Many people believe academic writing is confusing and dense, that it suffers from a lack of clarity and concision. Clear and concise writing does not always come easy; it takes practice and plenty of revision. The following guidelines can help you get started.

**Passive and Active Sentences**
Favoring active sentences over passive ones is probably the most repeated advice regarding clarity and concision. An active sentence is one where the subject is the source of the action. Conversely, a passive sentence has a subject that is the receiver of the action. In the following example sentences, the subject is underlined and the action is bolded.

1. **Sentence using active voice:**
   
   *Captain America* defeated the Red Skull

2. **Sentence using passive voice:**
   
   *The Red Skull* was defeated *by Captain America*.

In both sentences Cap defeats his arch nemesis, but in sentence 2, the receiver of the action is the subject and Cap’s contribution can be eliminated. Delaying or removing the source of an action is what contributes to a sentence’s passiveness.

Passive sentences can contribute to unclear writing by delaying or avoiding direct reference to the agent of the action. Even if a sentence using passive voice is clear, it can still be wordy. Compare the six words used in sentence 1 with the eight in sentence 2. For more information and examples about how to reduce passive voice, see the UWC resource titled Passive Voice: What It is & How to Reduce Usage.

**Actions and Characters**
We can employ two general strategies to help produce clear sentences. First, we can make our main agents the subjects of our sentences. Second, we can use the actions of our agents for our verbs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Verb</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Character</td>
<td>Action</td>
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Now, let’s compare sentences to illustrate these strategies. Subjects are underlined and verbs are bolded.

1. *The zombies’ feast* of the survivors occurred.
2. *The zombies feasted* on the survivors.
Both sentences feature zombies as agents, but in sentence 1 the zombies are not the subject of the sentence. Instead, their feast is. The verb in sentence 1 is also less direct due to its position at the end of the sentence, but the verb is still weak in comparison to “feasted” in sentence 2.

Using subjects and verbs which do not relate to our agents and their actions can produce unclear and wordy academic writing.

Abstract Characters and Nominalizations
The previous guideline isn’t just useful when our characters are concrete, which is fortunate because in academic writing we often write about abstract subjects, including nominalizations.

A nominalization is the noun form of a verb or adjective. These can end in -tion, -ence, -ment, etc. The word “nominalization” describes this concept.

verb — nominalize        noun — nominalization

An abstract subject is anything that describes an idea or concept without a physical referent.

*Resistance has been growing to the perceived vigilante actions of the Avengers.*

By making abstractions the subjects of our sentences, we can use the advice from the previous section. However, since our audience can often be unfamiliar with the abstract subjects we employ, avoid using too many. Paring down abstractions will also lead to more concise writing.

*Example adapted from *Style: Ten Lessons on Clarity and Grace* (eighth edition) by Joseph M. Williams.

Further Guidelines for Concision

**Adjectives and Adverbs:** A carefully chosen adjective or adverb can enhance your work, but adding too many extraneous and unnecessary ones can lead to wordy writing that isn’t really very concise (such as this clause).

**Nonessential Elements:** These are words or phrases which do not contain information essential to the meaning of a sentence as a whole. For example: Fred Weasley, George’s twin brother, always manages his mischief. The phrase “George’s twin brother” is not necessary for the meaning of the sentence. See UWC reference: Nonessential Elements.

**Precise Words:** Favor fewer precise words over numerous vague ones. Compare “The Avengers fought a small, unplanned battle with Hydra” with “The Avengers skirmished with Hydra.”

**Meaningless Phrases:** Avoid phrases such as “in my opinion,” “it is important that,” “it is necessary,” etc. that add little to no meaning to a sentence.