

WHY A COLUMN ON GRAMMAR AND WRITING?

Quite simply, we are starting this column on grammar and writing because it is essential to success, not only as a student, but as an aspiring executive, as a letter writer, as an educated person. Especially in this age of electronic communication, you will be judged on the quality of your writing – even if you are promoting yourself as an artist, a musician, a scientist, or an engineer. Often your first contact, or your only contact, with an organization that you are a part of, will be online, so your English had better be impeccable.

You may be the most dedicated employee in the world, but if your cover letter is full of grammatical errors, your application will be eliminated from consideration. So, let's get busy and work on perfecting your English.

Let's start with the dreaded Comma Splice. Of the Top 20 Errors documented in college student papers, the comma splice is a top contender.

What is a comma splice?

A comma splice occurs when two independent clauses are joined with only a comma.

Example: I like dogs, he likes cats. (Notice, length has nothing to do with it.)

Why is this a problem? Because a comma alone is not enough to join two independent clauses.

How do you correct a comma splice?

So glad you asked. There are four ways to correct a comma splice:

1. **Keep the comma, and add one of the FANBOYS (coordinating conjunction—For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, and So).**

I like dogs, **but** he likes cats.

(Adding the word “but” signifies that you are going to introduce a contrary idea. It provides a meaningful connection to the two clauses.)

2. **Replace the comma with a semi-colon.**

I like dogs; he likes cats.

(This method works well for two sentences that have a close relationship with each other.)

3. Replace the comma with a period.

I like dogs. He likes cats.

(This method may create a choppy effect—not the best writing, but at least it's grammatically correct. It works better with longer clauses.)

4. Rewrite the sentence to include a main clause and a subordinate clause. Introduce the subordinate clause with a word of dependency such as although, whenever, because, etc.

Although I like dogs, he likes cats.

(Notice that if you introduce one clause with a subordinate conjunction, you cannot use a coordinating conjunction. Note also, there is no comma after although.)

PLAIN ENGLISH WRITING

Beginning this week, I will be describing a movement known as Plain English Writing, designed to simplify your writing and to make it easier to understand. I will be sharing some tips and techniques that are designed to make poor writing understandable and good writing great!

What is the Plain English movement? It is an initiative directed at lawyers and regulators, urging them to make their documents easier to understand. Have you ever struggled through a proposed statute, regulation, contract, or consumer disclosure and given up halfway through in frustration? This movement was designed to make these documents more user friendly! These tips will help all kinds of writing.

I was gratified to learn that there are rules for transforming a muddled document to a model of clarity. Each week, I will be passing on one of these tips to you, with examples and exercises.

Let's start by looking at a sample of what Plain English Writing can do:

POORLY WRITTEN ENGLISH

I have been enrolled as a design student in the department of environmental design at the University of Columbia for two years and wish to be considered for any vacant positions in your company. Although I do not anticipate graduation until June 2005, I believe that because of my current creative and technical skills, as well as my interest in behavioral-interest design, I would be qualified to do the type of design work you require.

PLAIN ENGLISH

I am studying environmental design at the University of Missouri, graduating in June of 2005. My creative and technical skills include computer-aided design and web-page design, specializing in simple design techniques to help people grasp difficult ideas. I would love to have the opportunity to contribute my talents to your company. I am available to work as an intern or trainee beginning this May.

Note the reduction on the word count, from 75 to 64, with no loss of meaning!

Are you convinced that the second sample is an improvement over the first? Would you like to learn how to improve your own writing using proven techniques? Then read on!

Rule 1. Know your reader, and write with your reader's viewpoint in mind.

For lawyers, this means be aware your client has not gone to law school and does not understand legalese, and it is arrogant to write in archaic terms and jargon that are known only to other lawyers. For regulators, this means that rambling, awkwardly written regulations do the public a great disservice, as they will not understand or be able to do what is expected of them. If you are writing business correspondence, your language should be businesslike and you should clearly explain the problem or request as well as the desired action to be taken. For students, keep in mind that your instructor probably does not understand your slang, expects a degree of formality in your writing, and certainly is looking for a paper that is grammatically correct. More importantly, your instructor has not experienced what you are writing about and does not know what your position is on the subject. It is up to you to share that information with your instructor. That means identifying information that you know very well but others may not. You need to view your essay as though you were a stranger and are learning this for the first time.

A few examples may help.

“My teacher is incredible. Her teaching methods are awesome. We can relate to stuff in her class, though sometimes she does weird things.”

Source: <http://writeyourbest.blogspot.com/2011/01/can-you-translate-this-16-real-examples.html>

This essay violates two of the rules mentioned above. It is full of slang (“awesome,” “stuff,” and “weird”), and, although the teacher may actually have shared some experiences with the writer, it is certainly not easy to identify what experiences the writer is referring to. Last of all, the student is making a fatal error to insult the teacher who will be grading the paper!

Here’s a suggested improvement:

My teacher is inspirational. She has the knack of helping us understand the assignments by showing us helpful Powerpoints and asking thoughtful questions. Once she handed out a list of discussion questions the day before and then conducted a game show in which contestants (students) threw dice to determine which question they would answer. Each student had a time limit so that everyone could participate. Her teaching methods are original and often unconventional, but never boring!

PLAIN ENGLISH WRITING – Rule 2

In case you are wondering, the principles of Plain English Writing have been written down. One source is William Lutz, an English professor specializing in plain English, who wrote a book called *Doublespeak*, in which he criticized the often confusing and misleading language of government regulations and advertising. Another source is Richard Wydick, who wrote *Plain English for Lawyers*. My starting point for this column is Richard Lutz's Plain English website, in which he lists 39 steps to better English. Any resemblance to the Alfred Hitchcock suspense film is purely coincidental!

Last week I wrote on the importance of knowing your audience and addressing their needs in your writing. This week I will give you Rule #2, Organize your Text by doing the following:

- a. Arrange your ideas in a logical sequence,
- b. Use informative headings, and
- c. Add a Table of Contents for long documents.

To give you an example of how important organization is, let me show you an example of writing that leaps from one thought to the next with no apparent logical connection.

*POORLY ORGANIZED PARAGRAPH**

Child abuse and domestic violence often co-occur in the same family. As adolescents and adults, children exposed to violence often encounter psychiatric and addictive disorders, chronic medical illnesses, legal problems, and problems with their own families. Children do not have to suffer physical maltreatment to suffer the consequences of exposure to domestic violence. Research shows that almost half of the children whose mothers were abused were also abused themselves. Children who witness domestic violence are more likely to experience poor outcomes related to trauma.

What's wrong with this paragraph? It seems to contain a lot of roughly connected ideas, but the writer jumps from one topic to another without leading up to the next. The main point is hard to pin down and transitions are absent.

Let's rearrange the ideas in a sequence that makes sense.

*WELL-ORGANIZED PARAGRAPH**

Child abuse and domestic violence often co-occur in the same family. Research on family violence has produced strong evidence showing that almost half of the children whose mothers were abused were also victims of child abuse. However, children do not have to suffer physical maltreatment to suffer the consequences of exposure to domestic violence. Children who

witness domestic violence are more likely to experience trauma-related outcomes. Because of this trauma, as these children reach adolescence and adulthood they face heightened risk for a variety of poor outcomes, including psychiatric and addictive disorders, chronic medical illnesses, legal problems, and problems with their own families .

Source: Writing Tips for the MSW Program: <http://ssw.unc.edu/files/pdf/8-2012JumpstartWritingTipsForMSWProgram.pdf>

The key to well organized writing is the use of outlines before you begin.. After you jot down ideas during brainstorming, now regroup your ideas into a rough outline. This will help you write coherently.

You should also reread your paper when it is through to check for organization. Here is a checklist you can use to make sure your paper is properly organized:

- Are the ideas and actions connected to each other?
- Can your reader follow the piece logically from beginning to end?
- Is it complete? Are there enough details so that you understand the main points?

The above example is too short to require headings or a Table of Contents, so I will post a sample Table of Contents to a Masters Thesis illustrating some appropriate headings.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 RESEARCH PROBLEM DESCRIPTION

1.2 OVERVIEW OF THESIS

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

3. DETAILS OF RESEARCH

3.1 Description of Hypothesis

3.2 Description of Population

3.3 Proposed Experimental Method

4. DISCUSSION OF EXPERIMENT

5. ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

6. CONCLUSION

PLAIN ENGLISH WRITING – Rule 3

This week's rule is short and sweet: Use short sentences. Great! Does this mean all sentences should be in the style of a Dr. Seuss Young Reader book? ("I do not like green eggs and ham. I do not like them, Sam-I-Am.") In a word, no.

Let's look at an example taken from the *SEC Plain English Handbook, How to Create Clear SEC Disclosure Documents*:

Before:

The Drake Capital Corporation (the "Company") may offer from time to time its Global Medium-Term Notes, Series A, Due from 9 months to 60 Years From Date of Issue, which are issuable in one or more series (the "Notes"), in the United States in an aggregate principal amount of up to U.S. \$6,428,598,500, or the equivalent thereof in other currencies, including composite currencies such as the European Currency Unit (the "ECU") (provided that, with respect to Original Issue Discount Notes (as defined under "Description of Notes—Original Issue Discount Notes"), the initial offering price of such Notes shall be used in calculating the aggregate principal amount of Notes offered hereunder).

Did you understand all 113 words of that sentence that reads as though it was written by a robot? I didn't either. To fix it, try to distill the main ideas that are expressed and restate them one at a time.

After:

The Drake Capital Corporation may offer at various times up to U.S. \$6,428,598,500 worth of Global Medium-term notes. These notes will mature from 9 months to 60 years after the date they are purchased. We will offer these notes in series, starting with Series A, and in U.S., foreign, and composite currencies, like the European Currency Unit. If we offer original issue discount notes, we will use their initial offering prices to calculate when we reach \$6,428,598,500.

Much more understandable!

How many words are too many? Rule 11 recommends that your “average” sentence contain 25 words. How well did the above example pass this test? Using the Microsoft Word word count feature (click on the Review tab, and then look in the second column across the top), we find that the four sentences contain 18, 16, 24, and 20 words—a total of 78 words, with no loss of meaning.

Subsequent Plain English tips will usually result in trimming the total word count.

PLAIN ENGLISH WRITING – Rule 4

Last week we talked about how to write short, effective sentences. This week's step is a natural outgrowth of this rule: **Say only what you have to say, avoiding too many messages in a single sentence, and omitting surplus words.**

This week's examples are taken from a document called *Action Officer: Staff Writing*, prepared by the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, headquartered in Fort Monroe, Virginia. (Source: http://www.dtic.mil/whs/directives/plainlanguage/ActionOfficer_StaffWriting.pdf).

Here's an example of a sentence that has too many messages in a single, breathless sentence:

I learned I was selected for the job, so I called Jeanne immediately, and I told her the good news, and that evening we celebrated by going out to dinner.

Comment:

This 31-word sentence awkwardly strings together four thoughts, leaving the reader breathless and not sure what the author's main point is. To fix it, this sentence must be divided into shorter ones, but not too short.

The following revision, dividing the original into four sentences, is too short and choppy:

I learned I was selected for the job. I called Jeanne immediately. I told her the good news. That evening we celebrated by going out to dinner.

To get it just right, let's combine some of the shorter sentences and vary the word order.

Final revision (two sentences, 27 words):

Upon hearing I was selected for the job, I called Jeanne and told her the good news. That evening we celebrated by going out to dinner.

NOTE: These weekly columns are based on William Lutz's 39 Rules for Writing Plain English. (Source: <http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org/Resources/lutz.htm>).

PLAIN ENGLISH WRITING – Rule 5

If you can master Rule 5, your writing will flow and sparkle with clarity:

Keep equivalent items parallel. What this means is that whenever you have a list of two or more like things, they should be structured the same way.

EXAMPLE: My favorite hobbies are singing, dancing, and playing the piano.

NOT

My favorite hobbies are to sing, dancing, and I like playing the piano.

This principle can apply to lists of nouns, verbs, phrases, or clauses.

Here are some examples obtained from the Clarion University website:

<http://www.clarion.edu/70745.pdf>

1. Parallel series of nouns:

The Africans carried with them a pattern of kinship that emphasized collective survival, mutual aid, cooperation, solidarity, interdependence, and responsibility for others.

NOT

The Africans carried with them a pattern of kinship that emphasized collective survival, mutual aid, cooperating with each other, solidarity, interdependence, and being responsible for others.

2. Parallel series of verbs:

Her children like to swim, hike, and ride dirt bikes.

NOT

Her children like to swim, hike, and riding dirt bikes.

3. Parallel series of adverbs:

The manager wrote his report quickly, accurately, and thoroughly.

NOT

The manager wrote his report quickly, accurately, and in detail.

4. Parallel phrases:

She had not time to be human or to be happy.

NOT

She had not time to be human or **for being** happy.

* * * * *

The reward rests not in the task but in the play.

NOT

The reward rests not in the task but in **how you do it**.

* * * * *

Whether at home or at work, he was always busy.

NOT

Whether at home or **while he was working**, he was always busy.

* * * * *

5. Parallel clauses:

I was happy in the thought that our influence was helpful, that I was doing the work that I loved, and that I could make a living out of it.

NOT

I was happy in the thought that our influence was helpful, **that** I was doing the work that I loved, and **making** a living out of it **was possible**.

* * * * *

Did you recognize that the red words break the parallel structure? Do you agree that using parallel structure improves your writing immensely?

PLAIN ENGLISH WRITING – Rule 6

Avoid Unnecessary Formality.

If your language is too formal, it will be hard to read and harder to understand.

Today's tips are brought to you from Gonzaga University, from a link devoted to the art of business writing: <https://www.gonzaga.edu/academics/colleges-and-schools/School-of-Business-Administration/undergraduate/SBAWR/APWS.asp>

Writers should strive to use conversational, everyday language, rather than overly formal language. Overly formal writing can convey a pompous image; it can also interfere with the clear communication of your message. Look at how much simpler and clearer the following messages become when more conversational language is used:

Too Formal

It will behoove us to henceforth complete all documentation within two business days.

The board has initiated discussions pertaining to the new policy.

Pertaining to the contracts, all employees are herewith instructed to return the contracts to the undersigned.

Conversational

Please complete all forms within two business days.

The board began talking about the new policy.

Please return the contracts to me.

So the takeaway message is: don't try to impress your professor with obscure vocabulary words, complex, convoluted sentences, or stiff, formal diction. Instead, strive to adopt a more conversational tone that uses precise, readily understood vocabulary and natural diction and avoids slang and ungrammatical constructions.

PLAIN ENGLISH WRITING – Rule 7

Rule 7 is a good tip for the opening paragraph of an essay: Give an overview of the main idea and central purpose of the text. This statement may appear as the first sentence of the essay, or the last sentence of the opening paragraph; it should not be too broad or too narrow. Today's exercises are derived from a column on writing by Richard Nordquist, available at

<http://grammar.about.com/od/tests/a/Exercise-In-Identifying-Effective-Thesis-Statements.htm?p=1>

Please select the more effective thesis statement from each pair.

1. (a) *The Hunger Games* is a science fiction adventure film based on the novel of the same name by Suzanne Collins.

(b) *The Hunger Games* is a morality tale about the dangers of a political system that is dominated by the wealthy.

Choice (a) contains factual information about the film: its genre and author of the book it is based on. It is devoid of any ideas to build on. Choice (b), by contrast, conveys information about the theme of the film. Immediately the reader has a sense of the main idea of the film. It also conveys a tone of suspense, which is intriguing and leaves the reader wanting to learn more.

Now, see if you can select the statement that more effectively conveys the main idea of an essay to follow – answers next week!

2. (a) There is no question that cell phones have changed our lives in a very big way.

(b) While cell phones provide freedom and mobility, they can also become a leash, compelling users to answer them anywhere and at any time.

3. (a) Finding a job is never easy, but it can be especially hard when the economy is still feeling the effects of a recession and employers are reluctant to hire new workers.

(b) College students looking for part-time work should begin their search by taking advantage of job-finding resources on campus.

4. (a) For the past three decades, coconut oil has been unjustly criticized as an artery-clogging saturated fat.

(b) Cooking oil is plant, animal, or synthetic fat that is used in frying, baking, and other types of cooking.
5. (a) There have been over 200 movies about Count Dracula, most of them only very loosely based on the novel published by Bram Stoker in 1897.

(b) Despite its title, *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, a film directed by Francis Ford Coppola, takes considerable liberties with Stoker's novel.
6. (a) There are several steps that teachers can take to encourage academic integrity and curtail cheating in their classes.

(b) There is an epidemic of cheating in America's schools and colleges, and there are no easy solutions to this problem.
7. (a) J. Robert Oppenheimer, the American physicist who directed the building of the first atomic bombs during World War II, had technical, moral, and political reasons for opposing the development of the hydrogen bomb.

(b) J. Robert Oppenheimer, often referred to as "the father of the atomic bomb," was born in New York City in 1904.
8. (a) The iPad has revolutionized the mobile-computing landscape and created a huge profit stream for Apple.

(b) The iPad, with its relatively large high-definition screen, has helped to revitalize the comic book industry.
9. (a) Like other addictive behaviors, Internet addiction may have serious negative consequences, including academic failure, job loss, and a breakdown in personal relationships.

(b) Drug and alcohol addiction is a major problem in the world today, and many people suffer from it.
10. (a) When I was a child I used to visit my grandmother in Moline every Sunday.

(b) Every Sunday we visited my grandmother, who lived in a tiny house that was undeniably haunted.

PLAIN ENGLISH WRITING – Rule 7 – Part 2

This week, as promised, I am following up on last week's tips on writing an effective thesis statement by supplying the answers to the exercises with comments.

1. (a) There is no question that cell phones have changed our lives in a very big way.

(b) While cell phones provide freedom and mobility, they can also become a leash, compelling users to answer them anywhere and at any time.

COMMENT: Choice (a) is a general statement that is true, but does not give an idea of the advantages and disadvantages of cell phones, as Choice (b) does. Both sentences could be used in an effective introductory paragraph, beginning with Choice (a), continuing with a list of positive aspects of cell phone use, and concluding with the observation in Choice (b), which sets forth the focus of the essay – the drawbacks.

2. (a) Finding a job is never easy, but it can be especially hard when the economy is still feeling the effects of a recession and employers are reluctant to hire new workers.

(b) College students looking for part-time work should begin their search by taking advantage of job-finding resources on campus.

COMMENT: Choice (a) is tempting, since it contains a detailed explanation of why job seeking is difficult, but look again: the statement is factual, and once you have given the explanation, you have nowhere further to go. Choice (b), on the other hand, leads into a discussion of the career resources center on campus.

3. (a) For the past three decades, coconut oil has been unjustly criticized as an artery-clogging saturated fat.

(b) Cooking oil is plant, animal, or synthetic fat that is used in frying, baking, and other types of cooking.

COMMENT: Choice (b) is appealing, since it lists multiple sources and uses of cooking oil, but Choice (a) states a point of view which the writer will proceed to defend.

4. (a) There have been over 200 movies about Count Dracula, most of them only very loosely based on the novel published by Bram Stoker in 1897.

(b) Despite its title, *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, a film directed by Francis Ford Coppola, takes considerable liberties with Stoker's novel.

COMMENT: Choice (b), hands down. I am intrigued by the promised comparison of book to movie. However, the factual information contained in Choice (a) could be used as an opening statement. Add a transition sentence along the lines of "The most recent offering is *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, a film directed by Francis Ford Coppola, released on [date]." Wrap up with a variation of the thesis statement, such as "Despite its title, suggesting a faithful adaptation, Coppola's version of the literary classic takes considerable liberties with Stoker's novel."

5. (a) There are several steps that teachers can take to encourage academic integrity and curtail cheating in their classes.

(b) There is an epidemic of cheating in America's schools and colleges, and there are no easy solutions to this problem.

COMMENT: I like both statements, but Choice (a) clears the runway for suggesting some solutions. I might try blending both statements, concluding with the essay's thesis, as follows:

"There is an epidemic of cheating in America's schools and colleges, and while there are no easy solutions to this problem, there are several steps that teachers can take to encourage academic integrity and curtail cheating in their classes."

6. (a) J. Robert Oppenheimer, the American physicist who directed the building of the first atomic bombs during World War II, had technical, moral, and political reasons for opposing the development of the hydrogen bomb.

(b) J. Robert Oppenheimer, often referred to as "the father of the atomic bomb," was born in New York City in 1904.

COMMENT: Hmm, should I choose a sentence about a well known person that gives categorical reasons for taking a stand, or that gives identifying information (name, date of birth, best known achievement)? This is a persuasive essay, not an encyclopedia article. Let's go for Choice (a).

7. (a) The iPad has revolutionized the mobile-computing landscape and created a huge profit stream for Apple.

(b) The iPad, with its relatively large high-definition screen, has helped to revitalize the comic book industry.

COMMENT: Actually, both of these statements have potential as a thesis statement: Choice (a) paves the way for describing iPad's amazing capabilities, while Choice (b) focuses on how the iPad impacted one industry. Choice (a) is perhaps less effective because it is so broad, while Choice (b) focuses on one aspect, which is a fascinating story in itself. Besides, what

better choice is there than comic books to a superhero aficionado than yours truly?

8. (a) Like other addictive behaviors, Internet addiction may have serious negative consequences, including academic failure, job loss, and a breakdown in personal relationships.

(b) Drug and alcohol addiction is a major problem in the world today, and many people suffer from it.

COMMENT: Interesting – Choice (a) talks about internet addiction, while Choice (b) talks about substance abuse—two different things. Choice (a) contains a list of consequences that could be further developed, while Choice (b) simply observes what a big problem drug and alcohol abuse is.

9. (a) When I was a child I used to visit my grandmother in Moline every Sunday.

(b) Every Sunday we visited my grandmother, who lived in a tiny house that was undeniably haunted.

COMMENT: The Haunted House Hook in Choice (b) is far more intriguing than the straightforward recitation of where grandma lives in Choice (a), and is a great lead-in to further details – to be continued.

So there you have it – Sample thesis statements to suit many styles and topics. The trick, as you may have gathered, is to choose a topic that is suitably narrow, interesting, and leads to further development, rather than simply stating some facts and coming to a screeching halt.

PLAIN ENGLISH WRITING – Rule 9

Arrange your words with care.

One aspect of word arrangement is placement of modifiers. If a modifier is placed too far away from the word it modifies, we have a misplaced modifier and the result is confusing.

As a general rule, try to place your modifier just before the word it modifies. In the following examples, taken from “Quick and Dirty Grammar Tips,” the meaning changes as the key word is moved:

- ☐ Only John hit Peter in the nose.
- ☐ John hit only Peter in the nose.
- ☐ John hit Peter only in the nose.
- ☐ John only hit Peter in the nose.

In the first example, several people may have struck Peter, but John was the only one who hit him in the nose.

In the second example, John may have struck many people, but Peter was the only one he hit in the nose.

In the third example, John hit Peter in one place only (the nose).

In the fourth example, John limited his dealings with Peter to hitting him in the nose.

Let’s look at another example, taken from the Towson University website:

The vendor **almost** sold all of her pottery at the fair.

Did the writer mean that the vendor lined up a potential buyer who was interested in buying all of her wares? Probably not. More likely, the writer meant the vendor sold most but not all of her pottery. The correct way to arrange the words would be as follows:

The vendor sold **almost** all of her pottery at the fair.

Works Cited

Benner, Margaret L. Usage—Modifier Problems: Misplaced Modifiers. Towson University, 2013. Web. 20 Nov. 2013.

Whitman, Neal. "'Only': The Most Insidious Misplaced Modifier." Macmillan Holdings
LLC: *Quick and Dirty Tips*, 2013. Web. 20 Nov. 2013.

PLAIN ENGLISH WRITING – Rule 9

Arrange your words with care.

Last month, we looked at placement of modifiers as close to the noun it modifies as possible for clarity, but other aspects of word order impact your intended meaning. This week's column shows you how to rearrange your words for emphasis.

1. **Use the Passive Voice.** While the passive voice is generally not favored, using the passive voice will emphasize the subject as the person or thing affected by an action.

Example: My car was stolen last night.

2. **Use Inverted Word Order.** Introducing a sentence with a prepositional phrase followed by inverted word order is another way to place emphasis on the emerging idea. One technique is to use the auxiliary verb "did" or "was" followed by the subject and the main verb.

Examples: At no time did you ever mention that Friday was the deadline.

3. **Place the Main Idea at the End of the Sentence.** This technique allows the preceding words to build to the payoff. The following examples are from the Gnosis Learning website:

- Resolving all the current issues **will take some time.**
(emphasis on the time it will take)
- All the current issues will take some time **to resolve.**
(emphasis on the action of resolving)
- It will take some time to resolve **all the current issues.**
(emphasis on the current issues)

PLAIN ENGLISH WRITING – Rule 18

Rewrite the adjective, adverb, and noun clauses to other structures satisfying the same functions.

(In other words, restate your point more succinctly.)

According to the Federal Government Guidelines for Plain English, “Nothing is more confusing to the user than long, complex sentences containing multiple phrases and clauses” (p. 38). The problem is that “Sentences loaded with dependent clauses and exceptions confuse the audience by losing the main point in a forest of words.” Their advice is to “Resist the temptation to put everything in one sentence; break up your idea into its parts and make each one the subject of its own sentence” (p. 50).

Here is the example appearing in the government manual:

Don't say	Say
Once the candidate's goals are established, one or more potential employers are identified. A preliminary proposal for presentation to the employer is developed. The proposal is presented to an employer who agrees to negotiate an individualized job that meets the employment needs of the applicant and real business needs of the employer.	Once we establish your goals, we identify one or more potential employers. We prepare a preliminary proposal to present to an employer who agrees to negotiate a job that meets both his and your employment needs.

NOTE: The verbosity in the above example was reduced by changing passive voice to active, by combining sentences to eliminate repetition, and to convert phrases to adjectives.

Another way to reduce verbosity is to convert clauses (that have subjects and verbs) to phrases (eliminating the subject and transforming the verb to a participle or to a prepositional phrase). The following examples come from the website Sponsoravillage.ca, an English as Second Language website.

ADJECTIVE CLAUSE: The boy who is riding his bicycle is Michael.

PARTICIPIAL PHRASE: The boy riding his bicycle is Michael.

PREPOSITIONAL PHRASE: The boy on the bicycle is Michael.

ADVERB CLAUSE: While I was vacationing in Hawaii, I met an old friend.

PARTICIPIAL PHRASE: Vacationing in Hawaii, I met an old friend.

NOUN CLAUSE: They admit that they have problems at home.

GERUND PHRASE: They admit having problems at home.

NOTE: There is nothing grammatically wrong with the above examples of clauses. It is simply briefer and more to the point to replace a clause with a phrase.

Now, try your hand at these exercises from the Sponsor A Village website:

1. Knowledgeable consumers who are looking for bargains often shop at outlet stores.
2. The ideas which are presented in the essay are controversial.
3. While we were hiking in the wilderness, we encountered a mountain lion.
4. Because it was looking for food, the black bear rummaged in our garbage can.
5. Those who wish to travel with us must be ready to leave on short notice.

ANSWERS NEXT WEEK.

References

Sponsor A Village. "Reduce Clauses to Phrases." *SponsorAVillage.ca*, 2014.

Web. 4 April 2014.

"Write Short Sentences." *Improving Communication from the Federal*

Government to the Public, n.d. Plain Language.gov. Web. 4 April 2014.

PLAIN ENGLISH WRITING – Rule 10

Punctuate carefully.

Punctuation rules are numerous, so let's review the major marks of punctuation and their principal uses.

1. Period [.] – Used to end a sentence.

EXAMPLE: Birds of a feather flock together.

2. Comma [,] – Used to separate items on a list of three or more items, city and state, exact date and year, two independent clauses followed by a coordinating conjunction, or to set off a descriptive phrase or an introductory word, phrase, or clause.

EXAMPLES:

The weather announcer is calling for rain, sleet, and hail.

The concert will be held in Naples, Florida.

The article was published on June 13, 2013.

I went to the movies, but you never showed up.

Ms. Berlin, the Dean of Students, will introduce the speaker.

Incidentally, I ran into your friend Nick yesterday.

For example, Langston Hughes' poem "Mother to Son" uses the metaphor of stairs to describe the mother's struggles in life.

Because I was late, I was not able to get tickets to the event.

3. Semi-colon [;] – used to separate closely related independent clauses without a coordinating conjunction, or to separate a "monster list" of items which include interior commas.

EXAMPLES: I am not convinced he was being truthful; his manner was quite evasive.

The festival will include performances by Crosby, Stills, and Nash; Peter, Paul, and Mary; and Blood, Sweat, & Tears.

4. Colon [:] – Used to introduce a list, a quotation from a well known speaker, or an explanation of the preceding word or phrase.

EXAMPLES:

Will these students please come see me after class: Anthony Adams, Barbara Cooper, and Melanie Saunders.

Shakespeare admonished us about the evils of lending when he said:
"Neither a borrower nor a lender be."

There's one thing that bothers me: people who turn without signaling.

5. Question Mark

PLAIN ENGLISH WRITING – Rule 11

Use an average of 25 words per sentence.

Long sentences can be tough to muddle through, or they can be a graceful revelation, so knowing when to quit is key.

There are lots of things you can do to cut a sentence down to size: eliminate redundant phrases or filler words, reduce a clause to a phrase, or break up a sentence into two.

1. Eliminate redundant phrases. (Look out for words that sound different but mean the same thing.)

EXAMPLE: We are thinking of adding an additional staff member to our group.

BETTER: We are thinking of adding a staff member to our group.

Our group is thinking of hiring an additional staff member.

EXPLANATION: "Adding" and "additional" are redundant.

EXAMPLE: The consensus of the group is that we should attend the conference.

BETTER: The consensus is that we should attend the conference.

EXPLANATION: "Consensus" by definition is group agreement.

EXAMPLE: This is a difficult dilemma.

BETTER: This is a dilemma.

EXPLANATION: A dilemma, by definition, is difficult. There is no need to belabor the point.

2. Avoid filler words such as "there is" or the unnecessary "it."

EXAMPLE: There is a prize in every box of Crackerjacks.

BETTER: A prize is in every box of Crackerjacks.

EXAMPLE: In the article it says that Shakespeare may not have been the author of all of his plays.

BETTER: Johnson suggests that Shakespeare may not have been the author of all of his plays.

3. Replace a clause with a phrase or a phrase with a single word. Try to use vivid vocabulary words that combine two ideas.

EXAMPLE: The girl who is wearing a white dress is the most graceful dancer.

BETTER: The girl in the white dress is the most graceful dancer.

EXAMPLE: They are constant seekers of opportunities.

BETTER: They are consummate opportunists.

EXAMPLE: In the opinion of the manager, that was a mistake.

BETTER: In the manager's opinion, that was a mistake.

EXAMPLE: By the time Maria got home, she was very tired.

BETTER: By the time Maria got home, she was exhausted.

4. Divide monster sentences into manageable ones.

The following example comes from the Online Writing Lab of AIMS Community College:

Writing that contains long sentences can seem wordy, even if this isn't the case, for the information in long sentences, like in short ones, can be hard to understand and connect.

My revision:

Writing that contains long sentences can seem wordy, even if this isn't the case. This happens because the information in long sentences, as in sentences that are too short, can be hard to understand and connect.

Notice that the second version actually contains more words than the first version, but because of its structure, is more readable.

On a final note, don't make all your sentences 25 words long; occasionally alternate with a short, pithy sentence. It will be more meaningful!

PLAIN ENGLISH WRITING – Rule 12

Put most of your messages at the subject-predicate position.

This week's lesson is adapted from the Gateway to English of the Language Portal of Canada and from www.encomium.com. The rule has to do with sentence structure – writing your sentence in a sequence that helps convey meaning most effectively.

Most sentences are written in the subject-predicate order. Here is an example of a simple declarative sentence:

Samantha collects works of art.

Some sentences give commands directed at an audience and the subject is "you" understood, not specified.

EXAMPLE: Please come in.

Of course, for emphasis, the word "you" can be expressed:

You come in here right now or else!

Of course, not all sentences will have the subject come first. In fact, there are three situations in which the sentence will be in inverted order, that is, the subject will appear after the verb instead of before it. Those situations are as follows:

1. In a sentence which asks a question:

Did you hear what I said?

Note that the subject is "you" and the verb is "did hear." In this type of construction, the verb is typically split, with the subject placed between the two parts of the verb.

2. Sentences beginning with *here* or *there*:

There are fifteen weeks in a semester.

Here is a great idea you can use for your party.

In the first sentence, the subject is "weeks" and the verb is "are." "There" is not the subject; it is a filler word. The verb will be singular or plural depending on the subject which follows the verb.

3. Occasionally sentences beginning with one or more prepositional phrases may be followed by a verb and then the subject. This structure is used for dramatic effect.

EXAMPLE: In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit.

In this sentence the subject is "hobbitt" and the predicate is "lived."

4. Sentences beginning with negative words (never, rarely) or exclusive words (only) also may use inverted word order.

" Never in the field of human conflict was **so much owed** by **so many** to **so few**."

Only after the class was over did I remember the definition.

Being able to recognize subjects and predicates and to put them in the best order are useful skills, because they are the building blocks of complete sentences.

PLAIN ENGLISH WRITING – Rule 13

For variety or emphasis, invert your sentences.

This lesson is a repeat of part of last week's lesson on sentence order which advised you to "Put most of your messages at the subject-predicate position."

Implied in the above rule is "put most but not all of your messages in the subject-predicate position." It would be boring if all sentences followed the same structure. There are situations in which the sentence will be in inverted order, that is, the subject will appear after the verb instead of before it. Those situations are as follows:

1. In a sentence which asks a question:

Did you hear what I said?

Note that the subject is "you" and the verb is "did hear." In this type of construction, the verb is typically split, with the subject placed between the two parts of the verb.

2. Sentences beginning with *here* or *there*:

There are fifteen weeks in a semester.

Here is a great idea you can use for your party.

In the first sentence, the subject is "weeks" and the verb is "are." "There" is not the subject; it is a filler word. The verb will be singular or plural depending on the subject which follows the verb.

3. Occasionally sentences beginning with one or more prepositional phrases may be followed by a verb and then the subject. This structure is used for dramatic effect.

EXAMPLE: In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit.

In this sentence the subject is "hobbit" and the predicate is "lived."

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"Never in the field of human conflict was **so much owed** by **so many** to **so few**."

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Being able to recognize subjects and predicates and to put them in the best order are useful skills, because they are the building blocks of complete sentences.

PLAIN ENGLISH WRITING – Rule 14

Use the art of subordination to smooth out chopiness.

This week I will be adapting some material from the Purdue OWL website to show you how to combine sentences using subordination to avoid chopiness.

Subordination

Subordination refers to creating a sentence containing a main clause (which can stand alone) and a subordinate clause (which cannot).

EXAMPLE (main clause first):

I missed the first act of the play because I was late.

EXAMPLE: (subordinate clause first):

Because I was late, I missed the first act of the play.

Notice that when you lead with the main clause, no comma is needed, but when you begin with the subordinate clause, you need to set it off with a comma.

Notice also that the subordinate clause is a fragment; it cannot stand alone.

Because I was late, . . .

Well – what happened next? Don't keep me hanging! Finish the sentence with a main clause.

Here is a list of words (subordinate conjunctions, in case you're interested) that can be used to introduce a subordinate clause:

after, although, as, as if, because, before, even if, even though, for, if, if only, rather than, since, that, though, unless, until, when, where, whereas, wherever, whether, which, while

Your choice of subordinate conjunction will depend on the relationship of the two clauses.

Some more examples using some of the above words:

Although I had studied for the test, I was not prepared for some of the questions.

If only I had gone over the material from Chapter 4, I would have done better.

When you get a chance, can you check your email?

Now, let's look at some before and after examples of short, choppy sentences which can be improved with subordination.

1. **BEFORE:** I had to hand the project over to Max. You didn't respond to any of my e-mails.

AFTER: I had to hand the project over to Max **because** you didn't respond to any of my e-mails.

2. **BEFORE:** Another candidate with more qualifications applies in the next forty-eight hours. You should get the position without any difficulties.

AFTER: You should get the position without any difficulties, **unless** another candidate with more qualifications applies in the next forty-eight hours.

3. **BEFORE:** Viktor had prepared and practiced for the presentation thoroughly. The projector died and the presentation was not successful.

AFTER: **Although** Viktor had prepared and practiced for the presentation thoroughly, the projector died and the presentation was not successful.

Now, here's a few more you can try your hand at:

4. Keep calling our customers from last year. You make your sales quota.

5. The instructor copies his lesson directly from the textbook. The students lose interest and doze off.

PLAIN ENGLISH WRITING – Rule 15

Avoid disrupting your sentences with thought-stopping gaps.

Sometimes a “thought-stopping gap” is deliberate. This week I will be adapting some material from the Purdue Owllet to show you the proper use of dashes (also known as the em dash) to show an intentional interruption of thoughts, change of subject, or emphasis.

Here is an example of a phrase strategically inserted in the middle of the sentence, punctuated by dashes for emphasis:

For our vacation—which was much too short—we went to Florida and basked in the sun.

Another effective use of the dash is to introduce a sentence with a list, followed by an explanation of the significance of the items on a list. Examples:

Warts, buck teeth, and crossed eyes—he has them all!

New York, Washington D.C., and rural Pennsylvania—these were the cities most immediately affected by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

The dash is created by typing two hyphens in a row (the key to the right of the zero). No extra spaces are to be inserted.

Some writers use the dash as an alternative for parentheses (setting off material of secondary importance), colon (to announce a list), or semi-colon (to separate two separate but related clauses). Although there are no clear lines of demarcation, in general it is preferable to use the parentheses, colon, or semi-colon as they were intended to be used, and to reserve the dash for emphasis.

While its use in informal writing and dialogue is acknowledged, grammarians generally agree that writers should use the em dash sparingly in formal writing, as this will weaken its effectiveness as a dramatic tool. The Writing Center at the University of North Carolina explains that “Overusing dashes can break up the flow of your writing, making it choppy or even difficult to follow, so don’t overdo it”—Do you get my point?

PLAIN ENGLISH WRITING – Rule 16 (Part 1)

Tabulate particularly complex information.

The first time I read this rule, I assumed it meant to organize information into a table with borders, rows, and columns, but when I read Richard Wydick's book *Plain English for Lawyers* (which I highly recommend), I learned that it meant presenting items in list form as opposed to a lengthy narrative sentence. (Another way to remember its meaning is to look at your Tab key on the keyboard.)

K.K. DuVivier, author of a column called "The Scrivener: Modern Legal Writing," a tabulation is "a structural technique that breaks out complicated material into a laundry-list format" in which items on the list may be preceded by bullets, numbers, or letters.

EXAMPLE (without tabulation):

Webster's defines "readable" as fit to be read, interesting, agreeable and attractive in style, and enjoyable.

EXAMPLE (with tabulation):

Webster's defines "readable" as:

- fit to be read,
- interesting,
- agreeable and attractive in style; and
- enjoyable.

Here is the same list expressed as numbered or lettered items:

Webster's defines "readable" as:

1. fit to be read,
2. interesting,
3. agreeable and attractive in style, and
4. enjoyable.

Webster's defines "readable" as:

- a. fit to be read,

- b. interesting,
- c. agreeable and attractive in style; and
- d. enjoyable.

The beauty of this technique is that, using Microsoft Word, after the first two items are in place, subsequent items will be automatically listed in your chosen format.

As Ms. DuVivier notes, “Tabulations are often the clearest form to present complicated information for two reasons:”

1. Tabulations create white space surrounding each item, making it easier for the reader to assimilate the information provided in the text, and
2. The form itself allows readers to absorb information at a glance, instantly knowing how many items are on the list.

To that I would add that tabulation allows the writer to avoid drowning in commas, which could otherwise be confusing.

Reference

DuVivier, K.K. “Plain English Part IV: Keep It Straight, Tabulate.” *The Colorado Lawyer*. 27.7 (July 1996): 67. Web. 25 Feb. 2014.

PLAIN ENGLISH WRITING – Rule 16 (Part 2)

Tabulate particularly complex information.

How do you punctuate items on a tabulated list? Robert Dale, an adjunct professor of computing and Chief Technology Officer at Arria Natural Language Generation Software, advises that the items in a tabulated list should follow the rules of parallel construction and each be of the same structural type (typically noun phrases, verb phrases, or complete sentences).

Other tips for clear tabulations:

- Make sure that the introductory language applies to each item on the list.
- For a tabulated list of phrases, use the sentence style of capitalization for the entire list; each bulleted item would begin with a lower case letter and end with a comma.
- For a tabulated list of sentences, begin each bulleted item with a capital letter, as in this list, and end with a period.
- Each item on the list should be indented from the left.
- For items of two or more lines, use the “hanging indent” style (as in this list), so that all lines of text are aligned.
- Lists should have at least two items. Try to limit items on your list to a manageable number (no more than 6 or 8).

I would also suggest a variation of the short list, and that is a numbered list introduced by an underlined descriptive phrase, followed by an explanation or discussion.

EXAMPLE:

You have the following options for the format and packaging of your proposal. It does not matter which you use as long as you use the memorandum format for internal proposals and the business-letter format for external proposals.

- *Memorandum proposal:* In this format, just put the entire proposal into the memorandum. Notice that in the examples headings are used right in the text of the memo.
- *Business-letter proposal:* In this format, you put the entire proposal within a standard business letter. You include headings and other special formatting elements as if it were a report.

Run-in heading identifies the contents of the item.

Single- or double-space within and between items depending on what looks best to you.

Items indented 3 to 5 spaces and start with a capital letter.

Another variation would be to form two columns, for example, to match A term with its definition.

Reference

Dale, Robert. "LaTeX Style Tips." *Robert Dale's Home Page: Resources: Writing Advice for Students*. Robert Dale, 25 July, 2010. Web. 25 Feb. 2014.

PLAIN ENGLISH WRITING – Rule 17

Get rid of compound prepositions.

To elaborate on this week's rule, I looked to legal writing professor Wayne Schiess.

A compound preposition is a preposition consisting of a phrase. Examples include in order to, for the purpose of, with reference to, and in connection with. Overuse of this structure produces unnecessary wordiness. Wayne Schiess gives the following examples of how to improve your writing by reducing compound prepositions to one-word counterparts.

Poor

I prepared the interrogatories **in conjunction with** the Popsey matter hastily, **in order to** meet the discovery deadline.

Better

I prepared the interrogatories **for** the Popsey matter hastily **to** meet the discovery deadline.

Poor

The senior attorney said she wanted to discuss something with me **in connection with** my legal memo **with a view toward** improving my writing.

Better

The senior attorney said she wanted to discuss something with me **about** my legal memo, **so** I could improve my writing.

More examples:

More examples (from creativegenius.hubpages.com):

1. Use "how" instead of "the manner in which."
2. Use "then" for "at that point in time."

3. Use "from" for "from the point of view of."
4. Use "for" instead of "for the purpose of."
5. Use "although" for "despite the fact that."

An exercise for you:

The following exercise appeared as a contest in the March 2013 issue of the *Michigan Bar Journal*:

Below is a sentence from the old (before December 2007) Federal Rules of Civil Procedure. Notice the slew of unnecessary prepositional phrases:

"The subdivision does not preclude discovery of a report of an examiner or the taking of a deposition of the examiner in accordance with the provision of any other rule."

Readers were invited to submit their proposed revisions. The first two entries judged to be A quality would receive a copy of *Writing for Dollars, Writing to Please: The Case for Plain Language in Business, Government, and Law*.

Suggested solution in next week's column.

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PLAIN ENGLISH WRITING – Rule 19

Use phrases to smooth out the choppy noun-noun modifier.

Last week, we talked about how to eliminate unnecessary words by converting clauses to phrases. This week, we are going to insert a few words to avoid awkward noun string phrases--but first, let's take a look at the answers to last week's exercises.

1. Knowledgeable consumers who are looking for bargains often shop at outlet stores.

Knowledgeable consumers looking for bargains often shop at outlet stores.

2. The ideas which are presented in the essay are controversial.

The ideas presented in the essay are controversial.

3. While we were hiking in the wilderness, we encountered a mountain lion.

While hiking in the wilderness, we encountered a mountain lion.

4. Because it was looking for food, the black bear rummaged in our garbage can.

Looking for food, the black bear rummaged in our garbage can.

5. Those who wish to travel with us must be ready to leave on short notice.

Those wishing to travel with us must be ready to leave on short notice.

Now for some tips on how to avoid those annoying English language noun string abominations—a series of nouns that leave you breathless until you get to the end of the phrase. By that time, you have probably lost track of the starting point. It will sound so much better, and more conversational, to break up the string and form manageable phrases.

Here are some examples from the University of Wisconsin Writing Center:

Noun string: MHS has a *hospital employee relations improvement program*.

Revision: MHS has a program to improve relations among employees.

Noun string: NASA continues to work on the *International Space Station astronaut living-quarters module development project*.

Revision: NASA is still developing the module that will provide living quarters for the astronauts aboard the International Space Station.

Reference

"Avoid Noun Strings." *The Writer's Handbook: Clear, Concise Sentences*, 2012. Web. 9 April 2012.

PLAIN ENGLISH WRITING – Rule 20

Be fair and nonsexist, but don't be stupid.

Those are William Lutz's words, not mine. I would phrase it in a less insulting way—more like "Look for a neutral, nonsexist word."

The APA Manual has devoted an entire chapter to this campaign on eliminating built-in sexist bias in our academic writing and recognizing that one gender is not superior to the other. In addition, many editing houses, corporations, and government bodies have official policies calling for in-house use of gender-neutral language. In some cases, anti-discrimination laws require the use of gender-neutral language in certain situations, such as job advertisements.

This week, I have adapted some guidelines from the Boundless website for some tips on accomplishing this task.

In most cases of writing or speaking about a person of unknown gender, gender-neutral language may be substituted for the generic "he." This source encourages coining new terms for male-oriented ones. Some specific guidelines include the following:

1. Unless the context demands otherwise, use gender-neutral nouns and pronouns.

EXAMPLES:

<u>Gender Specific Occupations</u>	<u>Gender Neutral Occupations</u>
Businessman	Manager, Executive, Administrator
Fireman, Policeman	Firefighter, Police Officer
Housewives	Homemakers
Mankind, Manmade, Man-Hours, Man-Sized Job	Humankind, Synthetic, Working Hours, Large Job
Waitress	Server
Workman, Mailman	Worker, Mail Carrier

When referring to people in general, use alternative forms (he or she) or plural pronouns.

EXAMPLES: Instead of

Our home electronics cater to the affluent shopper. She looks for premium products and appreciates a stylish design.

Use:

Our home electronics cater to affluent shoppers. They look for premium products and appreciate a stylish design.

Instead of:

Before a new business-owner files tax returns, he should seek advice from a certified public accountant.

Use:

Before filing tax returns, a new business owner should seek advice from a certified public accountant.

2. Refer to individual men and women in a parallel manner (Mr. and Mrs., husband and wife, men and women).

Instead of: Mr. Sundquist and Anna represented us at the trade fair.

Use: Mr. Sundquist and Ms. Tokagawa represented us at the trade Fair.

Instead of: Men should proceed to the left, ladies to the right.

Use: Men should proceed to the left, women to the right.

4. In business letters to a generic recipient, use gender-neutral salutations.

Instead of: Dear Sir; Gentlemen

Use: Dear Personnel Department, Dear Switzer Plastics Corporation,
Dear Director of Research

5. Unless otherwise specified by the woman to whom you're referring, use the title "Ms." rather than "Mrs. " or "Miss. "

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PLAIN ENGLISH WRITING – Rule 21

Prefer the active voice.

Notice the rule states a preference for the active voice. It does not mean you must always use the active voice. Most of the time, your writing will be clearer and the meaning more direct if you use active voice.

What's the difference? Active voice proceeds from the doer, to the verb, and the object (if there is one).

A does B. **She studies** English at the university.

With passive voice, you begin with the person or thing that receives the action, and then in a roundabout way, proceed to the verb and the doer.

B is done by A. English **is studied by her** at the university.

Notice how awkward that sounds? Notice also that you can't use a single-word verb. To make it passive, you have to add a word or two to the verb. You also have to identify the doer by a prepositional phrase. This adds two unnecessary words to the sentence without adding meaning. Which is preferable? The first version wins the clarity contest.

The passive voice does have some uses, however. You may not know who the doer is, or you may want to focus attention on the receiver of the action, not the doer, or you may want to avoid naming the doer to avoid pointing a finger of blame. Here are some examples:

Last night my car **was stolen**.

The class **was cancelled**.

The records **were altered** without my knowledge.

Here are some examples of Active Voice and Passive Voice posted by the University of Wisconsin Writing Center:

Active: The candidate **believes** that Congress **must place** a ceiling on the budget.

Passive: **It is believed** by the candidate that a ceiling **must be placed** on the budget by Congress.

Active: Researchers earlier ***showed*** that high stress ***can cause*** heart attacks.

Passive: It ***was*** earlier ***demonstrated*** that heart attacks ***can be caused*** by high stress.

Active: The dog ***bit*** the man.

Passive: The man ***was bitten*** by the dog.