

Writing for Clarity: Common Issues

This document covers some of the most common writing issues I see. Most of them are related to clarity—can readers understand what the writer is saying? If not, readers will disengage. At the end of the document are some tools you can use to help identify and correct issues in your writing.

Refresher on Parts of Speech

For reference, here's a quick reminder about the parts of speech.

Part of Speech	Definition	Example	Sample Sentence
Noun	Person, place, or thing	Woman, ballpark, dog, cup	<i>Rene</i> types on his <i>laptop</i> at <i>Starbucks</i> .
Pronoun	Takes the place of a noun	He, she, they, it, him, her, I, you	Rene types on <i>his</i> laptop. <i>He</i> just bought <i>it</i> .
Verb	Action or state	(to) be, do, have, run, play, read	Rene <i>types</i> on his laptop. He <i>is sitting</i> at Starbucks.
Adjective	Describes a noun	Red, large, beautiful, grotesque	Rene types on a <i>sleek, stylish</i> laptop.
Adverb	Describes a verb, adjective, or another adverb	Very, really, quickly, well	Rene types <i>quickly</i> on his <i>very</i> stylish laptop. <i>Yesterday</i> he typed quickly too.
Preposition	Shows the time, place, or relationship of a noun to another word	To, through, in, by, on	Rene types <i>on</i> his laptop <i>at</i> Starbucks. He must be done <i>by</i> the end <i>of</i> the day.
Conjunction	Joins words, clauses, or sentences	And, but, when	Rene is tired, <i>but</i> he keeps typing on his laptop <i>and</i> drinks lots of coffee.
Interjection	An exclamation that expresses strong feeling	Ow! Help! Wow!	<i>Help!</i> Rene just spilled coffee on his laptop!

Incomplete Sentences

A complete sentence requires a subject (a noun) and a verb. Complete sentences can be very short. *I am.* *He goes.* *They stand.*

An incomplete sentence, or a “fragment,” is missing a subject, a verb, or both. Sometimes this is understandable and acceptable, especially in informal settings. If you text someone, “Headed to work,” they know you mean “*I am* headed to work.” Or if you text “Headed to work?” they know you mean “*Are you* headed to work?”

However, in business writing you typically want to be more formal, so even if it's understandable as is, write out the complete sentence. And watch out for fragments that don't make sense. Fix them by adding a subject or verb as needed or by finding the sentence they really belong to.

Example: In my opinion. (fragment) The first vendor is best. (complete sentence)

Possible revision: In my opinion, the first vendor is best. (combine using comma)

Example: We need to finish two parts of the project plan. (complete sentence) The timeline and the risk management plan. (fragment)

Possible revision: We need to finish two parts of the project plan: the timeline and the risk management plan. (combine by adding colon)

Run-on Sentences

A run-on sentence is when you have two independent clauses (a complete thought with a subject and a verb) mashed together with no joiner word or punctuation. Run-ons are hard to follow, so make sure each independent clause is distinct and separate.

Example: It is snowing the car slips on the road.

Clause one: *It* (subject) *is snowing* (verb)

Clause two: *the car* (subject) *slips* (verb) *on the road*.

Possible revision 1: It is snowing; the car slips on the road. (One sentence by adding a semicolon.)

Possible revision 2: It is snowing, and the car slips on the road. (One sentence by adding a comma and “and.”)

Possible revision 3: It is snowing. The car slips on the road. (Two sentences by adding a period.)

Long Sentences

It’s good to have variation in your sentence length, but *really* long sentences are difficult to read. Try for no more than **20-30 words per sentence**. Turn a long sentence into a **series of shorter sentences**. To find possible break points, look for changes in subject, changes in verb, or commas between clauses.

Example: I have also attached my resume in the documents and if you would like to discuss my experiences and abilities in greater detail, I would be delighted to have an opportunity to personally interview with you, but I can also be reached at the communication means given above. (one sentence, 48 words)

Possible revision: I have attached my resume. If you would like to discuss my experience and abilities in greater detail, I would be delighted to have an opportunity to interview with you. I can be reached at the communication means given above. (Three sentences, 5+25+10=40 words total.)

Multiple Series in the Same Sentence

When you use too many series (e.g., lists of items, multiple verbs) in one sentence, it becomes difficult to see how the series relate to each other. It also can make your sentence loooooong.

Example: Anora got to work late, forgot her lunch, missed a meeting, got her boss mad, and then stopped at the store on the way home to get milk, bread, orange juice and bananas because it was going to snow, and when she got home her husband reminded her she had forgotten to pick up the kids, the dry-cleaning and the package at the post office. (One sentence, 3 series, 65 words, and one really bad day.)

Possible revision: Anora got to work late, forgot her lunch, missed a meeting, and got her boss mad. Because it was going to snow, she stopped at the store on the way home to get milk, bread, orange juice and bananas. But when she got home, her husband reminded her she had forgotten to pick up the kids, the dry-cleaning, and the package at the post office. (Three sentences, 16+23+26=65 words.)

Lack of Parallel Construction

Parallel construction is related to series. When you write a sentence that contains a series, all items in the series should follow the same construction. For example, if you are using a series of verbs, the verbs should all be in the same tense.

When you don't use parallel construction, it becomes difficult to understand what you mean. If you have multiple series in one sentence, lack of parallel construction can *really* confuse the reader.

Example: [As a new MBA student at NC State, orientation has been a transformative experience.] It has opened me up to marketing my brand, networking with my cohort, social media, public speaking, and much more.

Possible revision 1: It has opened me up to marketing my brand, networking with my cohort, *using* social media, *speaking in public*, and much more.

In this revision the items in the series are all *do-ing something*: market-ing my brand, network-ing with my cohort, us-ing social media, speak-ing in public.

Possible revision 2: It has opened me up to marketing, networking, social media, public speaking, and much more.

In this revision, the series includes simple nouns indicating topics: marketing, networking, social media, public speaking.

Confusing Paragraph Structure

A paragraph is a collection of related sentences. When presented in a logical order, the entire paragraph is cohesive, complete, and easily followed. When sentences are not related or do not flow in a logical order, readers get confused. They stop reading and discount what you are saying, or they end up with questions about what you are trying to say rather than about the strategic content you are providing.

Confusing example: When I write I like to type at my computer on my desk but first I sit in the chair and write with paper and pen. Try it and see for yourself. My favorite is a spiral notebook. I like fountain pens. Writing with nice materials can help you write better. I get inspired by nice paper and ink that flows.

A general rule of thumb for paragraph structure is:

- a topic sentence,
- three to five supporting sentences, and
- a concluding sentence.

The first sentence should indicate the topic. It often states a thesis or makes a claim.

Example: Writing with nice materials can help you write better.

The middle sentences should support the first sentence and should flow in logical order, for example, general to specific, big-picture context to tactical details, or chronological. Whatever the order, it needs to make sense to the reader—without your being there to explain it to them.

Examples:

- When I write I like to type at my computer on my desk but first I sit in the chair and write with paper and pen. (Does the computer/desk statements support the idea of nice writing materials? Maybe, maybe not.)
- My favorite is a spiral notebook. (Supports the idea of writing materials but is a spiral notebook “nice”?)
- I like fountain pens. (Supports the idea of nice writing materials.)
- I get inspired by nice paper and ink that flow. (Supports the idea of *why* nice writing materials are helpful.)

The final sentence concludes the thought, and often transitions you to the next paragraph/next thought.

Example: Try it and see for yourself.

Check your paragraphs for structure and flow; rearrange when necessary.

Possible revision: Believe it or not, writing with nice materials can help you write better. When I write a first draft, I don’t sit at my computer; instead, I use paper and pen. My favorite paper is heavyweight, off-white paper in a spiral notebook, and I prefer fountain pens. I get inspired by the nice paper and ink that flows. Try it and see for yourself.

Ambiguous Pronouns/Unclear Antecedents

When using pronouns, an antecedent is the original noun or phrase the pronoun refers to. It is often (not always) the closest prior noun or phrase.

Example: When George went to the store, he forgot the milk.

“George” is the noun; “he” is the pronoun. “George” is the antecedent of “he.”

Example: Cheryl dropped her backpack.

“Cheryl” is the antecedent of “her.”

Example: Marketing your business is beneficial. It can help grow sales.

“Marketing your business” is the antecedent phrase “it” refers to.

Sometimes it is difficult to tell what the pronoun refers to. Since the meaning is ambiguous, it can cause readers to struggle or misinterpret.

Example: Benny and Carlos didn’t get along in class, which he complained about to his friends.

Who is doing the complaining—Benny or Carlos? The pronoun “he” is placed where it could be referring to multiple antecedents.

Possible revision: Benny and Carlos didn’t get along in class, which Benny complained about to his friends.

Example: As I read the proposals, I realized we need to teach writing in engineering classes.

Who is “we”? The school? Society generally? The antecedent is missing.

Possible revision: As I read the proposals, I realized the engineering program needed to teach writing in engineering classes.

Misuse/Overuse of Passive Voice

Business writers, scientists, and technical writers often use the passive voice to relay objectivity. While passive voice is not incorrect, using it too much can dull your writing. Look for appropriate places to use active voice instead.

Active voice

In **active** voice, the subject of the sentence performs the action in the verb.

Example: The guest instructor taught the class.

The *guest instructor* (subject) performs the action of *teaching* (active verb) the *class* (object).

There are two main reasons for using active voice: clarity and engagement. A straightforward subject-verb-object construction is easy to follow, so readers understand how the subject (the doer) and the object relate. And, generally, readers find active voice more interesting.

Passive voice

In **passive** voice, the person or thing performing the action is not the subject.

Example: The class was taught by the guest instructor.

The *class* (subject) was taught (passive verb), but the instructor is doing the teaching.

To identify the passive voice, look for the verb construction: a form of “to be” + a past participle.

Compare:

The batter hit the ball. (active)

The ball **was hit** by the batter. (passive)

Compare:

The police officer caught the crook. (active)

The crook **was caught** by the police officer. (passive)

While active voice is often preferred, passive voice is not usually incorrect, and it is preferred in some situations.

When the object being acted upon is more important than who is doing the acting, use the passive.

Example: After six months on the run, the crook was finally caught by the highway patrol. (The crook is emphasized.)

And when the doer of the action is unknown or unimportant use the passive.

Example: The cake was frosted pink. (Someone in the bakery frosted it; we don’t know/care who.)

Vague Words, Weak Words, and Other Verbal Tics

The stronger your word choices, the more engaging your writing. There are any number of vague and weak words that you can easily search for and improve or eliminate: *really, very, somewhat, perhaps, kind of, sort of, hopefully, good, great, nice, a lot, often...* I’m sure you can think of more.

Additionally, we all have our own little verbal tics:

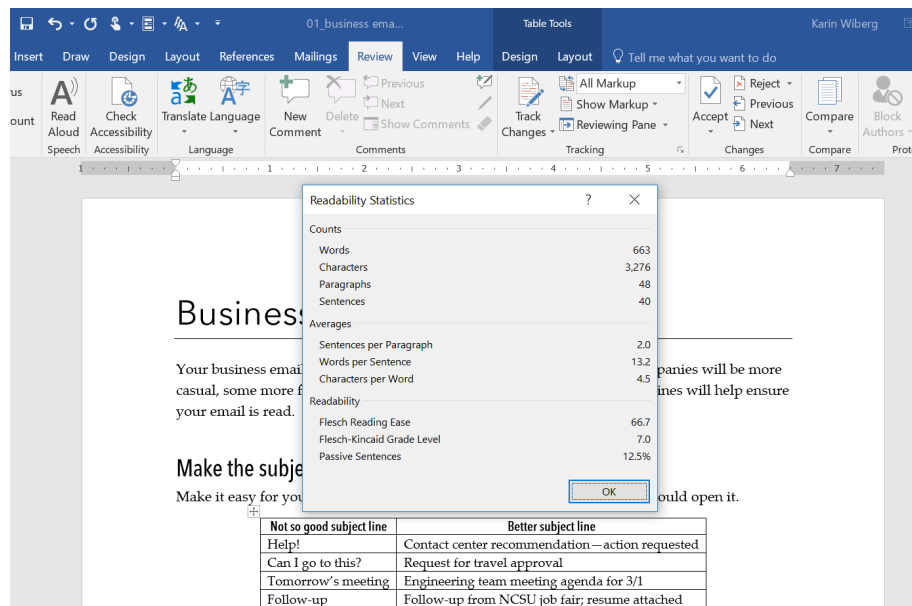
- Words we use too frequently – I tend to use “key” and “appropriate” too much.
- Distracting punctuation habits – I tend to use em dashes—like these—and parentheses (like these) too frequently.
- Words we regularly misspell—I tend to mix up *effect* and *affect*.

All of these things are checklist-able, so create a list of your own special tics. When you write a document (especially an important one), go through your checklist. This mechanical correction of small items can make a surprisingly big difference in the quality of the writing.

Tools to Check for Potential Issues

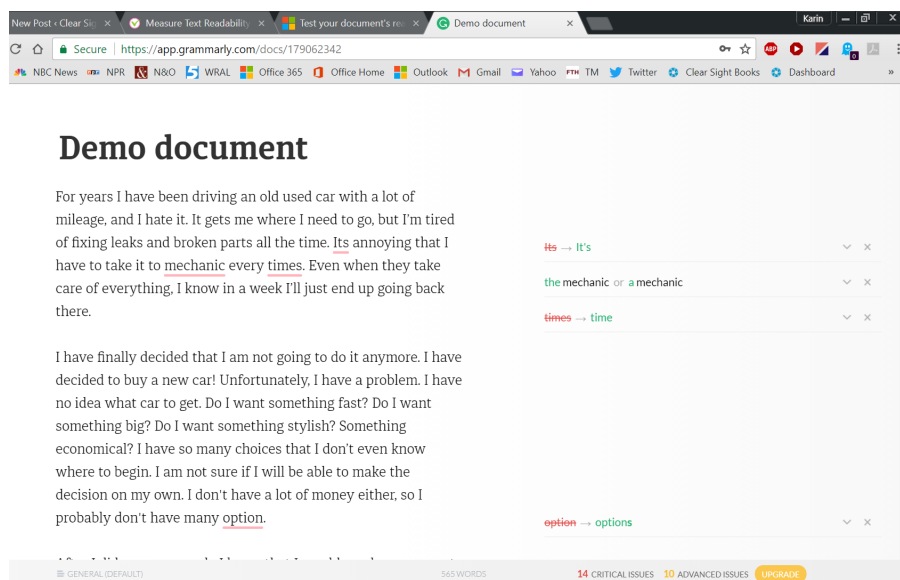
Word

Microsoft Word has readability checking built in. **To turn it on**, choose File, Options, Proofing, Check Grammar, Check readability statistics. **To run it**, from the Review tab, choose Spelling and Grammar. When the checker is done, it displays the readability statistics. (Important: You have to correct, or Ignore, all spelling errors found in the document before the readability statistics will display.)



Grammarly

Grammarly (<https://app.grammarly.com/>) is an online checking tool with free and paid versions that can be used alone or integrated with Word, Chrome, and other tools. It flags potential writing problems. In my experience, it is not always correct, so do not automatically accept the suggestions.



Online readability tools

There are other free (and paid) online tools to check readability, such as <https://readable.io/>.

