

Writing Strong Sentences

1. Replace "to be" verbs (is, was, were, etc.) with strong active verbs.

Often this entails making your statement in active rather than passive voice.

Original sentence in passive voice: The study was designed to compare Motrin and Aleve.

Revised sentence in active voice: The study compared Motrin and Aleve.

This example is easy because the stronger verb is fairly obvious. In other situations, words ending with -tion are often verbs waiting to happen. For example, we can transform "frustration" into "frustrates," and "allocation" into "allocates."

Also, collapsing compound verbs into a single verb ("was able to evaluate" into "evaluated") rids your sentences of both dull verbs and a lot of clutter. For example, we can rewrite "This RCT was able to evaluate for potential harms" as "This RCT evaluated for potential harms."

2. Eliminate strings of prepositions (often a symptom of passive voice).

Original sentence: After a pilot study, the site of the research was located in the Kaiser health care system in California in the 1990's.

Notice all the prepositional phrases: after a pilot study, of the research, in the Kaiser system, in California, in the 1990's. We may not be able to eliminate them all, but we can tackle a few.

Revised sentence: This 1990 study was conducted in the California Kaiser health care system.

3. Be concise.

Eliminate clutter, which often appears in the form of prepositional phrases, but also watch out for the senseless and the redundant moments. Notice how, in the example above, "After a pilot study" adds nothing to the meaning of the sentence.

And beware of pairs of words which create a nice rhythm to your prose but say the same thing: "The effect was clearly statistically significant." Here the word "clearly" is intended for emphasis, but adds no additional meaning.

Also, expletives (there are, it is) often launch weak sentences: "There are many studies that show this effect. In one study..." The entire introductory sentence might be eliminated without loss of meaning.

4. Vary the structure and length of your sentences.

Your prose becomes choppy (and dull) when every sentence begins with the main subject followed by a verb, and when sentences are of uniform length:

Original sentence: "Two hundred patients with asthma were recruited. They all received albuterol"

We could improve these sentences by combining them:

Revised sentence: "Two hundred patients on albuterol alone for asthma control were recruited."

5. Show relationships between sentences.

Notice how, with the two original declarative sentences above, we cannot be sure what the relationship is between recruitment and albuterol use. Was albuterol part of the protocol or part of the selection criteria? The revision helped clarify this relationship.