



Clarity and Concision

Readers in all disciplines value clear, concise writing since such language makes it easier to follow complex ideas and information. Options abound for making writing clear and concise, but start by considering two main issues: 1) how you use “to be” constructions; 2) how you use prepositions.

Use of “To Be”

You may already have heard about the passive voice. It works well in some instances, but you don’t want to use it all the time. But you also won’t want to overuse “to be” in general because that can lead to wordy sentences, a hesitant tone, and repetitious sentence structures.

For now, rather than focusing on what the active versus the passive voice is, we’ll give you examples of sentences that use “to be” constructions and examples of how to reword them:

Original: The politician was interviewed by members of the media, and it was clear that the journalists were trusting of each answer that was given by the interviewee.

Revised: Members of the media interviewed the politician and clearly trusted each answer the interviewee gave.

Original: There must be a determination about what role we should play in preventing climate change.

Revised: We must determine what role we should play in preventing climate change.

Original: It is scientists who need to decide what genetic research should be pursued.

Revised: Scientists need to decide what genetic research to pursue.

Original: I was reminded about the film *The Stanford Prison Experiment* when reading about Milgram’s study.

Revised: Reading about Milgram’s study reminded me about the film *The Stanford Prison Experiment*.



Original: The public may be accusing the government when in actuality there should be more blame placed on private corporations for excessive surveillance.

Revised: The public may accuse the government for excessive surveillance when in actuality the public should place more blame on private corporations.

Original: It has been recommended that studying organisms in their natural habitat is often an effective way to learn about them.

Revised: Studying organisms in their natural habitat is often an effective way to learn about them.

With your own writing, begin by marking any of the following words: *is, are, was, were, am, being, been, be*. Then rework sentences to omit many of those words. You don't have to get rid of each "to be" usage (see the last revised example above), but using fewer will make your writing clearer.

When revising, you'll also notice patterns related to how and when you use "to be," so you can watch out for those patterns in the future. Consider whether a different sentence structure or even a different verb can make the writing clearer and more concise. Remember—you don't need to omit all the uses of "to be"; just use them sparingly.

Use of Prepositions

English has a lot of prepositions—about 150. Prepositions help to show relationships between words in a sentence, and they usually precede nouns or pronouns. A few common prepositions are *on, of, to, by, for, from, in, with, at, about*.

Prepositions are useful, but if sentences use a lot of these, the ideas are usually not as clear as possible. To avoid this, you can look over your sentences and can highlight ones that contain several prepositions. Here's an example:

Original: A focus on how childhood memories can be full of false information is a common point of emphasis in the research of Elizabeth Loftus.

The writer, of course, has a point to make, but the ideas are hidden under all those prepositions. Consider the clarity and concision of this revised version:

Revised: Loftus emphasizes that childhood memories can be full of false information.

To make your ideas clear and your writing more concise, check for how you use prepositions and structure your sentences so you only use very essential ones.

"He that uses many words for explaining any subject, doth, like the cuttlefish, hide himself for the most part in his own ink." -- John Ray, naturalist 1627-1705

