How to Write Clearer Sentences: Four Strategies That Actually Work

Clarity is the foundation of effective writing. You can't change people's lives with your words if your words can't be understood.

[Nico Ryan, Ph.D. Candidate](#)

Photo via @kaboompics via

Amongst both writers and editors, Strunk and White's ***The Elements of Style*** is one of the most cherished and celebrated books on writing.

The text's chapter on style encourages writers to "be clear" whenever they put words to paper (or screen) (1979, p. 79).

Here's what Strunk and White tell us about **the relationship between clarity and writing:**

> *"Clarity is not the prize in writing, nor is it always the principal mark of a good style. There are occasions when obscurity serves a literary yearning, if not a literary purpose[.] ... But **since writing is communication, clarity can only be a virtue.** And although there is no substitute for merit in writing, clarity comes closest to being one. **Even to a writer who is being intentionally obscure or wild of tongue we can say, 'Be obscure clearly! Be wild of tongue in a way we can understand!'** ...*
>
> ***Clarity, clarity, clarity. When you become hopelessly mired in a sentence, it is best to start fresh; do not try to fight your way through** against the terrible odds of syntax. Usually, what is wrong is that the construction has become too involved at some point; the sentence needs to be broken apart and replaced by two or more shorter sentences."* (p. 79)

Summarizing Strunk and White's **core claim**, here's what we get:

You must seek to write intelligibly. Your primary objective ought always to be to make your writing understandable. If readers struggle to grasp the meaning of your words, everything you hope to accomplish with your writing — bringing about positive change, inspiring people to take action, teaching a useful skill — becomes a moot point.

Clarity is the foundation of effective writing.

As an [editor](#), one of the most common mistakes I see aspiring writers make is writing sentences whose meaning is unclear.

They write in a way that (sometimes) makes sense to them but that appears confusing to others.

This is problematic because intelligibility is the bedrock of communication.

If readers can't understand your words, the 'conversation' between you and your audience can't ever get off the ground, so to speak.

Not only does unclear writing prevent you from effectively expressing your ideas, but it also frustrates your readers, inclining them to give up on you and to find somebody else whose words they can better understand.

Here are **four powerful strategies** for improving the clarity of your sentences.

Rule 1: Use Commas Properly

1. Use the [Oxford comma](#) (otherwise known as the 'serial comma').

Yes, this is ultimately a stylistic choice rather than a hard-and-fast rule, but the fact is that use of the Oxford comma invariably makes your writing *more* — not less — clear.

The Oxford comma is the comma placed before the word 'and' in a sentence that contains a list.

For example:

- *"I can take the kids to daycare on Monday, Wednesday, [←] and Thursday of this week."*
- *"May I please have a large coffee, a toasted bagel, [←] and a*

muffin?"

The Oxford Comma helps clarify potentially ambiguous sentences.

Consider the following sentences, the first one without the Oxford comma and the second one with it:

- *"I have nothing but respect for my best-friends, the President and Jeff Bezos."*
- *"I have nothing but respect for my best-friends, the President, and Jeff Bezos."*

The first sentence (*without the Oxford comma*) can legitimately be interpreted to mean my best-friends are the President and Jeff Bezos, which I assure you they're not.

The second sentence (*with the Oxford comma*) can only be be interpreted as referring to a series of three separate items, thus precluding any implication that the President and Jeff Bezos are my best-friends.

Yes, these — and virtually all other — sentences could be re-arranged so as to avoid any potential confusion, but it's often easier to simply place a comma before the 'and' in a sentence and be done with the matter.

2. Use a pair of commas to separate a parenthetical expression.

A parenthetical expression is a part of a sentence that 'interrupts' the rest of the sentence.

A few examples:

- *"The best way to see a country, unless you're pressed for time, is to travel on foot."* (p. 2)
- *"Her first boyfriend, the only man she had ever truly loved, had*

recently visited her city without her knowledge."

- *"Natalie Portman, the star of Black Swan, recently made headlines after she…"*

When used to enclose a parenthetical expression, you must use a *pair* of commas — not a single comma.

Use of a single comma in any of the above three examples would be incorrect.

3. Place a comma before a conjunction introducing an independent clause.

This is a complex way of saying: use a comma to separate a part of a sentence if 1) it's preceded by a word like 'and', 'as', or 'but' and 2) it isn't immediately dependent on another part of the sentence for its meaning.

For example:

- *"The early records of the city have disappeared, and the story of its first years can no longer be reconstructed."* (p. 5)
- *"I had promised my nephew I would arrive by 8pm, but my train is late and the conductor is no where to be found."*
- *"We often make mistakes in life, as when we disappoint our loved ones or fail to help a person in need."*

4. Don't use a comma to join two complete sentences without the use of a conjunction.

In other words, don't use '**comma splices**'.

A comma splice is the use of a comma *without* the accompanying use of a conjunction like 'and', 'but', 'for', or 'so' to join what would otherwise be two independent clauses.

Comma splices are problematic because they give rise to run-on sentences, and run-on sentences make your writing less clear than it otherwise would be.

A few examples:

- *"The dog over there isn't scary, the dog is cute."*
- *"We're not going to be late for the party, the party doesn't start for another hour."*
- *"You should have called me before you left, now you'll have to watch the movie on your own."*

There are **three ways to correct a comma splice:**

1. Replace the comma with a period, and divide the single sentence into two separate sentences.

- *"We're not going to be late for the party**.** The party doesn't start for another hour."*

2. Replace the comma with a semicolon.

- *"We're not going to be late for the party**;** the party doesn't start for another hour."*

3. Add a conjunction to the sentence.

- *"We're not going to be late for the party**, as** the party doesn't start for another hour."*

Rule 2: Avoid Sentence Fragments

First things first: I've written [an entire article on sentence fragments](#), which I encourage you to read.

A **sentence fragment** is a *fragment* — a chunk, part, or section — *of a sentence.*

By definition, a sentence fragment is **an incomplete sentence** because it *lacks an independent clause* ([1](#), [2](#), [3](#)).

An independent clause is that which allows a sentence to 'stand on it own' because it expresses a **complete idea**.

A sentence must always express a complete idea: if a sentence doesn't make sense by itself, it must be re-written.

Examples of sentence fragments:

- *"She was an interesting talker. A woman who had traveled all over the world and lived in half a dozen countries."* (p. 7)
- *"Her grandmother always baked cookies for the family. Two dozen chocolate chip and two dozen oatmeal raisin."*
- *"The best moments in life."*

In the first two examples, each of the latter sentences is a fragment because it can't stand on its own, i.e., it lacks a complete idea.

In the third example, the sentence is a fragment because it's only part of a sentence, i.e., it's an unfinished statement.

One of the most effective ways to make your writing clearer and thus easier to understand (and to engage with) is to ensure every sentence you write expresses a complete idea.

If the words enclosed between two periods don't make full sense on their own, re-write the sentence until they do.

Rule 3: Use Semicolons Correctly

The semicolon [;] is easily one of, if not the, most commonly misused pieces of punctuation in the English language.

Virtually every day I encounter incorrect uses of the semicolon, including by highly successful professionals.

To make things as simple as possible, there are only two things you need to know about semicolons ([1], [2], [3], [4]).

1. A semicolon is used to separate items in a list, particularly when one or more of those items contain a comma.

Examples:

- *"The New York Rangers must do three things to win the next game: play aggressive offence, which means digging for the puck rather than merely hovering around the blue line**;** crowd the other team's goalie, muscle the defenders out of the way, and make smart passes**;** and do everything possible to prevent the other team from scoring the first goal."*
- *"Set out what you need to bake: your ingredients, including baking powder, eggs, flour, and sugar**;** your utensils, including mixing dishes and baking sheets**;** and a print-out of the recipe."*
- *"Your argument fails to stand up to scrutiny: it has no evidential basis**;** it's awkwardly worded, difficult to understand, and contradictory in parts**;** and it's massively outdated, referring exclusively to ideas from the 1970s and earlier."*

2. A semicolon is used to join two independent clauses when a conjunction ('and', 'but', 'for', etc.) is *not* used.

Each string of text that appears on either side of the semicolon *must* constitute a complete thought.

In other words, a semicolon doesn't magically fix sentence fragments.

Examples:

- *"It is nearly half past five; we cannot reach town before dark."* (p. 6)
- *"Mary Shelley's works are entertaining; they are full of engaging ideas."* (p. 6)
- *"The experience frightened her last time; perhaps she won't be as scared this time around, as she's now a few years older."*

In all three of these examples, each part of the sentence — i.e., the part to the left of the semicolon and the part to the right of the semicolon — could itself be a complete sentence.

This is a requirement of using a semicolon under these circumstances; sentence fragments (incomplete sentences) aren't 'saved' by use of a semicolon.

This second use-case for semicolons also includes situations in which a conjunctive adverb like 'besides', 'however', or 'therefore' is used:

- *"I have a major exam tomorrow morning; therefore, I can't let myself go out partying tonight."*
- *"I had never been in the place before; besides, it was dark as a tomb."* (p. 6)

Please forgive me for yelling, but:

THERE ARE NO OTHER LEGITIMATE USES OF A SEMICOLON!

Don't use a semicolon to:

- Begin a form of correspondence, e.g., a letter or an email (e.g., "*Dear Derek; …*");
- Replace a comma except for in the above-described cases (e.g., *"If you want me to take a look at it; I will."*); or

- Introduce a pause in between sentence fragments (e.g., *"We really need to talk about; this thing that happened between us."*)

Rule 4: Put Statements in Positive Form

Strunk and White implore writers to make definite statements rather than rely on negations in order to convey ideas:

> *"Make definite assertions. Avoid tame, colorless, hesitating, noncommittal language. Use the word 'not' as a means of denial or in antithesis, never as a means of evasion. …*
>
> *Consciously or unconsciously,* **the reader is dissatisfied with being told only what is not; the readers wishes to be told what is**.*" (pp. 20–21)*

Our regular use of negation as a means of expressing how we feel or think is astonishing once you spend even a little time reflecting on it.

The following kinds of expressions are very common today, both in writing and in common parlance:

- *"How are you feeling today?" "**Not bad**, I guess."*
- *"What did you think of the film?" "Well,* **it certainly wasn't the best thing** *I've ever seen."*
- *"Is there something in particular you'd like to eat for lunch?" "Hmm,* **definitely not Italian or Chinese food**…"*

There's nothing wrong per se with using negation in your writing from time to time.

It can be especially effective when you pair it with positive (i.e., affirmative, direct, or definite) assertions as a way of providing even more detail about that about which you're writing.

In general, though, **you should use words and phrases that describe what something *is* rather than what something *is not*.**

This is because **positive assertions typically provide the reader with a clearer and more complete 'picture'** of what you're discussing than do negative assertions.

After all, telling somebody a triangle "*is* a three-sided plane figure" is more accurate and helpful than pointing out a triangle "*is not* a five-sided plane figure".

Here are a couple of examples:

"I wasn't impressed by her performance; she didn't appear to be focused" **versus** *"I was unimpressed by her performance; she appeared to be distracted"*

- "Unimpressed" and "distracted" signal to your reader the specific attributes you and the actress sense and displayed, respectively, whereas "wasn't impressed" and "didn't appear to be focused" merely point out what you and she *didn't* sense or display.

"He's not the most trustworthy person in the world; nobody has ever vouched for him" **versus** *"He's untrustworthy; several people have told me that he lies and he's unreliable"*

- "Untrustworthy" explicitly tells the reader that the person referred to in the sentence can't be trusted whereas "not the most trustworthy person in the world" doesn't. "Several people have told me that he lies" overtly conveys the fact that people have warned you about his character; "nobody has ever vouched for him" simply confirms this one thing has never happened.

Some more examples:

- *"Did not remember"* versus *"forgot"* (p. 20);
- *"Did not pay attention to"* versus *"ignored"* (p. 20); and
- *"Did not have much belief in"* versus *"doubted"* (p. 20).

Your writing will be clearer and more intelligible to your readers if you aim for the bullseye with your words rather than merely try to land an arrow somewhere on the board, so to speak.

Summary

Unless you're writing exclusively for yourself, which would be rather odd if you're publishing content on a platform like Medium, **you must dedicate yourself to writing as precisely as you can so your words can connect with your audience.**

> *If you want to impact the people who come across your work, you must do everything you can to remove the 'friction' that exists between what you write and what your readers understand. Remember, you can't change people's lives with your words if your words are incomprehensible.*

Committing to writing clearer sentences is one crucial aspect of creating the specific conditions within which to produce your most meaningful writing.

In summary, the four key rules for writing clearer sentences explored in this piece are:

1. **Use commas properly**;

2. **Avoid sentence fragments**;
3. **Use semicolons correctly**; and
4. **Put statements in positive form**

One last thing: *[Get my secret weapon for landing more clients as a freelancer](#)* ***and*** *[let me show you how to make your writing exceptional](#)*

Note: This article contains Amazon affiliate links.