

A Few Fairly Durable Style Guidelines

Adapted from Joseph Williams, *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace* (NY: Longman)

Tom Deans | David Portnoy

1. Avoid making a long, abstract concept the subject of your sentence. Instead, locate the main actor and make it the subject. Then place that actor at the front end of the sentence and follow it quickly with the verb.

An emphasis on non-adversarial possibilities for communication and problem-solving is a common point of emphasis the work of linguist Deborah Tannen and the theories of rhetorician Kenneth Burke.

BETTER: Linguist Deborah Tannen and rhetorician Kenneth Burke both emphasize the non-adversarial possibilities for communication and problem-solving.

Note how putting words between the subject and verb slows comprehension a bit, though it adds interest to the rhythm: Both Deborah Tannen and Kenneth Burke, a linguist and a rhetorician respectively, emphasize the non-adversarial possibilities for communication and problem-solving.

2. Begin sentences with information that is familiar to your readers; then introduce new and complex information.

The extra cognitive work that is necessitated to mentally reconfigure a sentence that starts with unfamiliar and complex information is something that should be understood by writers.

BETTER: Writers should understand that when they begin sentences with unfamiliar and complex information, they force readers to do the extra cognitive work of mentally reconfiguring the sentence.

3. To improve cohesion or “flow,” link the end of one sentence to the beginning of the next. That is, the new information at the *end* of the first sentence *becomes*, or at least *echoes*, the information at the *front* of the next sentence. The model: Familiar element A → new/complex element B. B → new/complex element C .

Studies of peer victimization have primarily utilized samples of middle class suburban European American children. While the prevalence and psychosocial correlates of peer victimization are established in this population, the ability to generalize these findings is limited.

BETTER: Studies of peer victimization have primarily utilized samples of middle class suburban European American children. In this population^{links to end of last sentence} the prevalence and psychosocial correlates of peer victimization are established, but the ability to generalize these findings is limited.

That their writing doesn’t “flow” is one concern that I often hear from writers. The cohesion strategies Joseph Williams offers in Chapter 3 can help with the nebulous problem of flow, or as he calls it, cohesion. The introduction of complex or “new” information before simple and “old” information within a sentence, plus a lack of creating of links between the ends of sentences and the beginnings of the sentences that follow them, are key reasons why prose doesn’t flow. The help that these two guidelines can provide can be enormous, if they are applied correctly.

BETTER: Writers often worry that their prose doesn’t “flow.” This nebulous problem, which Williams labels *cohesion*, can be remedied by applying strategies from Chapter 3. There Williams suggests that prose seems more fluid when writers do two main things: put familiar or simple information before new or complex information, and create links between the end of one sentence and the beginning of the next. These guidelines, when applied correctly, prove enormously helpful.

4. Avoid multiple introductory clauses. When the writer of the sentence below stacks one introductory clause upon another, we strain our brains, no?

For instance, in studies of violent crimes in adolescents, such as homicide and assault, victimization tends occur among approximately same-age peers, not unlike peer victimization, and adolescents of color, especially African American adolescents, are at higher risk for violent victimization (Eron, Gentry, & Schlegel, 1994; Hammond & Yung, 1993).

Retuning to guideline #1: Who should be the main actor/subject in this sentence? Where should that subject be?

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Sample Paragraph from mid-way through the introduction of a thesis paper:

Studies of peer victimization have primarily utilized samples of middle class suburban European American children. While the prevalence and psychosocial correlates of peer victimization are established in this population, the ability to generalize these findings is limited. Increasingly over the last ten years, ethnicity has begun to receive attention as a potential factor in the experience and correlates of peer victimization; however, these studies remain relatively rare. Studies of conceptually related forms of victimization suggest the experience of victimization may vary by ethnicity. For instance, in studies of violent crimes in adolescents, such as homicide and assault, victimization tends occur among approximately same-age peers, not unlike peer victimization, and adolescents of color, especially African American adolescents, are at higher risk for violent victimization (Eron, Gentry, & Schlegel, 1994; Hammond & Yung, 1993). Additionally, involvement in violence, including witnessing violence has been shown to be a correlate of peer victimization (Cleary, 2000; Nansel et al., 2003). Therefore, the study of peer victimization in African American and Latina/o youth is particularly important because it has been found that these youth witness significantly more violent events than their European American peers, regardless of income level (Crouch et al., 2000). This suggests that exploring peer victimization as a function of ethnicity is warranted, particularly in examining ethnicity as a potential moderator in the experience and psychological outcome of peer victimization.

[David's revision]

Studies of peer victimization have primarily utilized samples of middle class suburban European American children. The prevalence and psychosocial correlates of peer victimization are well established; however, the ability to generalize these findings beyond this population is limited. While relatively few studies address the role of ethnicity, over the last ten years it has increasingly received attention as a potential correlate of peer victimization. Studies of conceptually related forms of victimization suggest the likelihood of experiencing it may vary by ethnicity. For example, African American adolescents have been found to be at a heightened risk for violent victimization (Eron, Gentry, & Schlegel, 1994). Additionally, witnessing or being involved in violence has been shown to be a correlate of peer victimization (Cleary, 2000; Nansel et al., 2003).

[Tom's revision]

Most studies of peer victimization have relied on samples of middle class, suburban, European American children. In this population, the prevalence and psychosocial correlates of peer victimization are established, yet the ability to generalize these findings is limited because they do not account for diverse populations. Over the last ten years, researchers have paid more attention to ethnicity as a potential factor in the experience and correlates of peer victimization. While these studies remain relatively rare, they suggest that for conceptually related forms of victimization, people of varied ethnicities experience victimization differently. For instance, African American adolescents are at higher risk for being victims of violent crimes, including violence perpetrated by same-age peers (Eron, Gentry, & Schlegel, 1994; Hammond & Yung, 1993). Moreover, involvement in violence, including witnessing it, correlates with peer victimization (Cleary, 2000; Nansel et al., 2003). African American and Latina/o youth, regardless of income level, witness significantly more violence than their European American peers, which makes studying how diverse populations experience victimization especially important (Crouch et al., 2000). Clearly we need to do more research on the role of ethnicity in peer victimization and on its psychological outcomes.

Some places to go for further reading:

Williams, J., *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, or the trimmed down, cheaper, *Style: The Basics of Clarity and Grace*. NY: Longman.

Gopen, G. D. and Swan, J. A. (1990) The Science of Scientific Writing. *American Scientist*, volume 78. Full text available online: <http://www.americanscientist.org/template/AssetDetail/assetid/23947>

Bem, D. J. (1987). Writing the empirical journal article. In M. P. Zanna & J. M. Darley (Eds.), *The compleat academic: A practical guide for the beginning social scientist* (pp. 171-201). NY: Random House. Available via David's HuskyCT resources.

Madigan, R. et al. (1995). "The Language of Psychology: APA Style as Epistemology." *American Psychologist*, June 1995.