Writing Skills: Avoid Choppiness

Source: Jeffrey Strausser, 2001. Painless Writing. Barron's Publishing

Ms. Smith is a math teacher at the Adult Education Centre. She is convinced that her students would do much better with a different approach to math. Ms. Smith spoke with the principal about developing an alternate math program. She had a program already worked out. The principal rejected her idea. The program had been set for the school year. She told her that she would consider her request the next year. Ms. Smith knows that will be too late for her students.

- How many words in each sentence?

- How does each sentence begin?

- What is the effect?

- How can this style of writing be improved?

- **Rewrite the paragraph, making improvements by using the methods discussed in class.

It is my belief that the writing skills of any student can be improved. There is enough evidence in the form of essays handed in at the beginning and end of English courses. There are some students who benefit more than others from writing instruction. It is because they apply themselves and apply what they learn.

It is a problem that can be easily corrected. There are programs that teachers have created that can be immediately implemented. It is unfortunate, however, that there are some teachers who are opposed to any new methods. It is of no interest to them that the old methods may be tried, but they are not necessarily true.

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- What is the effect?

- **Rewrite the paragraph, using the methods discussed in class.

Improve Choppy Writing

Identify declarative sentences.

Declarative sentences state (declare) facts or arguments and end with a period.

Mill Bay is located in the Cowichan Valley.

Drinking pop is not good for children.

He asked which path leads back to the river.

Avoid strings of short declarative sentences.

Mill Bay is located in the Cowichan Valley. It is at the south end of the valley. Mill Bay is the commercial centre of the area. It is also the most expensive area to live in.

A string of sentences occurs when 3 or more declarative sentences are used in a row.

Note that #2 says to avoid strings of short declarative sentences. This does not mean that you should avoid using short declarative sentences in general; they can be quite powerful when used for emphasis.

Identify expletive constructions

- Expletive means "filling a vacancy" and in grammar, that refers to using the word "it" or "there" instead of a real subject.

- It is important that you study for the test.

- There are many reasons to consider.

- There is a tendency for students to drink coffee late at night while studying.

- Identify the subject (doer) in each of these sentences. What do the words "it is," "there are," and "there is" add to the meaning of the sentences?

- How might you reword these sentences so that you are not using expletives? Remember that every sentence needs a subject.

Avoid overuse of expletive constructions

- Like declarative sentences, expletives have a place in good writing; however, they should not be overused.

- Do you use these types of constructions often? If so, add them to your editing checklist.

Use transitions to link sentences

Different types of transitions are used for different purposes. Think about your purpose.

- Comparisons: but, similarly, although, instead

- Reinforcement: for example, moreover, also

- Consequence: therefore, consequently, as a result

- Continuity: and, secondly, next, finally

Use demonstrative pronouns to link sentences

A demonstrative pronoun is a pronoun that refers to a specific noun and that can be used to connect sentences:

this   these   such

that   those

John could not wait to leave home and move to the big city. He told his parent this every day. He looked at moving to town as going on a vacation. He would come to find out that he was incredibly wrong. He had to work long hours every day at a low-paying job. He recalled what he had said to his parents. This was John's first experience of being independent.

Use relative pronouns to link sentences

A relative pronoun refers to (is related to) a noun that precedes it and can be used to link the ideas that relate to the same noun:

who   which
where   that

I love the serenity of the country. It is the place that recharges me. I can be myself there. My closest neighbours are the Whites. They live over a mile away. They are wonderful people. I cannot think of anywhere else where I would rather live.

Sentences may need to be restructured in order to add a relative pronoun.

On your next writing assignment, try intentionally using relative pronouns so that you don't have to restructure sentences when you edit.

Which ideas can be logically linked by using a relative pronoun? Completely rewrite the last sentence, using the relative pronoun "where."