Learning outcomes

By the end of this workshop you should have enhanced your ability to write clearly and coherently, and fine-tuned your editing skills.

Writing tips
Short, sharp and to the point

The examples that demonstrate the writing flaw they describe came from "Writing a report: A step-by-step guide to effective report writing" by John Bowden (1997, pp. 124-125).

Some other examples and general tips were from: "Brilliant writing tips for students" by Julia Copus (2009).

This session covers:

• Four writing style tips
• Sentence trouble
• Saying what you mean
  — Choosing words carefully
  — Using recap words
• What to check for when editing

1. First and foremost, avoid clichés like the plague

   — Bone of contention
   — Clear as mud
   — Movers and shakers
   — Rock and a hard place
   — Start from scratch

• Academic writing should be plain yet formal.
• Try the Is This Literally True? Test: was there a bone, was there any mud, were those researchers actually moving around the room and shaking?

2. Avoid abstract nouns, in truth they are not readily understood

Abstract nouns cannot be perceived by your five senses: you can’t see, hear, touch, smell or feel them.

Common ones from essays:
   — In truth...
   — In reality...
   — It is a well known fact...

• They come across as vague or as a way to promote your argument by implying accuracy or worth.
• Also in academia, they are often contested concepts:
   — there is no one version of what constitutes “truth”, or “reality” and even what is an “accurate fact” can be disputed.

Use your evidence and examples to prove your point

3. It is pathetic and criminal to use emotive language

Emotive or loaded language: Words that try and persuade the reader by appealing to emotion rather than reason
   — terrible
   — wonderful
   — appalling

Use evidence and examples to prove your point
4. Never use no double negatives

It was not the case that they never used the service...

- Bamboozling for the reader – try to avoid writing sentences that have to be read two or three times.
- Sometimes sentences get tangled when issues are phrased in the negative.

Saying what IS the case, rather than what isn’t, is often the best option.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sentences</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sentences need to make sense on their own.</td>
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<tr>
<td>A sentence needs two key pieces of information:</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Who or what is the sentence about (subject)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. What is the subject doing (main or finite verb)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do the sentence test: Look at your sentence in isolation. If you wrote your sentence on a wall, would it make sense by itself?</td>
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Sentence trouble

Too long: Once your sentence has stretched to three lines, stop and have a look.

- Is it too long? Too meandering. Are there too many ideas?
- Can you replace some commas with full stops?
- Can you cut any words out?

**Hamish bought several items from the supermarket, and then he carried the groceries home, when he got back and put the groceries away he realised that he’d forgotten the one thing he’d gone for, the cat food!**

Sentence trouble

Too short: Sentence fragments (incomplete sentences).

- Often sentence fragments are the tail ends of the sentence that have become detached.
Which nobody had ever heard of.

The final band in the line-up was a group called The Raucous Racoons, which nobody had ever heard of.

Write the worst sentences you can!

1. Write the worst longest sentence you possibly can. Meander, talk about too many topics, put in loads of commas when there should be full stops. Go to at least three lines (if not more!)

2. Write the worst shortest sentence fragment you can – must be longer than one word! (try writing a sentence and chopping the last half off).

Saying what you mean

Using recap words

- Sometimes we begin sentences with “that”, this”, or “it”
- Yet it’s not always clear what “that” (or “this” or “it”) IS
- Very common when we’ve shortened the sentences – which is good, just make sure you don’t lose any meaning
- Also sometimes occurs because the logic is clear in our head, but we haven’t made it explicit to others.

Recap words

The dog chased the cat around the house. This led to the vase being knocked over.

- “This led” – What led?

The dog chased the cat around the house. This incident led to the vase being knocked over.

- Often no one right answer
- Find a word that nicely “recaps” what you’re saying

Recap words – give it a go

The steps to resolving the issue involve clear communication and a willingness to forgive. This allows personnel to work effectively together.

- What is this? What allows?
- This process allows personnel to work effectively together.

Saying what you mean

Choosing words carefully

Verily it is incumbent upon you to avoid ensamples of archaic words.

- Deliberately choosing words because they sound “academic” will only detract from your writing.
- Sometimes we choose to add words to “pad” out assignments – if it’s waffly or unclear and you take ages to get to the point, you’ll lose marks!

Don’t be tempted to change every word to something else using the thesaurus. Don’t be enticed to vary all terms to yet another with the aid of the thesaurus:

- You can lose the meaning of what you’re saying and your writing can become clumsy.

Avoid words when you are unsure of their flotuberance.
Choosing words carefully

- Doesn’t mean you can’t use academic sounding words – you **should** be aiming to learn **new** words that capture:
  - the concepts and ideas of what you are learning
  - what you want to say

**New words open your mind to new ideas.**
- BUT: Make sure you know what the word means.
- AND: Make sure you are trying to capture what you want to say, and not simply trying to sound impressive (or adding waffle to boost the word count).

Editing – what to look for

- Don’t use contractions in formal writing.
- Avoid using the same words over and over again.
- Make sure you never a word out.

Editing tips

1. Reading your work out loud to yourself is a **GREAT** way to notice if:
   - Sentences are too long or too short
   - Words are missing
   - You’re repeating the same word too often
   - You’ve used contractions (“don’t”, “you’ve”…)
   - If you’ve used “that”, “this” or “it” – check that it’s clear what you’re talking about (do you need a re-cap word?)

Editing tips continued

2. Use the spelling/grammar checking tool
   - Set the language to English (New Zealand or UK), to ensure correct spelling.
3. Finding another student to proofread your essay and proofreading his or her essay in return.
   - Swapping essays is a great way to get a fresh perspective on your work.