

Handout 5 (Writing): Summary of Principles of Clarity & Coherence

Clarity

Here is a summary of the principles of clarity (quoted from Williams & Bizup, Ch 11 p.171)

- **Characters as subjects.** Use main characters in your "story" as subjects of most sentences.
- **Actions as verbs.** Express the main actions performed by or on these characters as verbs, not nouns.
- **Old before new.** Begin sentences with familiar information, and end them with information readers cannot predict.
- **Short before long.** Begin with a short, easily grasped segment of information that frames the longer, more complex segments that follow. This principle applies not only to sentences but also to paragraphs, sections, and whole documents.

Here is an additional principle, that we skipped in class (see Ch 6 in W&B)

- **Topic then stress.** Begin sentences with what they are about, or comment on; end with words that should receive special emphasis.

Coherence

Here are principles for writing coherently (quoted from Williams & Bizup, back cover, except #11)

- 1) Introduction: Motivate readers to read carefully by stating a problem they should care about.
 - 2) State your point or solution at or near the end of that introduction.
 - 3) In that point, introduce important concepts that you will develop in what follows.
 - 4) Make everything that follows relevant to your point.
 - 5) Make it clear where each part/section begins and ends.
 - 6) Order parts in a way that makes clear and visible sense to your readers.
 - 7) Open each part/section with its own short introductory segment.
 - 8) Put the point of each part/section at the end of that opening segment.
 - 9) Begin sentences that form a unit with consistent subjects / topics.
 - 10) Create cohesive old-new ties between sentences.
- +, for math & science:
- 11) Start with simple, easy-to-grasp examples, then move to more general theories.

Exercises

Here are some exercises you can do when you write or edit an article. These are (mostly) quoted from "Stylish Academic Writing", by Helen Sword.

1) Answer the following questions in simple, conversational language, avoiding disciplinary jargon:

- What is the main point of your article, dissertation, or book? Why is it important, whether to you or to anyone else?
- Who is your intended audience?
- What research question(s) do you aim to answer?
- What new contribution(s) does your research make to theory? To practice?
- What is your overarching thesis or argument? What evidence do you offer in support?

2) Make an outline of your article or book based only on its chapter titles or section headings.

- How well does that outline, on its own, communicate what your work is about? Are you using section headings to inform, engage, and direct your readers, or merely to carve up space?

For some journals (e.g. Physical Review Letters), you can instead base your outline on figures: identify 4 key figures that tell your research story.

3) To fine-tune your structure, make a paragraph outline.

- First, identify the topic sentence of each paragraph (that is, the sentence that most clearly states its overall argument).
- Next, arrange those sentences in a numbered sequence.

This process can help you identify structural weaknesses both within and between paragraphs: for example, a paragraph that has no clearly stated argument or one that does not logically build on the one before.