now</i> : One advantage of using "until now" is that it becomes easier to create parallel structure by writing, for example, "until 20 years ago..., until 5 years ago..., until now..."
<i>A great number of</i>	<i>Many</i>
<i>Not only A but also B</i>	<i>A and B</i>

2. Minimize the number of negatives in a sentence

Sometimes, we need to write about what is not possible. However, whenever a negative form (not, un-, im-) is used, the reader must mentally "flip" the meaning of the statement as they read along. Although this is quite easy when only one or perhaps two negatives are used, any more than this increases the cognitive load on the reader and makes the sentence more difficult to understand. Consider the following example.

A statistical test did **not** reject the null hypothesis, and so the hypothesis that students **can****not** perform as well when they do **not** have less expensive sporting equipment was **not** supported.

The phrase "did not reject the null hypothesis" is a standard statistical phrase, but it is only the first of several negative statements. In many cases, pairs of negative statements can cancel each other out to form a positive statement: "was not impossible" can become "was possible", "stopped being impermeable" can become "became permeable", and so on. Eliminating negative phrases in this way improves clarity:

A statistical test did **not** reject the null hypothesis, and so it is **unc**lear whether student performance is improved by using more expensive sporting equipment.

The second part of the sentence now has only one negative phrase, making it easier to read without sacrificing meaning.

3. Write shorter sentences, but avoid chopiness

Shorter sentences are usually easier to read. However, when taken to extremes, writing shorter sentences leads to very choppy writing. Ideally, the sentences used should be a *mix of long and short*. The best balance differs between fields, but an interesting and novel idea written in short, simple sentences is more readable than the same idea written in long sentences. Err on the side of brevity.

Here are some examples of when shorter sentences are clearer.

Long sentence

We heated the sample to 100 °C, after which we kept it at that temperature for 2 h and then cooled it for 1 h before assessing crystallization.

Because substitute teachers often work with students without knowing what those students actually know as they have not been teaching them throughout the year, they are likely to be worse at assessing student performance.

Compact cars and commercial delivery trucks are smaller and larger than average-sized vehicles and therefore require less and more resources, respectively.

Shorter sentences

We heated the sample to 100 °C and kept it at that temperature for 2 h. We then cooled it for 1 h and assessed crystallization.

Substitute teachers often work with students without knowing what those students actually know. This is because the substitute teachers do not teach the students throughout the year. Because of this, they are likely to be worse at assessing student performance.

Compact cars are smaller than average-sized vehicles and therefore require less resources. In contrast, commercial delivery trucks are larger than average and require more resources.

But, as we've said before, balance is key! Too many short sentences in succession creates chopiness in your writing and can make the writing seem too simple.

As a rule of thumb, limit the number of new ideas in a sentence to one or two. Using two ideas in a sentence creates a sense of rhythm and progression that can be lacking when using only one idea per sentence. One simple way to spot areas that can be smoothed is to look for sentences that have the same grammatical subject.

Here are some examples of successive short sentences that can be improved by combining them.

Short sentence

We heated the sample to 100 °C. We kept it at that temperature for 2 h. We cooled it for 1 h. We assessed crystallization.

Substitute teachers often work with students they have not been teaching throughout the year. Substitute teachers often do not know what the students know. Substitute teachers are likely to be worse at assessing student performance.

Compact cars are smaller than average-sized vehicles. Commercial delivery trucks are larger than average-sized vehicles. Compact cars require less resources than average-sized vehicles. Commercial delivery trucks require more resources than average-sized vehicles.

Longer sentences

We heated the sample to 100 °C and kept it at that temperature for 2 h. We then cooled it for 1 h and assessed crystallization.

Substitute teachers often work with students without knowing what those students actually know. This is because the substitute teachers do not teach the students throughout the year. Because of this, they are likely to be worse at assessing student performance.

Compact cars are smaller than average-sized vehicles and therefore require less resources. In contrast, commercial delivery trucks are larger than average and require more resources.

4. Use key terms consistently

Generally, fluent speakers of a language have more words available to them, and they often know many different ways to express the same idea. Especially in literary writing, such as in fiction, writers are encouraged to vary their prose by using many close synonyms, instead of repeating the same word many times.

However, research papers should be written with the primary aim of conveying the content, rather than showing off writing ability. Because the standard assumption in research papers is that technical terms will be used consistently, it can create confusion when the same idea is referred to with inconsistent terminology.

For example, “solar cells” and “photovoltaic cells” have the same meaning, but if you switch between them, you may unintentionally imply that they are different things. Especially when making a contrast—for example, “Increasing the efficiency of solar cells is an ongoing challenge. However, photovoltaic cells are a rapidly growing technology”—probably the reader will assume you are making a distinction between the two terms.

To avoid possible confusion, choose one word or phrase for each of the key concepts of your paper and use that word each time, rather than cycling among synonyms.

If more than one word/phrase is commonly used in your field, you can specify which one you are choosing where it first appears and list the other parenthetically on the first mention. Writing “Increasing the efficiency of solar cells (also known as photovoltaic cells) is...” will clarify that you will be using “solar cells” throughout, but also presents the alternative term clearly to readers. It also has the added benefit of keeping the alternative term in your paper for the purpose of text searches and web indexing.

By writing simply—focusing on ideas first and language only secondarily—authors at varying levels of skill can produce strong, clear, coherent papers. Simple writing can make the process of writing easier and improve the readability of the paper.

5. Balance the use of simple and sophisticated language

A simple way to use some sophisticated language in your writing while also keeping your concepts and arguments easy to understand is to use more complex connectors and transition words appropriate to your field. For example, “Because X occurred...” can become “*Given that* X occurred...”

Here, more “sophisticated” synonyms of connectors and transitions—but not of key technical terms—can be used in your writing. The key to their effective use is balancing clarity with authority so that your specialist readers, with different levels of English proficiency, can still understand your message quickly and clearly.

You can read more about this strategy in our article [“How to write authoritatively in your field from the outset.”](#)

Summary

Learning any language can be a daunting task. Even for native speakers, there is always more to learn. However, by writing simply—focusing on ideas first and language only secondarily—authors at varying levels of skill can produce strong, clear, coherent papers. Simple writing can make the process of writing easier and improve the readability of the paper.

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