

# The Writing Checklist:

This checklist supplements Joe Williams, *Style: Towards Clarity and Grace*. If you are not sure what I mean, read the book. This checklist will help you to understand my comments and help you to re-write quickly and effectively.

## Content:

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Does the author<sup>1</sup> fulfill the assignment.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Does the author make a clear POINT. Is the POINT true?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Does author introduce the POINT, the ACTORS, and the THEMES of the paper early in the paper.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Does the author develop the point by picking examples from the article and interpretation from the course?

## Style:

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Does the author make the ACTORS into the subjects of sentences, and the ACTIONS the verbs. Does the author avoid NOMINALIZING ACTIONS, creating abstract nouns to use as subjects, and relegating ACTORS to prepositional phrases and dependent clauses.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Cohesion I: Does the author start sentences with familiar material and end with new material? Are the topics obvious in each sentence.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Cohesion II: Does the author create coherent topic strings. Are the topics in a paragraph related – either linking or repeated.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Does the author avoid “elegant variation.”
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Emphasis I: Does the author put the important information at the end of the sentence.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Does the author make conscious choices of actors, actions, topics and stress to allow the reader to follow the logic of the argument and to lead the reader to an honest conclusion.

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<sup>1</sup>The “author” is you – the person who has written and submitted the essay.

## **1. Does the author fulfill the assignment?**

### ASSIGNMENT:

Find a newspaper or magazine article that is an example of one of the ideas developed in the unit. Write a brief (4-6 page) explanation of the how the article illuminates the point made in the course. Point out any way in which the example does not fit the theories developed in class. (Real life is rarely a perfect fit.)

Most common problems:

Author summarizes the article instead of analyzing it in terms of the course

Author summarizes the course instead of illuminating the ideas in the course using the article

Author writes an editorial about the topic of the article.

Author includes too much information, but does not develop ideas.

Do not include unrelated information from the class just to prove you attended class. Do not ignore material in the article that does not fit the interpretations from class. But do focus your essay on the central aspect or aspects of the article that relate to the unit in question. Do not include a lot of extra information you pull off the web or somewhere – extra information should ANSWER a question raised by article. Most people include too many facts, observations and details and too little development of any one idea.

Less common problems:

Author does not understand the article.

Author does not understand the class.

## **2. Does the author make a clear POINT.**

You cannot fulfill the assignment if you does not have a clear POINT. For this assignment the POINT will concern the overlap of the article and the course.

Lack of a point is the most common error in papers, and among the most costly. Without a clear point you cannot get better than a B-.

## **3. Does author introduce the POINT, the ACTORS, and the THEMES of the paper early in the paper.**

Don't hide your point. Your point should be found in TOPIC SENTENCE in your introductory paragraph. The topic sentence should come at the end of the beginning – that is, the end of your introduction.

Here is an example of an introductory paragraph. I am not claiming it is the world's best introductory paragraph, just that it is clear and readable and sets the reader up for the rest of the essay. The article I used was on the results of, and response to, a tri-annual report on traffic conditions in metro DC.

According to a new regional study, the highways in the “outer suburbs” of Virginia and Maryland have become much more congested in the last three years. (Lyndsey Layton, Washington Post, Thursday, Oct. 17, 2002. p A01) The reasons for the congestion are clear: too many people on too few roads. But is the solution more new roads, or fewer new people? That is the issue facing voters as they consider whether or not to raise sales tax by ½ a cent on the dollar to fund new transit and road construction in Northern Virginia. Supporters urge voters to vote yes, because new roads, subways, and buses will ease congestion and speed traffic. Opponents, however, urge voters to vote no, because new roads will only bring more jobs and people to the area. Only better planning can permanently fix the traffic mess, they argue. Who is right? An urban economist would point out that they are both right, partly, but they are also both partly wrong.

Okay, what have I done? First – can you find the POINT, the TOPIC SENTENCE for the whole essay?

Answer: It's the sentence “But is the solution more new roads, or fewer new people?”

I like POINT sentences that are questions – that is, I tell the reader what question I will try to answer. But I could also have written.

Some experts suggest we need more roads, other experts feel the answer is better planning of new development so that people will not need so many roads. Who is right?

What would a bad topic sentence look like? How about:

Experts differ on the solutions, and voters need to figure out who is right.

Just not enough information. This sentence would be true for ANY important topic in a modern democracy. It might refer to declaring war on Saddam Hussein, or fluoridating the water.

What have I done in the REST of the introductory paragraph? I have introduced the major elements in my story, what Joseph Williams calls the ACTORS and the THEMES. The “THEMES” (I usually think of them as issues) include the tax hike, traffic congestion, new roads, better planning and fewer people. The ACTORS include voters, supporters, opponents, the “urban economist.” The “urban economist,” of course, is you, the author of your paper, in disguise, applying what you have learned in Econ 350.

When you write your own opening paragraph, you will probably want to keep the same basic structure: Opening comments to introduce the reader to the topic (this is often a good place to cite your article, especially if the title is full of information); next your MAIN POINT (this is the sentence you are most likely to come back and change after you've actually written the paper); and finally, a few carefully chosen sentences that elaborate on the main point and introduce the main actors and themes you are going to develop in exploring and proving the main point.

#### **4. Does the author develop her point by picking her examples from the article and her interpretation from the course?**

This is, of course, specific to this assignment, not a general point for ALL papers. However, many, many essays in the Social Sciences have the same structure as this assignment. You, the author, try to explain some real world phenomenon by showing it is one example of a set of phenomenon, all of which can be explained by one, or a few, forces.

When you write the rest of your paper you will expand on the basic structure you sketched in your opening paragraphs. To quote Williams:

“When presenting complex new knowledge, first sketch a schematic structure that is too simple to reflect the complex reality of the subject; only then qualify, elaborate, and modify it. We have found that it is not effective to present new knowledge ...as a series of detailed, qualified, exception-laden observations.” (Williams, p. xvi)

Here, in the main body of your paper, you are returning to the topics, themes, and actors you raised in your introduction. Now that your reader is familiar with them, you can add the details, make qualifications, point out exceptions, and so forth. This is the place to develop the links between Econ 350 and the material, and to point out where links are lacking.

## Style

1. Clarity: Does the author make the ACTORS into the subjects of her sentences, and the ACTIONS into the verbs. Or does the author NOMINALIZE the ACTIONS, creating abstract nouns to use as subjects, and relegate the ACTORS to prepositional phrases and dependent clauses.

Chapter 3: Actions and Chapter 4: Characters in Williams covers this material – read it again. But for our convenience, allow me to repeat the conclusion:

I. Express actions and conditions in specific verbs, adverbs or adjectives.

II. When appropriate, make the subjects of your verbs characters involved in those actions.

Here is an example – a well written sentence from a real paper. See how I turn it into a “bad” sentence with a few deft changes that take the action out of the verb and the actor out of the subject.

A well written sentence:

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) claims that the subway will eliminate seven to eight thousand cars a day from the road. (Truban, Paper 2. p. 1)

ACTORS: The Metropolitan Transportation Authority, the subway

ACTION: to claim, to eliminate

This is a compound sentence, with a dependent clause, so we have an actor in the main sentence and an actor in the clause (introduced by the word “that.”)

Okay, now I am going to turn this into a BAD sentence by nominalizing the verbs. “to claim” becomes “the claim,” “to eliminate” becomes “the elimination.”

And here is the BAD version, with the newly created abstract noun, the claim, as the subject:

The claim has been made by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority that the elimination of seven to eight thousand cars a day from the road can be achieved by building a subway.

How to FIX your sentences.

1. Circle the subject of the sentence. underline the ACTOR.

Are they the same. If not, is the subject an ABSTRACT NOUN formed by nominalizing a VERB? Try straightening the sentence out by making the ACTOR into the subject and the former ABSTRACT NOUN into a verb that expresses the ACTION.

Okay, this was the short lesson – now go back and re-read Williams, Chapters 3 and 4. Practice on making good sentences bad and bad sentences good.

If you don't know how to find the subject and verb in a sentence first you should call Tony Soprano and take out a contract on your high school English teacher, because he or she was wasting your parent's tax dollars and your time. Then you should go to Amazon.com or Borders and buy yourself a book on grammar and learn at least the first three chapters.

And you should come and see me and I will show you were to find your subjects and verbs.

## **2. Cohesion I: Does the author start each sentence with familiar material and end with new material?**

Our rules are:

“Put at the beginning of a sentence those ideas that you have already mentioned, referred to, or implied, or concepts that you can reasonably assume your reader is already familiar with, and will readily recognize.

“Put at the end of your sentence the newest, the most surprising, the most significant information: information that you want to stress—perhaps the information that you will expand in your next sentence.

## **3. Cohesion II: Does the author create coherent topic strings. Are topics in a paragraph related, either linking or repeated.**

All sentences have “topics.” The topic is found at the beginning of the sentence; often but not always it is also the subject. The topic is whatever a reader thinks the sentence is about after she has read the first 5 or 6 words. The topic is the key to linking sentences together into cohesive paragraphs. We link the sentences in a paragraph in two ways. We can use the new material introduced at the end of one sentence to provide the topic for beginning the new sentence Or we can repeat topics several times in different sentences in the same paragraph, creating coherent “topic strings” which tie the work together. Here are two examples that work, and a third that doesn't. In the following selections I have underlined the “topic” of each sentence.

Each topic is taken from the end of the previous sentence:

Ex. Mass transit is rarely the responsibility of a single city government. City governments are eager to have a multi-jurisdiction Transportation Authority run the system. Then the Authority can take the heat from unhappy commuters when trains and buses are overcrowded and slow.

Or we can repeat the same “topics” in several sentences.

City governments are rarely responsible for local mass transit. The city governments are eager to eager to have a multi-jurisdiction transportation authority because the city doesn't want to take the heat from unhappy commuters when trains and buses are overcrowded and slow.

What we don't want to do is let the topics wander randomly. As I do in the paragraph below:

It is rare that mass transit is the responsibility of the local government. Transportation authorities that have jurisdiction in many localities are instead usually in charge. Then when overcrowding on buses and trains makes commuters angry they get mad at the Authority, not at their own city governments.

See how each paragraph contains the same information, but the third seems much more "disjoint."

Both the technique of "linking" topics and of "repeating" topics usually fit with our earlier instruction to move from old, familiar information to new, unfamiliar information when building a sentence. When we link and repeat topics, the "topic" of the sentence is "old" because your readers will have already been introduced to it. Often you will repeat two or three topics over and over in a paragraph.

Pick a paragraph in one of your papers and practice underlining the topics. Underline the first 5-6 words. Read them. Which words will a reader pick as the TOPIC of the sentence.

6. Avoid elegant variation.

Compare this good paragraph:

Often we try to avoid repeating ourselves. We want each sentence in a paragraph to be unique. We fear that our readers will grow tired of hearing the same words over and over. Yet in our search for variety we often lose the clarity which our readers value far more than they do any elegant variation.

To the "Elegant Variation" version (bad):

Often we try to avoid repeating ourselves. Sentences are written to be unique. It is feared that our readers will grow tired of hearing the same words over and over. In the search for variety it is possible to lose the clarity which the people who consume our writing value far more than they do any elegant variation.

And if this doesn't convince you, check out Lincoln's Gettysburg Address.. He repeats the topic/actor "we" seven times.

Summing up rules 5, 6 and 7:

Organize your sentences so that you open them with old information in the topic position, usually with a character as a subject. Then follow the subject with a verb that expresses a crucial action. Move complex information to the end of your sentence. Then be certain that your string of topics is consistent and appropriate. At this point, your good judgement has to take control. (Williams, p. 65)

### **5. Emphasis I: Does the author put the important information at the end of the sentence.**

First, find the important stuff. Usually this is the new information or the surprising results or controversial claims which you are trying to convince your readers to believe. Then put this at the end of the sentence.

Sometimes the fix is easy – move or eliminate meta-discourse and general modifiers.

For example:

Bad:

No one expected the fire to spread so quickly, it must be remembered.

Good:

It must be remembered that no one expected the fire to spread so quickly.

Often the important stuff is buried in the middle of the sentence. Unbury it. Either lop off the end of the sentence. Or move the end of the sentence to the beginning. Or divide the sentence up into two sentences.

For example.

Bad:

Great cities often don't develop according to their plans, although they were often begun with plans, and Washington DC is an example of such a city that turned out differently from its plan.

Good:

Many great cities started with plans, but no great city has ever turned out the way it was planned. Washington, DC is no exception.

The important idea here is the idea that great cities don't turn out as planned. All the other stuff – that many cities are planned, and the DC was planned, are probably things you already knew. They are also facts, not particularly interesting subjects for further development. But the new idea – that cities get away from their planner and develop according to their own logic – just might be the subject of the paragraph, or even the paper (or book). It definitely deserves to be at the end of its own sentence. The secondary, but still important, idea that DC follows this rule ALSO deserves to be emphasized, so I will need two sentences to do the job.

When introducing jargon, put it at the end of sentences, unless we are defining it. A definition should introduce the term first, followed by the definition.

For example, imagine I am using the term “sprawl” for the first time in a paper:

Bad:

Sprawl, the unchecked spread of low density development across the landscape, is blamed on the automobile by many modern critics of city structure.

Should be rewritten:

Modern critics of city structure often attack the automobile for creating sprawl, the unchecked spread of low density development across the landscape.

Elegant variation II:

It is okay to repeat yourself at the beginning of your sentences – where readers expect to find old, familiar things and they aren’t paying too much attention. However you should avoid repeating the same words at the END of sentences, where readers are looking for new information and are paying close attention.

For example:

When oil prices leapt in the 1970s several large cities started building subways. Because the Federal government was willing to subsidize construction these cities did not fully investigate the costs of subways.

Instead, try a variation (in this case, just dropping the prepositional phrase):

When oil prices leapt in the 1970s several large cities started building subway systems. Because the Federal government was willing to subsidize construction, these cities did not fully investigate the costs.

And try to avoid repeating the same word in a single sentence!

**6. Does the author make conscious choices of actors, actions, topics and stress to allow the reader to follow the logic of the argument and to lead the reader to an honest conclusion.**

There are two dangers:

You may relinquish control, allowing the random variations natural to a first draft distract and confuse the reader. Or you may abuse your control, using your knowledge of how readers read to distract or confuse on purpose.

When you control your own rhetoric you control a tool of immense power. I expect you to use this power responsibly. Once you know how to make yourself clear, you also know how to make

yourself unclear. I expect you to avoid actively misleading readers by hiding actors, deflecting action, and stressing the unimportant while concealing the vital. For example, what if I am an auto manufacturer writing a recall letter. Should I write:

In certain instances it is possible that the vehicle brake assembly was inadvertently installed in a manner that will require adjustment to prevent unexpected cessation of function.

Instead of:

It is possible that we did not properly install the brake in your car and your brakes may fail suddenly. Please return your car to nearest service center for immediate adjustment.

But few authors hide their actors, nominalize their actions, allow their topics to wander and put trivial information at the end of sentences because they wish to conceal or confuse their readers. They do so because they haven't thought through their rhetoric. Once you have thought through your rhetoric you have the power to manipulate it. But even within the range of honest rhetoric, you have lots of choices. By choosing your actors and actions, by choosing your topic strings and your sentence endings you can shape your readers response to your argument. As an example of the power of choosing your actors on purpose, I would like you to go back and have a look at the introductory paragraph I wrote above. I wrote:

“But is the solution more new roads, or fewer new people?”

I could have said:

“But is the solution more new roads, or less new development?”

It means the same thing – after all, the new houses don't get into cars and drive down I-66, the people who live in them do. The words you pick to be your themes have emotional connotations as well as factual content. In the current debate, “development” has bad connotations. Evil, money-grubbing developers who force innocent farmers off their land, cut down beautiful groves of trees, and throw up vulgar, oversized McMansions are bad. But people have good connotations. Hardworking people searching for comfortable, affordable housing where their children can grow up safe from urban temptations and dangers are good.

When you write on purpose you pick the vocabulary. Don't lie. Don't cheat. But don't unthinkingly adopt your opponents vocabulary, either.

How to rewrite:

Which do I do first, fix the style or fix the content?

It doesn't matter. It is MUCH more important that you get STARTED.

I often start by fixing the STYLE first. I find and fix the nominalizations. Then I work on the sentence structure: old to new. Then I work on the paragraph structure – a main POINT and coherent TOPICS. Then, once I've got the sentences all right side out and the paragraph in order I can actually TELL if I've said what I was trying to say.

I also often start with STYLE because it is easier to fix sentences and paragraphs then to try to re-arrange the whole paper cold turkey. After you've been working on your sentences and paragraphs for 30-40 minutes you will KNOW what you've said, and what you were trying to say, and you can start moving big chunks around, or adding stuff, or taking stuff out.

You will find yourself going back and forth – as you fix STYLE, you'll see changes you want to make in the content: both what you say and the order in which you say it. When you add new content, or move old content around, your style will decay again. That's normal. This isn't a test to see if you can write better first drafts. This is a method for getting from your first draft, whatever it looks like, to a good last draft.

A very useful technique for discovering your topic strings and actors: Run a line under the first five or six words in every sentence (and under the subject in every subordinate clause, too, if you use a lot of them.) This should be where you find: a) your actors and b) your topics. If the actors are missing, find'em. If the topics wander all over the map, kick out the interlopers so your topics are a consistent "family."

In conclusion, writing is only the beginning. Re-writing is where the real paper is born. Only when you re-write will you be able to take control of what you have said and how your reader will read it. It is my hope that these lessons, cribbed directly from Joe Williams, give you a plan, a way to re-write. However they cannot tell you WHAT to say. That is still your job.

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November 2003

References:

Williams, Joseph M. 2003. *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*. Seventh Edition. University of Chicago Press.