

Tips for More Effective Writing

helpful hints for
Continuing Challenge 2002

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Effective writing is often critical in the hazmat arena. We rely on well written SOPs, training manuals, and other reference sources to keep us safe. Good reports can minimize our liability and build stronger court cases. Additionally, people often make judgments about our credibility and professionalism based on our writing skills.

This newsletter contains some practical tips for more effective writing. This is a small sample of the wealth of information available in the book *Take Command of Your Writing* by Jill Meryl Levy. For ordering information, please refer to the last page of this newsletter.

Use the Appropriate Voice

There are two voices in the English language: active and passive. The *active voice* emphasizes the one doing the action. The *passive voice* emphasizes the person or thing being acted upon. The one doing the action may or may not even be mentioned in a sentence written in the passive voice.

Active: Firefighters decontaminated and treated seven people.
Passive: Seven people were decontaminated and treated by firefighters.

The active voice is more powerful, more interesting, and usually more concise. However, there are times when the passive voice is preferable. For example, the passive voice is useful when the one doing the action is either unknown or less important than the one being acted upon.

Active: Someone sabotaged the water treatment plant last night.
Passive: The water treatment plant was sabotaged last night.

You can also use the passive voice when you want to protect the identity of the one doing the action, such as when you want to protect a witness.

Active: Bill Petersen overheard our suspect threaten to blow up the water treatment plant.
Passive: Our suspect was overheard threatening to blow up the water treatment plant.

The active voice emphasizes the person or thing doing the action.

**The explosion killed one worker.
(active)**



The passive voice emphasizes the person or thing being acted upon.

**One worker was killed by the explosion.
(passive)**

Avoid needless shifts, such as shifts from singular to plural.

If a person mixes drinking and driving, they may end up in jail. (inconsistent)



Often the best solution is to make everything plural.

If people mix drinking and driving, they may end up in jail. (revised)

The passive voice is often used to sound more diplomatic, to soften the impact of a strong statement, or to avoid sounding bossy.

Active: You must clean up this site within the next 30 days.
Passive: The site must be cleaned up within the next 30 days.

Avoid Needless Shifts

A shift is a change in structure or style midway through a sentence or paragraph. Most shifts result in confusing or awkward sentences.

Avoid shifts in number (for example, from singular to plural). Making everything plural is often easier than making everything singular. Alternately, you can rewrite the sentence to eliminate the pronoun. Notice that the last example below is clearer and more concise than any of the others.

Inconsistent: If a person mixes drinking and driving, they may end up in jail.
Revised: If a person mixes drinking and driving, he or she may end up in jail.
Revised: If people mix drinking and driving, they may end up in jail.
Better: People who mix drinking and driving may end up in jail.

Avoid shifts in person (for example, from third person to second person). Put everything in the same person or rewrite the sentence entirely.

Inconsistent: If a person stops breathing, you can suffer permanent brain damage in four to six minutes.
Revised: If you stop breathing, you can suffer permanent brain damage in four to six minutes.
Revised: If a person stops breathing, he or she can suffer permanent brain damage in four to six minutes.
Revised: People who stop breathing can suffer permanent brain damage in four to six minutes.

Avoid inappropriate shifts in voice (for example, from active to passive). Sometimes a shift in voice is appropriate because it keeps the reader focused on a single subject. The following example shifts from an active voice to a passive voice, but the subject, *fire*, does not change.

The fire burned out of control for hours, but was extinguished by early morning.

If a shift in voice also involves a shift in subject (for example, from *we* to *the children*), the resulting sentence will be awkward and confusing. The following sentence was corrected by putting everything in the active voice.

Inconsistent: As we pulled up to the burning structure, the children inside could be heard screaming desperately for help.
Revised: As we pulled up to the burning structure, we could hear the children inside screaming desperately for help.

Avoid shifts in discourse (for example, from an indirect question to a direct question).

Inconsistent: I asked whether the product is flammable and, if so, is it within its flammable range.

Revised: I asked whether the product is flammable and, if so, whether it is within its flammable range.

Revised: Is the product flammable and, if so, is it within its flammable range?

Avoid shifts in point of view. Point of view refers to the person through whose eyes the story is told. The first example below begins with an observation made by rescue workers, then abruptly switches to the driver's point of view. The problem was corrected by writing everything in the eyes of the rescue workers.

Inconsistent: We found the vehicle resting on its roof at the bottom of the embankment. The driver struggled to crawl out through the broken window, afraid the leaking gasoline would ignite.

Revised: We found the vehicle resting on its roof at the bottom of the embankment. We could see the driver struggling to crawl out through the broken window, apparently afraid that the leaking gasoline would ignite.

Use Parallel Structure

To use parallel structure means to use like form or structure in your writing. In other words, when two or more items or ideas are presented in the same sentence or list, the wording should be similar.

Use parallel structure when two or more items are combined with words such as *and*, *but*, *or*, *nor*, or *yet*.

Nonparallel: Playing with matches can lead to *fires* and *getting burned*.

Parallel: Playing with matches can lead to *fires* and *burn injuries*.

Use parallel structure when presenting lists. Notice below how switching from *identifying* in the first sentence to *identify* in the second makes all the verbs parallel.

Nonparallel: Our objectives are to (1) *ensure* our personal safety, (2) *isolate* the area, and (3) *identifying* the hazardous material.

Parallel: Our objectives are to (1) *ensure* our personal safety, (2) *isolate* the area, and (3) *identify* the hazardous material.

Use parallel structure with elements being compared or contrasted.

Nonparallel: Roger decided to become a police officer rather than a career in the fire service.

Parallel: Roger decided to become a police officer rather than a firefighter.

Parallel: Roger decided on a career in law enforcement rather than in the fire service.

Use parallel structure.

Parallel sentences use the same kinds of words.

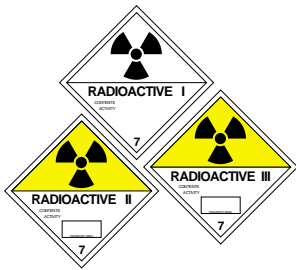
I like fighting fires, but not to find burn victims.
(nonparallel)



I like fighting fires, but not finding burn victims.
(parallel)

Avoid mixed constructions.

By doubling your distance from a radioactive source reduces your risk of exposure by 75%. (mixed)



Doubling your distance from a radioactive source reduces your risk of exposure by 75%. (revised)

Avoid Mixed Sentences

Avoid mixed constructions — sentences with two or more incompatible grammatical structures.

- Mixed:* By doubling your distance from a radioactive source reduces your risk of exposure by 75%.
- Revised:* Doubling your distance from a radioactive source reduces your risk of exposure by 75%.
- Revised:* By doubling your distance from a radioactive source, you reduce your risk of exposure by 75%.

Make logical connections — subjects and predicates that make sense together. The example below is subtle. However, *deciding to close the highway* is not really the problem. You can *decide* all you want to, but nothing happens until you *act*. Thus, it's really the *act* of closing the highway, not the decision to do so, that caused the problems.

- Mixed:* *Deciding to close* the highway caused problems for commuters all evening.
- Revised:* *Closing* the highway caused problems for commuters all evening.

Avoid Sentence Fragments

Avoid sentence fragments. A sentence fragment is a part of a sentence that is incorrectly punctuated as if it were a complete sentence.

Ensure your sentence has both a subject and a verb.

- Fragment:* Arrived on scene at 1357 hours.
- Revised:* We arrived on scene at 1357 hours.
- Fragment:* Her eye irritated. She complaining about pain.
- Revised:* Her was eye irritated. She was complaining about pain.

Pull fragmented phrases and clauses into nearby sentences, . . .

- Fragment:* We finally figured out who the bomber was. *Thanks to a tip from an anonymous caller.*
- Revised:* We finally figured out who the bomber was, thanks to a tip from an anonymous caller.

Or create two independent sentences.

- Revised:* We finally figured out who the bomber was. We credit a tip from an anonymous caller.

Avoid Run-Ons and Comma Splices

Avoid run-on sentences — two independent clauses joined without any punctuation whatsoever.

Run-on: The smoke was thick they had trouble advancing.

Avoid comma splices — two independent clauses joined by a comma alone, rather than by a comma and a coordinating conjunction (e.g., *and*, *but*, *or*; *so*).

Comma Splice: The smoke was thick, they had trouble advancing.

Either punctuate properly, . . .

Revised: The smoke was thick. They had trouble advancing.

Revised: The smoke was thick, so they had trouble advancing.

Use a semicolon and transitional expression, . . .

Revised: The smoke was thick; as a result, they had trouble advancing.

Or make one clause subordinate to the other.

Revised: The smoke was thick, making it difficult for them to advance.

Revised: They had trouble advancing because the smoke was thick.

Avoid Misplaced, Squinting, and Dangling Modifiers

A *modifier* is a word, phrase, or clause that qualifies or limits the meaning of another word or group of words. Modifiers include adjectives and adverbs, as well as words, phrases, and clauses that serve as adjectives and adverbs.

Readers generally associate modifiers with the nearest words they might logically modify. When modifiers are put in the wrong place, it can result in confusing, amusing, or embarrassing sentences. The following is an example of what is called a **misplaced modifier**. The first sentence implies the fire department does more damage than the fire. This is not the message we want to give the public.

Misplaced: The fire was extinguished *before any appreciable damage was done* by the fire department.

Revised: The fire was extinguished by the fire department *before any appreciable damage was done*.

When a modifier falls between two words or phrases and can conceivably modify the words or phrases on either side, it is said to be “squinting.” **Squinting modifiers** create ambiguity.

Squinting: People who drink and drive *frequently* cause accidents.

Avoid run-ons and comma splices.

In a run-on sentence, two independent clauses are joined without any punctuation.

Eye and head protection are required don't enter without it.
(wrong)

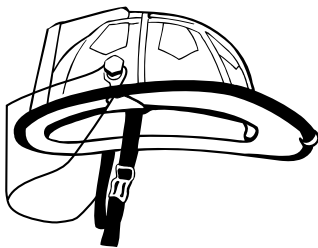


In a comma splice, two independent clauses are joined by a comma alone.

Eye and head protection are required, don't enter without it.
(wrong)

Avoid misplaced, squinting, and dangling modifiers that create confusing, amusing, or embarrassing sentences.

Being old and not up to current standards, we took the helmets out of service. (misplaced)



We took the helmets out of service because they were old and not up to current standards. (revised)

When you say a sentence aloud, you can use pauses and vocal inflection to make your meaning clear: *People who drink and drive—pause—frequently cause accidents.* However, someone *reading* the same sentence cannot hear your pauses and vocal inflection and may interpret the sentence differently: *People who drink and drive frequently—pause—cause accidents.* Even if readers eventually interpret the sentence correctly, if they had to read it two or three times to do so, you've done them a disservice. You can avoid this confusion by repositioning the modifier.

Clear: *Frequently, people who drink and drive cause accidents.*

Do not try to fix a squinting modifier by inserting a comma to make your readers pause. While every comma signals a pause, not every pause warrants a comma. It would be grammatically incorrect to insert a comma between the words *drive* and *frequently* in the example on the previous page.

A **dangling modifier** is one that does not clearly describe anything in the sentence. Although the connection may be clear in the writer's mind, it is not necessarily clear in the reader's. Dangling modifiers often result in very awkward sentences. The first example below implies that the chief (not the building) was totally engulfed in flames when he made his decision.

Dangling: *Totally engulfed in flames, the chief decided to let the building burn and protect the exposures instead.*

Revised: *Since the building was totally engulfed in flames, the chief decided to let it burn and protect the exposures instead.*

Here's another example. The first sentence below suggests that the subject of the sentence, *you*, might be ruled inadmissible in court. It says nothing about the evidence.

Dangling: *To be ruled admissible in court, you must ensure the chain of custody is unbroken.*

Revised: *To be ruled admissible in court, evidence must be maintained with an unbroken chain of custody.*

Revised: *For evidence to be ruled admissible in court, you must ensure the chain of custody is unbroken.*

Be Concise

Avoid careless and unnecessary repetition.

Repetitious: *The smoke-filled attic was charged with smoke.*

Revised: *The attic was charged with smoke.*

The key to eliminating unnecessary repetition is being able to identify words that can be omitted without changing the meaning of the sentence. Consider the following examples.

<u>Repetitious</u>	<u>Concise</u>
red in color	red
circular in shape	circular
dangerous in nature	dangerous

Don't fill your sentences with empty words. Many phrases can be replaced by one or two words.

Wordy: We had to shut down the highway *because of the fact that there was* an accident involving an overturned gasoline tanker.

Concise: We had to shut down the highway *because of* an accident involving an overturned gasoline tanker.

Unnecessary words and phrases make sentences unclear and difficult to read. Readers quickly become frustrated with such garbled writing and may even question the credibility of document and its author.

Garbled: The operations concepts addressed in this plan allow for the emergency response and mitigation efforts relating to a broad spectrum of hazards with which the site could be faced.

Revised: This plan contains guidelines for responding to a variety of emergencies that could occur at the site.

Legal documents are some of the worst offenders because the writers are so concerned about addressing every minute detail from a legal standpoint that they seldom stop to consider the individuals who must read the documents and implement the programs. The following example comes from *29 CFR 1910.120, Hazardous Waste Operations and Emergency Response*. While there are sometimes valid reasons for extra detail in legal documents, **don't sacrifice clarity by burying your message with excessive detail.**

Wordy: All suspected conditions that may pose inhalation or skin absorption hazards that are immediately dangerous to life or health (IDLH), or other conditions that may cause death or serious harm, shall be identified during the preliminary survey and evaluated during the detailed survey.

Concise: All potential hazards shall be identified during the preliminary survey and evaluated during the detailed survey.

Reduce your modifiers. Clauses and phrases used as modifiers can often be reduced to fewer words without losing emphasis or clarity.

Wordy: The boots *that have become contaminated* need to be replaced.

Concise: The *contaminated* boots need to be replaced.

Use strong verbs that get directly to the point.

Weak: We *made a search* of the facility all afternoon *with the hope that we might find* some clue as to who sabotaged the tank.

Strong: We *searched* the facility all afternoon, *hoping to find* some clue as to who sabotaged the tank.

Weak verbs are disguised as nouns and tucked into phrases. Weak verbs de-energize your writing. Consider the examples below.

<u>Weak</u>	<u>Strong</u>
conducted an <i>investigation</i>	investigated
managed to <i>escape</i>	escaped
made a <i>decision</i>	decided

**Be concise.
Don't let
excessive detail
or superfluous
wording detract
from your
message.**

**All suspected
conditions
that may pose
inhalation or skin
absorption
hazards that
are immediately
dangerous to life
and health or
other conditions
that may cause
death or serious
harm . . .
(wordy)**



**All potential
hazards . . .
(concise)**

Take Command of Your Writing is the first comprehensive guide to more effective writing geared specifically for emergency services personnel.



This book can help you present your ideas more effectively, regardless of what kind of writing you do.

Take Command of Your Writing

Take Command of Your Writing by Jill Meryl Levy is the first comprehensive guide to more effective writing geared specifically for emergency services personnel. The following are some of the key features.

- Each chapter provides a thorough coverage of the rules, answering many questions that other grammar books leave unanswered.
- The most important rules are highlighted in easy-to-read sidebars for quick reference.
- Thousands of examples make it easy to understand how to apply the rules.
- Professionally drawn illustrations provide an attractive, user-friendly format.
- A thorough index makes information easy to find.

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- Commas
- Other Marks of Punctuation
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- Subject-Verb Agreement
- More on Verbs
- Adjectives and Adverbs
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- Spelling
- Compound Words
- Finding the Right Words
- Capitalization
- Abbreviations and Acronyms
- Numbers
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