

Clarity Clarified

No. 40 in the Writing Center Handout Series

High atop the lists of Important Elements of Writing for writers, instructors, and editors is clarity. Yet unlike structure, organization, and thesis, clarity is not easily defined. The more effort you put into achieving clarity, the less work your reader has to do in order to understand your paper. This handout will deal with the issue of clarity in two forms—clarity of words and clarity of thought or argument. For further suggestions on clarity, see Handout 23: Revising Prose.

CLARITY OF ARGUMENT

- **Know why you are writing.** What is the purpose of the paper? Of each paragraph? Of each quote? Know what you want each paragraph and sentence to accomplish. Those purposes need to be evident to the reader.
 - Each paragraph should reinforce the thesis you have set forth in the beginning of your paper.
 - Each sentence should reinforce the purpose of the paragraph.
 - Explain your quotes. The connection between the quote and your argument isn't apparent until you make it so.
- **Make sure that what is holding your argument together—a thesis, a research question, or an organizing idea—is evident to the reader.** If you cannot state your argument in one or two sentences, it will be difficult for a reader who may be unfamiliar with your topic to pick it out.
- **Consider repetition of your argument as reinforcement.** Although you want to avoid redundancy, repeating your argument—in different words—and developing it further with each repetition can be helpful in making it clear to your reader.

CLARITY OF WORDS

- **Define key terms.** Do not assume that your reader has the same definition of freedom or masculinity as you do. Make sure to define technical terms, and also define common words that you use in a special way. Set up your definition early so that your paper works from these assumptions.
- **Evaluate long sentences and try to achieve greater conciseness.** Deliver the information as succinctly as possible. Complicated ideas do not necessarily require long, complicated sentences; actually, the more sophisticated or complex the idea, the more necessary it is to use clear and direct language to explain it. Sometimes long sentences are necessary, but avoid sticking on strings of dependent clauses.
 - Unclear:** Yossarian is a pivotal character in *Catch-22* because, despite his cowardice, which is not the insanity the military claims it is, and despite his bawdiness, which is actually an attempt to hold onto life, he defies the archetypal hero figure to represent the reality of the modern hero...
 - Better:** Yossarian's cowardice and bawdiness defy the archetypal hero figure, yet this conflict makes him a more powerful character in that he represents the reality of the modern hero.
- **Similarly, avoid using jargon and big words.** A sophisticated idea does not require overly erudite language. An academic paper can still be academic without requiring a thesaurus to supply the biggest word possible. Do not hide behind language—the strength of your paper lies in your ability to present your argument effectively, not your ability to use big words.
- **Use specific language; avoid generalizations.** Specific language is much more clear—and powerful—than general or abstract language.
 - Unclear:** The meaning of this assertion of femininity goes back to previous eras.
 - Better:** This interpretation of femininity dates back to the Victorian era. The pronoun "this" by itself is also an example of vague language. "This" should always be followed by a noun to clarify or reiterate its meaning.
 - Unclear:** People often ignore the homeless and turn a cold shoulder to the elderly. This is an example of the moral decay of our society.
 - Better:** People often ignore the homeless and turn a cold shoulder to the elderly. This apathy is an example of the moral decay of our society.

Remember that you're writing for an audience unaware of your intuition; you have to teach them. Lead them through your points one at a time, and explain everything. Use language that makes your ideas accessible, rather than language that makes your audience have to read your sentence, paragraph, or entire paper again to get your point.

For more information on clarity, see

<http://writing.richmond.edu/writing/wweb/clarity.html>

<http://writing.richmond.edu/writing/wweb/pronoun.html>

The College Writer's Reference, Toby Fulwiler & Alan R. Hayakawa, 135-84

The Elements of Style, William Strunk and E.B. White

Writing Clearly: An Editing Guide, Janet Lane and Ellen Lange

Writer's Resources: From Paragraph to Essay, Julie Robitaille and Robert Connelly



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