

## Chapter

## 2

## Style and Effect

## Focus:

- Style, format and genre
- Types of style
- Clearly, accurate and concise writing
- Cohesion

Even if you have all the conceptual aspects of a written project thought out, and have a plan of the information that you want to communicate, you may find that you get stuck in some other areas. For example, you may find that you have difficulty in putting ideas into words, cannot think how to begin, or how to end, a sentence, or find that your sentences are invariably too short, too long, unclear or monotonous. Furthermore, since style differs quite drastically from spoken to written form, attempting to write as you speak can only lead to ineffective communication (unless, of course, you are writing dialogue). As the poet T. S. Eliot famously once said, 'if we spoke as we write, we would find nobody to listen; if we wrote as we speak, we would find nobody to read'. This chapter gives insights into recognising and choosing appropriate style and expression for particular genres, and in constructing sentences in an effective and clear manner.

The chapter looks at *style* in terms of *word choice* and *sentence structure*. It explains how a particular arrangement of words emphasises different elements and produces varying degrees of objectivity and subjectivity. The components of style are *balance*, *emphasis*, *degree of formality* (*register*) and *tone*. Like the clothes we wear, our hairstyle and the way we move give away much about our status, personality and cultural affiliations, choice of style and grammar tells readers whether what we say concerns them, and whether they should read it as serious, humorous, urgent and so on. Stylistic choices 'colour' writing, making the first and longest lasting impression.

## A typology of style

Classifications and typologies impose sometimes artificial boundaries between elements that are often as inclusive as they are exclusive. They can be useful, however, in highlighting similarities and differences in the composition of these elements. The following typology of style is intended as a continuum, with writing addressed to a broad audience at one end, and writing addressed to a specialised audience at the other. This typology presents some criteria that could be used to discern and understand stylistic choices that produce different effects, and that are conventionally expected in different contexts of communication. Just as it is inappropriate to attend an executive board meeting in your pyjamas, so it would be inappropriate to adopt an informal style for a formal occasion and vice versa.

In many cases, written material can be classified as a certain document format. As a simple illustration of this point, think about how a shopping list looks when compared with a car manual, or a letter compared with a film script. Knowing what genre we are reading helps to clue us into what sort of language we might expect the writers to use, how they will organise their material, whether they are likely to include graphs and other visuals and so on.

For our purposes, we can distinguish three main categories of writing style: *specialist*, *journalistic* and *creative*. Although some genres are associated with a particular type of style, styles can be mixed, depending on the writer's intended effect, and are not strictly bound by genre conventions. The basic criteria for selecting a writing style are the audience you are addressing and the effect you intend to have on it.

Business reports tend to be written in specialist style, but their degree of formality varies according to the company's 'personality' – more hip companies would favour a less formal style than more traditional ones. National culture also plays a role in selecting a style. For instance, American, Australian and New Zealand businesses tend to use a less formal, and more direct, style than British companies, while Asian companies tend to use the most formal, and most indirect, style of English. Such factors show that cultural perceptions of politeness and interpersonal relationships are important in analysing differences in stylistic choices (for politeness in communication, see Holmes and Stubbe 2003; Watts 2003).

Journalistic style, as the title suggests, is found in journalistic texts such as magazine and newsletter articles. It is also used in public relations documents and documents that are addressed to the broad public. How 'chatty' such documents become depends on the publication and context.

Creative style is arguably the most complex because it can be found in a variety of genres. Fiction genres, especially poetry, are associated with this style, but fictional texts include a variety of styles. For example, some science fiction texts are written extensively in specialist style even though their content is based primarily on imagination.

So, what are the distinguishing features of each type of style? The following sections describe them.

### Specialist style

At one end of the style continuum is specialist style, which is suitable for an audience with a specific interest in the topic. These readers may be managers, administering the business aspects of your professional field (as in reports to management or to team members), or they may have a practical interest in accessing the knowledge offered, often because they want expert advice on how to solve a problem (as in reports to clients and shareholders). Characteristics of this style are:

- strong use of quantitative or quantifiable information: where possible give numbers, facts and measurable data – but make sure you explain them
- factual tone produced by minimal use of evaluative adjectives: avoid words that show personal response, such as ‘wonderful’, ‘horrible’, ‘delightful’, ‘heartbreaking’, etc.
- use of abstract entities as agents of actions rather than people: where possible, use words that refer to things as agents in your sentence. For example, write ‘The project is developing on time’ instead of ‘I am developing the project on time’, and ‘Data suggest...’ instead of ‘I think...’. This helps to focus on facts and observable elements rather than people
- focus on the topic rather than on readers’ anticipated response towards it: avoid using direct questions, such as ‘don’t you think that...?’ or ‘wouldn’t you...?’, and expressions that attempt to tangle the reader in appeals to common sense, such as ‘we all feel that...’, ‘of course, everybody knows...’. The ‘you’ approach is a feature of journalistic writing: avoid it in specialist style
- description and analysis of topic, presented with critical distance: describe a situation objectively, even if you have strong feelings about it
- use of complete words. Avoid the use of contractions (it’s – it is, haven’t – have not, etc.), as they give writing a ‘spoken’ or ‘chatty’ tone.

Here is an extract from a report written by the IT manager of an insurance company to department managers, on the dangers of new

computer viruses for the functioning of the company’s network. Notice the direct approach tackling the main topic immediately, the use of specifics, such as names and dates, and the impersonal presentation of facts.

This report examines the type of computer viruses that are currently circulating and that constitute the greatest threat to the company’s network system during 2014. The viruses discussed are Sircam, Love Bug and Code Red. These are especially destructive and attack the operating system. Given the insidious nature of these viruses, prevention is very important. All employees should follow these precautions:

- Make sure the anti-virus software installed on all computers is functioning and updated. Check the bottom right corner of screens for an icon of a sealed computer monitor. If this is not there, contact the System Support section immediately.
- Do not open any suspicious email attachments. Open only those attachments that you are expecting or that are clearly justified.
- Make sure all important files are backed up so that information can be retrieved even if a virus attacks deletes files.

### Journalistic style

Because it addresses a very wide audience, and comes in a variety of formats, journalistic style is more complex and harder to define. The main purposes of documents written in this style are to inform the public of a development or event, to entertain them by presenting a personal commentary on an issue that is of collective concern, or to influence and motivate them to adopt a certain attitude towards an issue. In this respect, anything that popularises a subject would use journalistic techniques to an extent. Popular science, for instance, is written in this style. In fact, even some academic or professional textbooks, including this one, are written in journalistic style, as they, too, aim to present specialist information in a readily accessible manner that can be understood by non-specialists.

Journalistic writing can vary from factual (such as reporting news stories), to informative (such as the scripting of scientific documentaries), to promotional (such as marketing products in business publications), to denagogic (such as the opinionated and often polemic style of editorials). Chapter 5 is devoted to an analysis of journalistic writing.

As regards style, the general characteristics of journalistic writing are:

- chatty tone produced by colloquial words and phrases, question–answer format and sentence fragments

- appeal to emotion and common sense
- consistent use of generalities and exaggeration
- consistent use of imperatives (sentences that begin with command words), and exclamations
- direct address to the reader: 'you' and 'we'
- dramatisation of events through use of colourful metaphors and visual language.

Here is an extract from a journalistic piece written by the same IT manager who wrote the specialist example of the previous section. This time the manager is writing for the IT column of a local newspaper, and dealing with the same topic as his report – computer viruses. Notice the chatty tone, the direct address to the reader and the use of humorous exaggeration:

Be prepared for Armageddon. Just as you are farewelling last year's unprecedented cataclysm of computer viruses, a whole new army – better, smarter and stronger – is marching in.

What can you do? Sit tight. If you don't already own anti-virus software, invest in some. If somebody sends you a love email, resist the temptation – don't open it. Love Bug is rampant. In case the worst happens, copy your files on memory sticks and CDs. Remember, do something before a virus attacks: better safe than sorry!

To better understand the difference between specialist and journalistic styles, compare the following two extracts. Both were written by biologist Frank A. Brown, but for two different publications. The first was written for a specialist scholarly journal, addressed to expert peers, while the second was published in a popular science magazine, addressed to a wider, and therefore less technically versed, audience. Both extracts deal with the same topic but present this topic differently to suit the knowledge and interests of the respective audiences.

A deep-seated, persistent, rhythmic nature, with periods identical with or close to the major natural geophysical ones, appears increasingly to be a universal biological property. Striking published correlations of activity of hermetically sealed organisms with unpredictable weather-associated atmospheric temperature and pressure changes, and with day to day irregularities in the variations in primary cosmic and general background radiations, compel the conclusion that some, normally uncontrolled, subtle pervasive forces must be effective for living systems. The earth's natural electrostatic

field may be one contributing factor. (Published in *Biological Bulletin*, – Brown 1962.)

Everyone knows that there are individuals who are able to awaken morning after morning at the same time to within a few minutes. Are they awakened by sensory cues received unconsciously, or is there some 'biological clock' that keeps accurate account of the passage of time? Students of the behavior of animals in relation to their environment have long been interested in the biological clock question. (Published in *Scientific American* – Brown 1954.)

The first extract, written in a high degree of specialist style, is almost undecipherable by a lay audience. Some features that produce this effect are strong presence of technical jargon, long sentences, and emphasis on abstract entities and processes with no mention of human agents or personal concerns. The second extract, written in journalistic style, 'interprets' the technical information by associating it to personal, everyday experience. Some features that demonstrate this are rhetorical questions, use of metaphor ('biological clock') and generalisation ('everyone knows').

### Creative style

As noted above, creative style is an umbrella term encompassing a variety of techniques, generally associated with fictional writing – although it is also used in some journalistic genres, such as 'creative non-fiction'. The main aims of creative style are: a) to draw attention to language processes themselves, rather than to events or objects in the objective world; and/or b) to evoke images in the reader's mind through linguistic symbolism such as metaphor. Creative style is not covered in this book, but it is useful to include a brief description in order to contrast it to the other stylistic types that we discuss.

For an example consider this extract from William Gibson's 1984 novel *Neuromancer* (this is the work, incidentally, that introduced the term 'cyberspace' into English):

Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts. A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding... (Gibson 1984: 510).

Although this extract describes an abstract concept, cyberspace, it does so by creating mental images and arousing an emotional response, rather than by detailing the technical specifics of the concept. The features that create this effect include the use of fragments (all six sentences are fragments), the strategic use of metaphor ('consensual hallucination'), analogies to common experiences ('like city lights...') and superlative expressions ('every nation', 'every computer', 'unthinkable complexity').

### The three 'Golden Rules' of professional writing

Regardless of genre and style, effective professional writers follow three basic rules: *clarity*, *accuracy* and *conciseness*. These rules can be traced back to the 1970s when the Plain English campaign that was launched in most English-speaking countries helped to re-conceptualise business and government communication. The main aim of the Plain English campaign was that documents intended for the broad public should be easily understandable. The campaigners criticised the existing belief that formal writing should be technical, impersonal and passive, in order to be respectable and authoritative. Instead they emphasised the importance of communicative value: if readers cannot understand what a document says, how can they be persuaded by the content or be expected to follow the regulations described? Since then, audience research has refined the guidelines for professional writing, and this research informs the way in which many corporate and governmental style guides are designed. Writers spend a lot of time researching and thinking about the best words and sentence structures to create the desired effect on target audiences. To be successful as a writer, and especially one with a serious public responsibility, you must have an eye for detail. As Stephen King advises, to create compelling writing that impacts on readers' perceptions, 'you must take your objective one blood word at a time' (King 2000: 136).

#### Be clear

Clarity encompasses precision and conciseness. In most cases, the more precise and concise your writing is, the clearer it is. Obscure expression and verbosity are not, generally, conducive to clarity. Clarity should be assessed from the point of view of the reader, so attempt to take the reader's perspective when composing a document. Although in the planning stage you are writing for yourself, to clarify your ideas and give direction to your writing, adopt the reader's point of view when revising.

One way to assist clarity is to be as specific as possible. This is achieved by knowing exactly what you want to communicate and to whom, and by choosing relevant information to convey your message. Make sure each piece, section or chapter is about one topic only and that all information you give relates to that topic. Avoid changing the topic or including irrelevant information. Also, avoid writing in a way that forces the reader to waste time by re-reading the document to decipher 'hidden meaning' or to reverse-engineer your thinking. For example, the following announcement would have been very clear to those who wrote it, or to 'insiders', but very confusing for passers-by and visitors:

Due to renovations, the first floor will be on the second floor, half the third floor will be on the second floor and half will remain on the third. Second floor will move to the third.

Clarity can be achieved on the text level and on the sentence level. When structuring your document, follow a logical pattern of organisation that will be easy for the reader to understand. Usually, this means going from the more general to the more specific, from assumed shared knowledge to new knowledge, from 'big picture' to details, or from definition of a problem to its analysis and then to its proposed solution. When revising the document, keep in mind that the reader should not have to go backwards or forwards to understand your message but should be able to continue reading in a linear order.

One test of the quality of professional writing is the ease with which it can be summarised. If you find a document is hard to summarise, the chances are that it needs revising to refine it of digressions, ambiguities or inconsistencies. Use this test on both your own and other people's writing. On the sentence level, clarity is often achieved in these ways:

**Favour agent-action structures.** This means focusing your intended meaning on the central parts of the sentence, the subject, verb and object. Begin by naming the agent and proceed by specifying the action, what the agent does. For example, the following sentence, on the suits of players in a game, has 'the first player' as the subject of the first part of the sentence and 'the keeper' as the subject of the second. This is misleading, however, because the intended subject is actually each player's suit and not the players themselves.

*Confusing:* The first player wears a special leather suit that is designed for fast movement and the ability to slip through the opponent's clutches, while the keeper wears a heavily padded suit to protect him from aggressive attacks.

*Revised:* The first player's special leather suit is designed for fast movement and slipping through the opponent's clutches, while the keeper's suit is heavily padded to protect him from aggressive attacks.

Also, the following sentence includes the redundant and confusing ideas 'design' and 'ability' when the aim is to describe what a prototype does:

*Confusing:* The prototype is designed to ensure that it would be able to maintain consistency among all products of the same series.

*Revised:* The prototype ensures consistency among all products of the same series.

2 **Avoid more than two nouns in a row.** Sometimes writers try to make their writing more concise and technical by eliminating prepositions (in, of, etc.) and linking nouns in a chain. Unfortunately, this is often done at the expense of clarity and accuracy. Make sure that elegant style and clarity win over brevity and the tendency to repeat jargon indiscriminate

*Confusing:* He designed a new graphics construction language.

*Revised:* He designed a new language for constructing graphics.

*Confusing:* The project includes a long term failure prevention program.

*Revised:* The project includes a long term program to prevent failure.

Or:

The project includes a program to prevent long term failure.

3 **Break up long sentences,** especially if they contain more than one piece of information. Usually, sentences that contain one piece of information even if this includes details on that item, are clearer to grasp in one reading.

*Confusing:* Although this methodology has been tested worldwide on different formats and has been hailed as the most effective currently available, we have decided not to use it in this experiment because the present situation requires more rigorous techniques of controlling testing procedure.

*Revised:* This methodology has been tested worldwide on different formats and has been hailed as the most effective currently available. However, the present situation requires more rigorous techniques of controlling testing procedure. Consequently, in this experiment, we have decided not to use it.

*Confusing:* This is a science fiction action film set in the year 2025 about a self-centred superstar of a world sport phenomenon called

Destruction, which has eclipsed the popularity of all sports, who is targeted by a terrorist group.

*Revised:* This is a science fiction action film, set in the year 2025, when a world sport phenomenon called Destruction has eclipsed the popularity of all other sports. The film is about a self-centred superstar of this sport, who is targeted by a terrorist group.

4 **Position phrases correctly.** When you order words and phrases in a sentence, make sure that nouns agree with all their subject positions. It can be especially misleading when the noun immediately following an opening phrase cannot be identified with the noun of the phrase. This has the effect of confusing agents and actions and potentially leading to incorrect attribution of responsibility.

*Confusing:* As an experienced manager, my boss gives me little supervision.

*Revised:* Because I am an experienced manager, my boss gives me little supervision.

### Be accurate

To make your writing more accurate, follow these guidelines:

1 **Favour quantification.** If you can give measurements and numbers, instead of ambiguous words, then do so.

*Vague:* This policy has been effective for several years.

*Revised:* This policy has been effective since 1995.

*Vague:* Many people attended the event.

*Revised:* About 200 people attended the event.

Or:

Attendance for the event this year was 20 per cent higher than last year.

2 **Avoid words with many meanings.** Think of a word that is specific to the meaning you intend in the sentence. For example, a commonly used word with many meanings is over:

*During* – The experiment must take place over the winter

*On to* – The fertiliser was spread over the field

*More than* – This disease affects over 10 per cent of the population

*From* – We collected data over three locations

*Of* – Apply two replications over six dilutions

*To* – Statistical sampling was applied over the data

*Across* – Sampling was stratified over taxonomic groups

*Through* – Dust accumulates over time  
*With* – The company policies changed over time

Consider some examples with the word *wrong*:

*Vague*: The decision was wrong

*Revised*: The decision was financially costly for the company

*Vague*: This number is wrong

*Revised*: This number is incorrect

*Vague*: Cheating is wrong

*Revised*: Cheating is unethical

*Vague*: He was wearing the wrong clothes

*Revised*: He was dressed inappropriately.

Words that have many meanings include also evaluative adjectives whose meaning is relative to the speaker's judgment – 'nice', 'terrible', 'good', 'big', etc.:

*Vague*: This team contains good members.

*Revised*: This team contains conscientious and hard-working members.

*Vague*: The manager's decision was terrible.

*Revised*: The manager's decision was irresponsible.

Or:

The manager's decision was based on short-term profit only.

**3 Define terms** and favour specific words instead of phrases, where possible. This sharpens your writing, making it more direct. However, be careful not to offend reader by putting them in categories and labelling them. Discretion is advised.

*Vague*: Clear documentation pleases people and may increase the people who buy our software.

*Revised*: Clear documentation pleases users and may increase our clients.

*Vague*: Strict regulations are in place to protect against people who break into computers and steal information.

*Revised*: Strict regulations are in place to protect against hackers.

## Be concise

The above sections show that, to be clear and accurate, you sometimes need to expand on a point, and use more words. This does not condone

verbosity, however. Being direct is important in professional writing if for no other reason than, in many cases, 'time is money', and readers want to know if a document answers their question or addresses their need without having to analyse it in detail. Some writers believe that by including as many details as possible and repeating information they become clearer. Trying to 'drill in' information, however, may draw attention away from the main message and confuse the reader. In most cases, by stating your point clearly and directly, at strategic sites in the document you have a better chance of getting your intended meaning across.

You can make your writing concise by avoiding long, crowded and wordy sentences, especially if they are in succession. If you write one or two long sentences, make sure the next sentence is short to break the density. Also, following these tips will help:

**1 Use the active voice where possible.** Passive sentences are wordier, and can also be confusing if they do not reveal the agent of an action.

*Wordy*: The work was finished by the engineers before the deadline was reached.

*Revised*: The engineers finished the work before the deadline.

*Wordy*: The policy decision was met with disapproval by the public.

*Revised*: The public disapproved of the policy decision.

**2 Avoid 'there is/are' at the beginning of sentences.** In many cases, we overuse these words: they are often not necessary.

*Wordy*: There are several conclusions that we can draw from these results.

*Revised*: We can draw several conclusions from these results.

Or:

From these results, we conclude...

*Wordy*: There are several organisations that belong to the union.

*Revised*: Several (number?) organisations belong to the union.

**3 Use modals (may, might, could, should, must) where possible.** Some harbour suspicion that modals are informal; however, this is not true. Modals modify verbs and have a clear place in language.

*Wordy*: It is possible that the project will be funded.

*Revised*: The project may be funded.

*Wordy*: It is imperative that all options be considered before making a decision.

*Revised*: All options must be considered before deciding.

4 Use verbs where possible instead of nouns. Besides making sentences concise, verbs are action-oriented and give your writing a more direct tone. Noun-centred sentences, known as *nominalisations*, have a heavy effect that makes the sentence static by reducing elements that evoke movement. Although nominalisations are still used in some technical and scientific texts, they should be avoided in energetic and people-oriented writing.

*Heavy:* The experiments are not a demonstration of myogenesis.

*Revised:* The experiments do not demonstrate myogenesis.

*Heavy:* A vacuum chamber is not a requirement for this procedure.

*Revised:* This procedure does not require a vacuum chamber.

5 Avoid weak verbs. Some verbs, instead of signaling action, depend on a noun to support them. In many cases, such verbs can be replaced by other verbs that do not require a noun. Weak verbs include *take*, *make*, *do*, *give*, *conduct*, *get* and *reach*.

*Wordy:* Researchers conducted an investigation of inflation.

*Revised:* Researchers investigated inflation.

*Wordy:* This study serves to show the results of the investigation.

*Revised:* This study shows the results of the investigation.

6 Use punctuation strategically. If you find that your paragraph is getting cluttered with too many wordy or long sentences, it is often possible to use punctuation to cut down on words. This is especially effective when announcing or introducing a list of items.

*Wordy:* There are many reasons for climatic change, which include toxic pollution, deforestation and volcanic activity.

*Revised:* There are many reasons for climatic change: toxic pollution, deforestation and volcanic activity, etc.

*Wordy:* Most professional writing can be divided into three categories. These categories are essays, reports and articles.

*Revised:* Most professional writing can be divided into three categories – essays, reports and articles.

7 Avoid wordy clichés. Some phrases are so commonly used in spoken language that writers have become almost unaware of their presence. Writing, nevertheless, gives you the opportunity to become more conscious of how you use language and allows for elimination of repetitive material. Table 3 lists such clichés.

Table 3: Common wordy clichés

Wordy	Concise
a majority of	many (or number)
a number of	some (or number)
at this point in time	now
basic essentials	essentials
cancel out	cancel
come to the conclusion that	conclude
completely eliminate	eliminate
due to the fact that	because
end result	result
enter into	enter
for the purpose of	to
give a summary of	summarise
has the ability to	can
have the capability to	can
higher in comparison with	higher than
in order to	to
in the absence of	without
in the event that	if
make a decision	decide
make a proposal about	propose
make an assumption about	assume
may be the mechanism responsible for	may be why
so as to	to
subsequent to	after
take action	act
there can be little doubt	definitely, certainly
with regard to	about



## Effects of sentence structure

Like other media, professional writing does not aim only to inform but also to please. Correct grammar, precision and conciseness are, therefore, not the only criteria by which to judge a written text. The text should also be diplomatic, elegant and sophisticated, and should give readers the feeling of being respected at the same time as being informed or motivated.

The best way to achieve this aim is by knowing the values, knowledge and interests of your audience. This will determine your choice of going formal, impersonal, chatty, hip, 'cool' or whatever other tone you think will be most appropriate. Keep in mind that style and content are two different things: your style will have a strong effect on how the reader accepts or understands your content but will not determine what this content actually is. For example, all these sentences contain the same information, but each construction uses balance, emphasis and tone differently:

- a In the era of social media, companies have little control over information.
- b Social media have taken control over information away from companies.
- c What social media have achieved is to take control over information away from companies.
- d It is control over information that social media have taken away from companies.

The versions could be multiplied, but what this experiment shows is that you can draw attention to different parts of a topic and modify your tone by re-ordering parts of a sentence and, similarly, elements of a larger text. The changes in style in the above sentences are also a change in focus.

Sentence a) makes a loose connection between social media and loss of control over information by placing social media in an introductory phrase. Sentence b) gives much stronger agency to social media by making it the subject of the sentence. It is less equivocal than the first. Sentence c) also focuses on social media, but in this case, it places social media in the context of its results or achievements. This sentence suggests that the surrounding text would describe social media in terms of its historical or comparative aspects. Sentence d) emphasises control over information by implying that this is the most important element that social media have affected in business.

This brief analysis shows how written language creates tone by orchestrating its units (words, sentences and paragraphs) in different combinations. Assume control over this stylistic manipulation by becoming

aware of it in what you write and read. The next section describes some guidelines on using sentence structure to produce different stylistic effects. Grammatical information on sentences and phrases is given in Chapter 10.

## Sentences and style

Following the above guidelines, here are some tips on choosing your style:

**Include variety.** No document is justifiably boring, so make sure you introduce rhythm by alternating long and short sentences, using some active and some passive voice and beginning some sentences with phrases rather than with subject-verb construction. For example, this extract from a report is concise, grammatically correct and precise. However, stylistically it is displeasing to the reader and monotonous, because of its succession of simple, short sentences and lack of linking words between sentences:

Email is the most common Internet activity. Some of the information on e-mails is of sensitive nature. A technically savvy person can intercept emails. This person then has access to the information. In fact, there is little awareness of email's lack of security among general users.

In constructing your document, use a variety of simple and complex sentences, with short, simple sentences for information you wish to emphasise. Because they condense meaning in a few words, short, simple sentences have the greatest impact on the reader. The more you expand a sentence, the more dissipated the meaning becomes. For example:

The project team sent the data to the laboratory for testing. They expect the results back within two hours of dispatch. *It's not always so.* Sometimes they have to wait for hours, which means their whole project could be jeopardized. *It's a risky business.*

Notice how the two italicised sentences carry a lot of weight in this passage because they comment on the rest of the information. They are also the shortest of the five sentences.

**Use subordination carefully.** Information in a sentence can either come in the main clause or in a subordinate clause. The main clause foregrounds information; the subordinate clause diminishes information. For example, consider this sentence:

The proposal, which was approved by the Board, will be implemented immediately.



The most important information here is in the main clause: 'The proposal will be implemented immediately'. The subordinate clause, 'which was approved by the Board' gives secondary information, or information that is assumed to be known by the audience and therefore backgrounded. When using complex sentences with one or a number of subordinate clauses, think carefully whether what you subordinate should not be given more importance by coming in a separate sentence as a main clause. Remember that what you subordinate is received by your reader, consciously or unconsciously, as secondary in relation to what you give as main information. So, consider the re-write of the above sentence:

The proposal was approved by the Board. It will be implemented immediately.

Here the two items of information are balanced by being placed in two separate sentences – neither item is subordinated.

When writing complex sentences with more than one subordinate clause, be aware that the ways you combine main with subordinate clauses creates different effects. The different combinations are called *loose structure*, *centred structure* and *periodic structure*. Here are the effects of each.

*Loose:* Sharks can be very dangerous when they smell blood, although they may not always be hungry.

Loose structures begin with the main clause and add subordinate clauses at the end. They project a relaxed, informal style imitating a conversation.

*Centred:* When they smell blood, sharks can be very dangerous, although they may not always be hungry.

Centred structures begin with a subordinate clause, then give the main clause, and end with another subordinate clause. They project a tighter and more formal sentence that gives the impression you are dealing with a complicated or serious matter.

*Periodic:* Although they may not be hungry, when they smell blood, sharks can be very dangerous.

Periodic structures begin with the subordinate clause(s) and lead to the main clause. They suggest that the information in the main clause is conditional to other factors, or that you concede a point to an opponent before asserting your opinion. Use this structure carefully, because, although it may increase the importance of the main clause, it delays it and

could annoy the reader. Think about whether leading to a statement with a degree of suspense would be appropriate for the audience and purpose. This structure is more common in texts intended for oral speech, such as documentaries, than in formal report writing.

### Use first- and second-person pronouns (I, my, you, we, our)

**differently in journalistic and specialist documents.** These pronouns refer to the writer, and to the reader and are important in establishing a communicative link between the two parties. Over-use of 'I' constructions, however, can give your document a simplistic or, otherwise, arrogant appearance. Similarly 'you' constructions can be inappropriately didactic or accusative, if used in cases where a more impersonal phrasing would be more appropriate. In many cases, as in formal reports for example, you are expected to focus on aspects of a situation and not on the reader's response to this situation. To decide on the best of use of pronouns, assess the nature and degree of audience complicity that you need to create.

For example, this extract is adapted from an editorial in *New Scientist* (30 June 2001). Its use of personal pronouns is typical of the demagogic variant of journalistic style. The demagogue is the enthusiastic public speaker, who tries to sway audiences with a highly emotive tone. Although fine for an editorial, this style would be highly inappropriate in business writing, say, in a formal report to a client:

So, it turns out that poisonous polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB) are turning up in our food more often than we thought. Should we panic? PCBs are in everyday food in high concentrations and we aren't even monitoring them. It makes you wonder what else is out there.

## Cohesion

Cohesion is the way segments of a text are combined to produce flow and transition from one point to another. In the hands of a competent writer, cohesion consists of a blend of repetition and variation. Cohesion exists within a sentence as well as between sentences, and, on the level of text, between paragraphs. In longer documents, such as reports, cohesion is achieved through a logical sequence of sections (more on this in Chapter 7). The rest of this section discusses cohesion at the sentence and paragraph level.

Cohesion between sentences and paragraphs is achieved in three main ways: *linkers*, *referents* and *parallel structure*.

## Linkers

Linkers show the relationship between ideas or points. Your train of thought will usually seem so obvious to you as not to be worth stating. But if you do not make it clear, you will force your reader to laboriously reverse-engineer your writing to discover your meaning. In professional writing, your reader may not have the time or inclination to do that.

If, for instance, the sentence you are writing is meant to contradict the meaning of the previous sentence, signal actively to the reader that you intend a contradiction, by using 'but', 'however', 'in spite of' or some similar linking word or phrase – and make sure you use the correct grammatical structure to accommodate the linker you have used. If one sentence contains the result or consequence of a previous sentence, again, do not leave the reader to infer that you are talking about a result or consequence. Signal it by using 'consequently', 'as a result', etc. Remember to use signpost words if the relation between ideas is not obvious. Overusing such words or phrases can be tiring for the reader and can at times produce a condescending or harsh effect that may be detrimental to the quality of your document.

Table 4 gives some linkers that provide cohesion, and the relationships they express.

**Table 4: Linkers and their functions**

Function	Examples
Adding	again, then again, also, moreover, furthermore, in addition, what is more
Contrasting	conversely, instead, on the contrary, by contrast, on the other hand, however, nevertheless
Evaluating	surprisingly, in the final analysis, paradoxically, interestingly
Explaining	namely, in other words, that is to say, better, rather
Illustrating	for example, for instance
Listing	first, second; one, two; a, b; next, then, subsequently, finally, in the end
Showing alternatives	alternatively, or again, or rather, but then, on the other hand

Showing results or effects      so, as a result, consequently, hence, now, therefore, thus

Showing similarity      equally, likewise, similarly, correspondingly, in the same way

Summarising      so, so far, altogether, overall, then

## Referents

Referents are words that refer to preceding words without repeating them. **Synonyms and pronouns** can act as referents.

### Synonyms

Words of closely related meaning can provide an effective solution to the problem of excessive repetition. If you said 'approach' in one sentence and had to repeat the idea, you might choose 'method' in the next sentence. If you said 'skill', you could then use 'ability', and so on. That would give your reader variety without changing the meaning. It indicates to the readers that you are writing about the same thing without their needing to read the same words ad nauseam.

When using synonyms, be careful not to over-use them. Overwhelming the readers with a big range of words for an object or concept can be confusing and detracts from the clarity of your document. In certain cases, especially with regard to technical terminology, it is better to repeat a term rather than replace it with a synonym.

### Pronouns

If two sentences begin with the same subject, it is sufficient to use a personal pronoun in the second sentence instead of the word itself (I, he, she, it, we, you, they, this, that, these):

The report claims that the new incentive to include all financial figures in Intranet documents has not led to an increased interest in the company's economic development. *It* adds that most stockholders do not know how to access Intranet information.

However, guard against ambiguity: sometimes the use of a pronoun instead of a noun can be confusing, especially if there are several nouns in the previous sentence to which the pronoun might refer. In this case, it is better to repeat the noun or use a demonstrative pronoun (this, that):

*Incorrect:* The report claims that the new incentive to include all financial figures in Intranet documents has not led to an increased interest in the company's economic development. Although *they* (?) are now available, most stockholders do not know how to access Intranet information.

*Revised:* The report claims that the new incentive to include all financial figures in Intranet documents has not led to an increased interest in the company's economic development. Although *these figures* are now available, most stockholders do not know how to access Intranet information

Demonstrative pronouns refer to a noun in the previous sentence or to the whole previous sentence, especially if followed by a noun:

*Repetitive:* The popularity of social media in business communication is increasing. The popularity of social media has been observed by many researchers and is a growing area of study.

*Revised:* The popularity of social media in business communication is increasing. This (popularity) has been observed by many researchers and is a growing area of study.

### Parallel structure

Parallel structure adds clarity to your paragraph. Parallelism refers to the similar grammatical structure of headings and sentences within a paragraph. The more mathematically inclined will recognise the distributive law in mathematics as analogous to parallelism in language:  $x(a + b) = xa + xb$ . The common element must work grammatically with each of the parallel elements; the grammatically parallel elements could be substituted for each other without needing to change the rest of the sentence. Check for parallelism when you include items within one category, or balance items on one level of information.

*Not parallel:* These books are not primarily for reading, but they are used for reference.

*Parallel:* These books are not primarily for reading but for reference.

*Not parallel:* Not only is he a conscientious worker, but also he is very competent.

*Parallel:* Not only is he conscientious but also competent.

*Not Parallel:* Don't underestimate the value of defining technical terms. Prior knowledge on behalf of the reader should not be assumed

*Parallel:* Don't underestimate the value of defining technical terms. Don't assume prior knowledge on behalf of the reader

*Not parallel:* Possible solutions for dealing with at risk youth include implementing programmes and support measures through parent and child education, housing and physical, social and economic conditions should be changed.

*Parallel:* Possible solutions for dealing with at risk youth include implementing programs and support measures through parent and child education, improving housing and changing physical, social, and economic conditions.

Parallelism is very important in instructions, point lists and headings. For example, here are four introductions to a user guide for a printer:

- a Setting up the printer, maintenance, and what to do if something goes wrong are easy with Apple's step by step user guide.
- b Setting up the printer, maintaining it, and troubleshooting are easy with Apple's step-by-step user guide.
- c Printer set-up, maintenance, and troubleshooting are easy with Apple's step-by-step user guide.
- d Apple's step-by-step user guide will show you how to set up the printer, how to maintain it, and what to do if something goes wrong.

Version a) is awkward because the three elements that it lists are not parallel. The other three correct this error. Notice also how although all three are grammatically correct, there are slight differences in tone with each choice. Version c), with its noun emphasis, is the most formal version, while d), with its clause structure and second-person pronoun, is the most informal.

The following extract is analysed in terms of its cohesive devices:

### Analysed example 1

Understanding the shape of the tree of life and the details of its branches is more than a quaint sideline of biology, even though the science of this quest – known as systematics – has come to be regarded by many biologists as dowdy and old fashioned, little more than stamp collecting. But such an understanding is probably the best foundation for a larger appreciation of life, including evolution, ecology and behaviour. As Colin Patterson, a palaeontologist at the Natural History Museum of London, says: 'To retrieve the history of life, to reconstruct the evolutionary tree, is still the aim of evolutionary biology.' *Getting it right is therefore important.*

*Getting it right, however, is much harder than might be imagined. Inferring an evolutionary relationship from morphology rests on identifying anatomical features, or characters, that are shared by two species because of their common descent. Such features might include the shape of teeth, the form of a particular nerve canal, the number of certain flower parts, and so on. Ironically, the thing most likely to confound the well-intentioned systematist in identifying such characters is the power of natural selection itself. Many shared characteristics do not reflect a common ancestry, but *instead* are the result of distantly related species independently adapting their bodies to meet the demands of similar lifestyles. (Lewin 1998: 37, my emphasis.)*

This is known as a parenthetical definition. It is used within a sentence to provide a brief definition of a term, and is placed between brackets or dashes. It acts a cohesive device in allowing for explanation without compromising flow as would happen if a separate sentence was inserted to explain the term.

Shows transition of contrast. Note that 'but' and 'and' at the beginning of a sentence are markers of journalistic style and should be avoided in specialist style.

Provides a supportive explanation.

Summarises an important point in the paragraph.

Repeats the concluding sentence of the previous paragraph and indicates the topic of this paragraph.

Refers to the features mentioned in the previous sentence.

Evaluates this sentence in relation to what was said before.

Emphasizes contrast.

### Audience matters

The most important considerations in choosing your style are audience and purpose. If writing for complete outsiders or novices, for example, you may find that to be clear you have to use definitions and explanations that lengthen the text. If that is what would ensure reader understanding, then

so be it – you cannot be as concise and direct in this situation as would be appropriate in a different situation. Also, when writing about a delicate or controversial topic, you will need to take care to avoid using phrases that are loaded with offensive connotations, especially if the audience is the general public. Phrases with offensive connotations would be suitable, however, if your purpose was to provoke! Similarly, it is sometimes impossible to be precise when quantifying a situation. In that case you could give a range, average or approximation. In all cases, choose a style that supports your message and is aligned to the situation in which your writing takes place.

In all, clarity and writer–reader complicity should guide your stylistic choices. When reading others' writing, use the guidelines given in this chapter to analyse and understand what flatters you, offends you, leaves you indifferent, angers you, enlightens you or seduces you. Then use the insights you gain to control your own writing.

### Medium matters

The medium is the channel in which you transmit your message, and it is a separate decision to choosing genre and style. For example, you can submit a report by sending it through the post or you can attach it as a PDF to an email and send it electronically. The genre (report) remains the same in both cases, but the medium is different. Medium is mostly a matter of access. Which medium would reach your target audience most effectively?

Access, however, is linked to the ways readers process information perceptually. For instance, it is still easier and faster to read script off paper than it is to read it off a screen (although new digital technologies are rapidly changing this). Therefore, professional writers still work on the assumption that readers will print a long and complicated document, for easier reading. Professional editors, in fact, tend to print typescripts to proofread them, since it is easier to pick errors on a hard copy. With regard to style, this means that journalistic style, with its shorter sentences and words, is more suited to digital writing, especially writing that is generally not printed, such as website content (more on this in Chapter 6).

Besides mental processing, space is another consideration in different media. Websites have a strict layout and typography, which affects the number of words that can 'fit' in a space. This is analogous in many ways to magazine and newspaper layout (in fact, websites were initially modelled after magazines). A rule of thumb states that a business headline should have 5–8 words or 16 characters. This has the added advantage

that it fits on a Blackberry screen. Websites, magazines and newsletters are often printed in columns, so shorter paragraphs, sentences and words are best.

## Activities

- 1 The following sentences are grammatically correct. However, they are inappropriate for professional writing because of ambiguity and/or wordiness. Re-structure the sentences to make them more suited to a professional context.
  - a This program has a graphics design capability.
  - b The security guards have the responsibility of checking all offices.
  - c We opened the project to suggestions with a view to being able to get some ideas on the improvement of the security of the building.
  - d Since we hired the new technical assistant, the quality of the equipment has improved.
  - e His project will involve a big investigation into how the monetary economy has evolved.
  - f There are several organisations that are concerned with the destruction of rainforests.
  - g The inspecting officer can do a verification of the data when the manager has made a decision on a suitable methodology.
  - h The media could not provide the public with a justification of their manipulation of the information in the news story.
  - i When logging in, the data must be completed fully.
  - j Non-computer background personnel can do this task.
  - k To find the committee room, signs have been posted along the corridor.
  - l A detailed analysis of trends and an evaluation of the relations between state and corporation is the purpose of this report.
  - m Prolonged use of the battery can cause it to become drained of its energy.
  - n Because there is a trend towards fewer and larger offices, it will cause an increase in the demand for computers.
- 2 The following sentences come from informal genres, such as conversations and email. Re-write them in specialist style to make them appropriate for a formal business report. You will need to make up some specific information.
  - a The deplorable staff turnover rate could be reduced if those long-awaited fringe benefits could be introduced.
  - b You can hardly imagine the effect of incentive pay on staff morale.
  - c I don't understand why anyone would opt for this outrageous solution.

- d Nobody likes to feel unsafe at home, so these building security measures will help to make people feel more secure.
  - e I think the Slick Graphics upgrade is a good, solid way to do what we want and we can also save money.
  - f Advertisers feed on people's greed and futile attempt to fill the emptiness of their lives with consumer objects.
- 3 Re-write the following sentences so that their structures are parallel.
  - a He has the ability both to choose a suitable course of action and he can implement his decision wisely.
  - b Walking quickly burns as many calories as you burn when you run slowly.
  - c It has been found that homo sapiens have not changed anatomically in the last 10,000 years, and also our intellectual capacities are about the same.
  - d The court found him guilty of insurance fraud and he has been sentenced to two years imprisonment.
  - e From this report it is recommended that the following initiatives be adopted: links with the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the viability of an information technology school should be examined and also a scheme, which assists small business with accounting matters, should be established.
- 4 Improve the cohesion in the following paragraphs by using some of the devices described in this chapter. You may re-arrange sentences and add linkers, but do not re-write the paragraphs extensively. Keep the style and content the same as the original.
  - a Romantic individuality may have something to do with the sport's popularity – the fact that one undertakes a kind of Byronic solo adventure when one jumps. The jumpers do their thing in groups and form little outlaw societies in which they approve of and cheer one another. It could be the illegality of the sport that pumps them up. In an interview last April, Kapfjell said he delighted in playing outlaw and 'fooling the authorities' as he gained access to his perches. (Adapted from Rosenbått 1999 – note that the sport mentioned is base jumping.)
  - b Complex systems are particularly good for modelling the complexities of the natural world. During the Gulf War, large quantities of oil polluted the sea. This damaged the ecosystem – but how do you go about measuring that damage and monitoring the ecosystem's recovery? Researchers needed to disentangle a complex web of interrelationships. (Adapted from Stewart 1998: 37.)
  - c Explorative graphics enable the user to move about a website by selecting a graphical object. This is an alternative to using text to navigate the website. They make the website more attractive while increasing download time. Excessive use of exploration graphics can confuse a user.