Unit II: Writing Documents

Writing Sentences

Organizing Paragraphs

Using Appropriate Style and Language

Writing Sentences

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Chapter Overview

Have you ever tried to use only complete sentences in a texting conversation with a friend? If you are seated in a diner and the server points at your soda glass and asks "Refill?" do you understand the exchange? Consider the context in which you have had these experiences and compare it to the context in which you operate as a technical writer. The gestures, facial expressions, and familiarity are typically not part of academic or professional writing – so the casual approach must give way to a formal and complete one to be understood.

One recent textbook, *Technical Writing Essentials: Introduction to Professional Communications in the Technical Fields* describes technical writing style this way: "Concise, clear, plain, and direct language; may include specialized terminology; typically uses short sentences and paragraphs; uses active voice; makes purpose immediately clear." (Last, p. 16) Keep this description in mind as you navigate this chapter and learn how important sentence-level skills are to technical writing.

This chapter aims to help you learn to write in – and edit for – concise, complete, clear, and correct sentences in formal documents with the goal of improving the audience's ability to understand and use those documents efficiently. You will develop accurate sentence construction skills, including ways to avoid or revise common errors; use correct verb tenses; and convert active/passive voice.

What are the important terms to review?

Active voice	Subject-predicate sentence construction in which the *subject* conducts the action described by the *verb*
Comma splice	Error when two independent clauses are joined in the same sentence by a comma without a coordinating conjunction
Coordinating conjunction	Joining words for use following a comma in a compound sentence; *FANBOYS* is an acronym that may be helpful: *F*or, *A*nd, *N*or, *B*ut, *O*r, *Y*et, and *S*o are coordinating conjunctions
Oxford comma	Comma included in a written list after the penultimate list item and before the conjunction linking the final list item
Passive voice	Subject-predicate sentence construction in which the *subject* receives the action described by the *verb*; often achieved by adjusting the prominence of the direct object

Run-on sentence	Error when two independent clauses are joined in the same sentence without punctuation or a coordinating conjunction
Sentence fragment	Error when a dependent clause or a phrase of any kind is punctuated as though it were a complete sentence
Subject and predicate	The subject is what or who the sentence is about; the predicate includes the verb and the remainder of the sentence
Subordinating word	Usually a conjunction, a word like the example *because* is placed at the start of a clause to show its relationship to the preceding or following independent clause; creates a complex sentence
Verb tense	Variations in verb forms intended to indicate *timing* of the action described by a verb; main divisions are past, present, and future tense

Sentence Construction

Writing complete sentences - whether simple, compound, complex, or compound-complex – is one significant skill practiced writers demonstrate. Similarly, good technical writers focus on being clear and concise, which may result in complete sentences that are shorter than those used by writers in other academic styles. Your challenge is to practice writing complete, clear, concise, and correct sentences and to explain the choices you make in constructing your sentences. In other words, it is important to have reasons for the words and construction styles in your technical writing. Gone are the days when "It just sounded good" is an answer.

University students learning introductory technical writing are expected to be familiar with the various fundamentals like the parts of speech; phrases and clauses; and distinctions between *independent* clauses and *subordinate* clauses. The idea, however, of writing short sentences that are also complex may at first seem counter-intuitive. For clarity, this section briefly explores the four sentence structures with examples. The following examples and explanations are adapted from Suzan Last's 2019 textbook, *Technical Writing Essentials: Introduction to Professional Communications in the Technical Fields* (Appendix E, pp. 247-249):

Simple Sentence

A sentence structured with one independent clause plus any number of phrases, such as:

- ✓ A simple sentence can be very effective.
- ✓ It makes one direct point.
- ✓ Is it good for creating emphasis and clarity?
- ✓ Too many simple sentences in a row can sound repetitive and choppy.
- ✓ Does varied sentence structure sound more natural?

Compound Sentence

A sentence structured with two independent clauses joined by one of the following combinations:

1. a *comma* followed by a coordinating conjunction;
2. a *semicolon* followed by a coordinating conjunction;
3. a *colon* followed by a coordinating conjunction; or
4. a *semicolon* or *colon*.

The clauses may not be joined by a comma without including a coordinating conjunction. By coordinating the ideas, you are giving them roughly equal weight and importance: see the following examples.

- ✓ A compound sentence coordinates two ideas, **and** each idea is given roughly equal weight.
- ✓ The two ideas are closely related, **so** you don't want to separate them with a period.
- ✓ The two clauses are part of the same idea**; thus**, they should be part of the same sentence.
- ✓ The two clauses may express a parallel idea**;** they might also have a parallel structure.
- ✓ You must remember to include the coordinating conjunction, **or** you may commit a comma splice.

Complex Sentence

A sentence structured with one independent clause plus at least one subordinate clause. The sentence may start with the subordinate clause that begins with a **subordinating conjunction**. This structure is used when the relationship between the clauses is such that one *depends on* the other to complete its idea.

- ✓ **When** you make a complex sentence, you subordinate one idea to another.
  (subordinate clause) **,** ***(independent clause)***
- ✓ **If** you place the subordinate clause first, you add emphasis to the main clause at the end.
  (subordinate clause) **,** ***(independent clause)***
- ✓ They decided to re-design the components **after** they discussed different options.
  (independent clause) ***(subordinate clause)***

Compound-Complex Sentence

A sentence structured with at least two independent clauses and at least one subordinate clause. The compound-complex structure is more likely to confuse a reader, particularly in a technical document, because its length can diminish clarity. There are times, however, when an idea is difficult to explain or a process has multiple steps, and the compound-complex structure

is preferred. Use compound-complex sentences only when they are the best choice for clarifying the ideas expressed by the clauses.

- ✓ I explain how or why something happened and I write a compound-complex sentence because it is easier to read than a numbered list.
- ✓ If writers want to use the compound-complex structure, they must recognize a dependent clause so they know where to place commas.

Sentence Construction Errors

Once you clearly understand the different possible sentence construction formats in academic and technical writing, you can easily recognize and correct errors by knowing the punctuation requirements for each sentence type. Consider the following additional details:

Construction type	Punctuation error	Correction measure
Simple sentence	Commas: used when not needed or missing when needed	Commas usually only appear to separate items in a list, after an introductory phrase, and in dates or addresses
Compound sentence	Comma splice – a comma between two independent clauses with no coordinating conjunction Fused or run-on sentence – two independent clauses with no punctuation between them	• Use a period or other end punctuation to make two simple sentences • Insert a coordinating conjunction after a comma between the clauses • Use a subordinating conjunction to make one clause dependent
Complex sentence	Commas: missing after an introductory subordinate clause Sentence fragment – often a subordinate clause ending in a period as if it were a complete sentence	Identify the subordinate clause: • if it is at the *beginning* of the sentence, use a comma at the end of this clause • if it ends in a period, revise by changing the period to a comma or remove the subordinating word
Compound-complex sentence	See those listed above	See those listed above

Verb Tenses

You already understand that verb tenses refer to the timing of the actions represented by verbs in your sentences. Careful sentence construction using the conventions provided in this chapter and in your grammar resources involves choosing verb tenses appropriate for the message you are writing. Nevertheless, college-level technical writing affords students with some new

opportunities to make decisions that can improve writing ability, and mindful use of verb tenses is one of those potential improvements.

Think about what you know regarding past, present, and future tense in writing. Now, when you apply that knowledge to the practical genres you are writing in for your college coursework, it becomes important to think about the purpose of your document as you make tense choices. For example, consider the following situations alone or with a partner in class: try to determine whether your writing will use one of the past, present, or future tenses.

Activity: Construction Errors and Verb Tenses

Read and discuss the following scenario with your classmates as directed by your instructor.

1. You are conducting an experiment in biology lab. Your assignment requires that you take measurements at 10-minute intervals for a total period of one hour and record each set of measurements, including the times you take them, in your lab notebook. Assume for this exercise that each entry must be a complete sentence.

2. After you complete the experiment, your assignment requires you to submit a lab report that includes the following sections: *Purpose, Methods, Results,* and *Conclusion*.

Work with your partner or discuss the example in class. Remember you must maintain a consistent verb tense within sentences. In technical writing, however, the tense may shift from one section to the next, so think about each section in terms of whether you are reporting things you plan to do or things you have already done. In this way, you can plan for the appropriate tense to maintain within each section of a report or other writing.

Consider the two examples of tense shift errors shown in the first table below. The errors are presented in **bold** in the left column; the explanation of the errors is in the right column.

A sample of 100 participants **will be surveyed** and **have anonymized** collected responses for further analysis.	Illogical shift: verb tenses don't agree will be surveyed = future tense have anonymized = past tense
A sample of 100 participants **were surveyed**, and collected responses **are anonymized** for further analysis.	Illogical shift: verb tenses don't agree were surveyed = past tense are anonymized = present tense

The table below provides corrected versions of each example in the left column with explanations of the corrections in the right column.

A sample of 100 participants **will be surveyed** and collected responses **will be anonymized** for further analysis.	All verbs are future tense in this sentence. This construction is an example of how you might write the sentence in a *research proposal*.
A sample of 100 participants **were surveyed,** and collected responses **were anonymized** for further analysis.	All verbs are past tense in this sentence. This construction is an example of how you might write the sentence in a *research article*.

Use this link to learn more from the Penn State PubHub handout *Using the Correct Tenses.*

Now, prepare to respond to the following exercise as you consider the scenario continued below:

First, record the information required according to 1. in the previous text box. Remember you are writing down the measurements every 10 minutes, and each entry must be a complete sentence. What *verb tense* should you use? Choose the best option and be prepared to discuss your choice in class:

- At 12:20 p.m., the solution temperature **was** 115.4 degrees Fahrenheit.
- The solution temperature **is** 115.4 degrees Fahrenheit; the time **is** 12:20 p.m.

Next, complete the topic sentences for each section of the lab report. Select the *verb tense* that is appropriate for the purpose of the section. Recognize that some sections will discuss work you have completed, while other sections may discuss steps you still need to finish.

Purpose: *I (will conduct/am conducting/conducted) the experiment to determine whether hot water freezes faster than cold water.*
Methods: *In our lab work, my partner and I (will use/are using/used) the following tools: …*
Results*: After recording all temperature data, we (will find/are finding/found)….*
Conclusion: *Additional data (should be/is/was) collected next semester to determine….*

Active and passive construction – what's the difference?

Most commonly referenced as *active voice* and *passive voice* in relation to verb styles, these two types of construction affect the message in substantial ways. Put simply:

- In an *active* construction, the subject of a sentence is *performing* the action; while
- In a *passive* construction, the subject is *receiving* the action of the verb

Here is an example of an *active* construction:

- *The research team developed an idea, pursued a grant, and studied possible solutions.*

What makes the example *active*? The research team is the subject of the sentence, and it was (in past tense) *performing* the actions of the verbs: *developed, pursued,* and *studied.*

The difference when constructing the example statement in *passive* form is that the subject – *the research team* – becomes less prominent because it is no longer "doing" the actions described by the verbs. In fact, the research team is no longer even the subject of the sentence.

Here is the same statement in a *passive* construction:

- *An idea was developed, a grant was pursued, and then possible solutions were studied by the research team.*

Talk with a partner in class and compare these two sentences. Without determining which sentence is "better" or "correct," write down all the differences you identify:

Considering the length of each example sentence, which is the most *concise?* If *clarity* is increased by placing the most important information at or near the beginning of a sentence, how is the information affected by active or passive construction?

<u>Why change?</u>

One essential characteristic of a successful technical document is this: regardless of the complexity of the ideas discussed in a document, the writing makes the message clear. Often such clarity is accomplished through deliberate use of active constructions that:

- Place the subjects at the beginning of sentences
- Place the active verb near the subject that is performing its action
- Reduce the total number of words in sentences by simplifying verb constructs

Just as active sentence construction benefits technical documents, passive voice best serves the needs of some situations. According to Suzan Last (2019, p. 49):

> While the passive voice has a place—particularly if you want to emphasize the receiver of an action as the subject of the sentence, or the action itself, or you want to avoid using first person—its overuse results in writing that is wordy, vague, and stuffy. When possible, use the active voice to convey who or what performs the action of the verb.

Additionally, you may note passive voice is traditionally used in academic lab reports and other writing that may require a more formal tone or avoids first person voice. When passive voice is chosen in such cases, technical writing may lose some sharpness and be less concise.

How to Convert

Your previous training in writing, including the courses and lessons intended to prepare you for college, may have focused effort on using a formal tone and constructing lengthy passages and paragraphs. Students at the lower-division course level of college writing often focus on meeting minimum word counts and avoiding use of the first-person at all costs. However, as you learn to develop documents for use by other, non-academic audiences, some of those absolutes that were presented as rules must be reconsidered.

Recall that the *active voice* construction emphasizes the subject performing the action described by the verb in the sentence. *Passive voice* construction focuses attention instead on the action itself and makes the subject less prominent. Both constructions can be correct and appropriate in a piece of writing, but authors make choices based on the message they wish to convey with the sentence. Compare the following two sentences:

- *Lee Harvey Oswald assassinated President John Kennedy in Dallas, Texas.*

This active voice construction provides the subject (Lee Harvey Oswald) at the very beginning of the sentence, immediately following the subject with the action verb (assassinated). Active voice in this example helps make the meaning of the sentence and its emphasis clear: readers can quickly identify “who did it” and “what he did.”

- *President John Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas, by Lee Harvey Oswald.*

Do you notice how the emphasis changes when the sentence is structured with a passive voice? All the same factual information is present, but the significance of the murderer’s name is diminished by its placement at the end of the sentence. The construction is correct in form, and the focus becomes “who (the verb) happened to.”

Activity: Active/Passive Conversion

Work with a partner in class and refer to your textbooks for various other courses. Review the chapter summary at the beginning of a chapter you are currently studying in the other class. Discuss the following items with your partner for each of your book chapter summaries:

1. Who is the intended *audience* for the chapter summary you reviewed?
2. What is the author's *purpose* in writing the chapter summary?
3. Identify the *topic sentence* in each partner's summary paragraph. If the summary includes more than one paragraph, choose either the first or last paragraph for this exercise (whichever is longer). Write your responses below.

Discuss each topic sentence with your partner. Determine for each sentence whether it is currently written in *passive* or *active* voice. How do you know?

Rewrite each topic sentence in the space below:

- If the original is *active,* convert it to *passive* by revising it to make the original *subject* the receiver of the action in the verb.
- If the original is *passive,* convert it to *active* by revising it to make the *subject* prominent, followed closely by the verb clearly describing the action taken by the subject.

Finally, talk with your partner and compare the original topic sentences from the text to those you created in the previous step. Which sentences are clearer and more concise? As a reader and a member of the author's intended audience, do you think the author's choice of construction was appropriate? Why or why not?

Homework

Developmental Writing Assignment
(Adapted from Last, 2019 p. 250)

Combine the following pairs of sentences (1. and 2.) to make one sentence (3.) in which one idea is subordinate to the other. Notice the impression you convey by how you subordinate one idea to another. If your combined sentence was a topic sentence for a paragraph, what idea would the reader expect that paragraph to emphasize?

1. Energy drinks enhance awareness and energy level.
2. Energy drinks have negative health impacts.
3. _____

1. Smith's study found that energy drinks can increase athletic endurance.
2. The study also found that energy drinks can cause negative side effects such as headaches and "energy crashes", and can possibly lead to caffeine addiction.
3. _____

Submit your responses in the manner and form required by your instructor.

Technical Writing Document Creation Assignment
(Adapted from Last, 2019 p. 59)

1. Revise the following passage – so that it is roughly half its length and contains no more than ONE "to be" verb – by doing the following:

   - Create an effective topic sentence for this paragraph that clearly indicates what the paragraph is about
   - Cut unnecessary words and phrases; eliminated repetition (look carefully for these!)
   - Combine and connect sentences logically; use effective transition words
   - Eliminate as many 'to be' verbs as possible (highlighted)
   - Eliminate sentence structure and usage errors (underlined)
   - The chapter "Using Appropriate Language and Style" may also be helpful

Energy Drinks are able to be consumed in many varied and different ways by people all over the world. Moreover, drinking these energy drinks is able to provide people in today's society with the helpful benefits of increased awareness and energy. Besides, even though there are enhancements that may be present from drinking an energy drink, the negative side effects are posing more of a threat to a person than the energy boost that is able to be achieved. In a survey that was taken in the United States at an American university, it was reported that fifty one percent of participants were consuming greater than three energy drinks each month in the semester (Jones, 2016). Looking at this statistic, it can be seen that a majority of students in university are drinking energy a large amount of drinks on a very regular basis. Which can be the cause of some health problems experienced by students. In the same study, it was also shown that energy drinks are capable of helping to increase energy and athletic endurance; for those who drank it. Despite the fact that there are some benefits to be had from drinking energy drinks, there is the problem of the negative side affects that are caused by the drinking of these energy drinks. However, the side affects that were commonly reported in the study are: headaches, and "energy crashes" (Jones, 2016). Being a potentially more severe problem than the minor problems of headaches and "crashes;" there is definitely the possibility of people which are becoming addicted to caffeine.

(260 words)

2. Write a memo to your instructor discussing the revisions you made in this exercise. Include your rewritten version as an attachment to the memo and explain both the *methods* you used in deciding how to revise; and the *results* you found that will help you revise your own writing to employ active construction going forward.

References

George Mason University Writing Center. (2017). *Active and passive voice*. Retrieved from https://writingcenter.gmu.edu/guides/active-and-passive-voice

Last, S. (2019). *Technical writing essentials: introduction to professional communication in the technical fields*. University of Victoria. License: CC-BY-SA-3.0. Retrieved from https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/technicalwriting/