Effective Writing Tips

Purpose

- It is important to understand the basics of writing before tackling any large piece of writing.
Tip 1.

Always use concrete language rather than vague language.

Vague:

- The weather was of an extreme nature on the West Coast.

This sentence raises frustrating questions: When did this extreme weather occur? What does “of extreme nature” mean? Where on the West Coast did this take place?

Concrete:

- California had unusually cold weather last week.

Tip 2

- Use active voice wherever possible. Active voice means the subject is performing the verb.
  Passive voice means the subject receives the action.

Active:

- Barry hit the ball.

Passive:

- The ball was hit.

NOTE: The part responsible for the action—in the previous example, whoever hit the ball—may not even appear when using the passive voice. So passive voice is a useful option when the responsible party is not known.

Example:

- My watch was stolen.
Tip 3

Avoid overusing *there is, there are, it is, it was,* etc.

Example:

- There is a case of meningitis that was reported in the newspaper.

Revision:

- A case of meningitis was reported in the newspaper.

Even Better:

- The newspaper reported a case of meningitis. (Active Voice)

Example:

- It is important to signal before making a left turn.

Revision:

- Signaling before making a left turn is important.

OR

- Signaling before a left turn is important.

OR

- You should signal before making a left turn.

Example:

- There are some revisions that must be made.

Revision:

- Some revisions must be made. (Passive Voice)

Even Better:

- Please make some revisions. (Active Voice)
Tip 4

To avoid confusion (and pompousness), don’t use two negatives to make a positive without good reason.

Unnecessary:
  ● He is not unwilling to help.

Better:
  ● He is willing to help.

Sometimes a *not un-* construction may be desirable, perhaps even necessary.

Example:
  ● The book is uneven but not uninteresting.

However, the novelist-essayist George Orwell warned of its abuse with this deliberately silly sentence: “A not unblack dog was chasing a not unsmall rabbit across a not ungreen field.”

Tip 5

Use consistent grammatical form when offering several ideas. This is called parallel construction.

Correct:
  ● I admire people who are honest, reliable, and sincere.

NOTE: that *are* applies to and makes sense with each of the three adjectives at the end.

Incorrect:
  ● I admire people who are honest, reliable and have sincerity.

In this version, *are* does not make sense with *have sincerity*, and *have sincerity* doesn’t belong with the two adjectives *honest* and *reliable*.

Correct:
  ● You should check your spelling, grammar, and punctuation.

Incorrect:
You should check your spelling, grammar, and punctuate properly.

**Tip 6**

Word order can make or break a sentence. If you start a sentence with an incomplete phrase or clause, such as *While crossing the street* or *Forgotten by history*, it must be followed closely by the person or thing it describes. Furthermore, that person or thing is always the main subject of the sentence. Breaking this rule results in the dreaded, all-too-common dangling modifier, or dangler.

**Dangler:**
- Forgotten by history, his autograph was worthless.

**PROBLEM:** *his autograph* shouldn’t come right after *history*, because *he was forgotten*, not his autograph.

**Correct:**
- He was forgotten by history, and his autograph was worthless.

**Dangler:**
- Born in Chicago, my first book was about the 1871 fire.

**PROBLEM:** The sentence wants to say *I was born in Chicago*, but to a careful reader, it says that *my first book* was born there.

**Correct:**
- I was born in Chicago, and my first books was about the 1871 fire.

Adding *-ing* to a verb (as in *crossing* in the example that follows) results in a versatile word called participle, which can be a noun, adjective, or adverb. Tip 6 applies to all sentences with a participle in the beginning. Participles require placing the actor immediately after the opening phrase or clause.

**Dangler:**
- While crossing the street, the bus hit her.
WRONG: The bus was not crossing the street.

Correct:

- While crossing the street, she was hit by the bus.

OR

- She was hit by the bus while crossing the street.

Tip 7

Place descriptive words and phrases as close as is practical to the words they modify.

Ill-advised:

- I have a cake that Molly baked in my lunch bag.

NOTE: cake is too far from lunch bag, making the sentence silly and ambiguous.

Better:

- In my lunch bag is a cake that Molly baked.

Tip 8

A sentence fragment is usually an oversight, or a bad idea. It occurs when you have only a phrase or dependent clause but are missing an independent clause.

Sentence Fragment:

- After the show ended.

Full Sentence:

- After the show ended, we had coffee.
References:

The Blue Book of Grammar and Punctuation by Jane Straus