Writing Clearly

Clarity can be difficult to achieve. When you're first becoming comfortable with academic prose, it can be tempting to try to make your sentences sound sophisticated. Unfortunately, this sometimes backfires and shields your good ideas in overly complicated syntax.

Clarity can also become muddled when you're working out complex ideas. Therefore, you should get your ideas out on paper – no matter how clear or confusing – and then return to your draft to edit for sentence-level clarity issues.

The tips below identify several strategies for improving clarity during the editing process.

1. Specify pronoun referents (or cut down on pronoun use).
A pronoun is a word that replaces a noun, such as *this, that, he, she, it, they,* and *me.* Sometimes a sentence loses its intended meaning when a pronoun does not clearly refer to its antecedent (the word it is replacing).

Example: Vargas is a skilled and articulate man whose talent is needed in the United States. However, Krikorian believes that <u>he</u> should still be forced to leave. Krikorian contends that <u>he</u> has skills that are usable in much of the world and can be used back home in <u>his</u> country.

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A Note on Beginning Sentences with "This"
When writers use "this" as a pronoun, they often use the word to stand in for a complicated antecedent. In general, avoid using "this" as a pronoun. Instead, convert "this" into an adjective and let it modify some noun that more clearly specifies the referent: "this complementary view" or "this scholarly perspective," for example.

Example: <u>This</u> restricted the country's ability to trade with its neighboring nations.

<u>This policy</u> restricted the country's ability to trade with its neighboring nations.

2. Watch out for stringy sentences.
Stringy sentences are grammatically correct sentences that trail on and on due to prepositional phrases or coordinating conjunctions. You can correct stringy sentences by changing their sentence structures or breaking them into more than one sentence.

Example: Since the Dream Act could be debated indefinitely and many of the people who could benefit from it may be deported before it takes effect, there should be an amendment on the law that allows those who would have benefited, but were deported before the law was passed, to be allowed to come back to the United States.

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Adapted from Rosenwasser and Stephen's *Writing Analytically* and Hacker and Sommers' *A Pocket Style Manual*

be an amendment to the law that allows those who would have benefited, but were deported before the law was passed, to be allowed to come back to the United States.

3. Replace "to be" verbs with descriptive, active verbs.
Forms of "to be" (be, am, is, are, was, were, being, been) lack vigor because they contain no action. "To be" verbs are static and suggest subjects' states of being rather than describing subjects' actions. If an active verb can convey your meaning as effectively, us the active verb instead of "to be" form.

Note that in the example below, the writer eliminates the "to be" verb (was) and creates a more concise verb construction.

Example: <u>Passive</u>: John F. Kennedy <u>was effective at manipulating</u> his image in the media.

<u>Active</u>: John F. Kennedy **effectively manipulated** his imagine in the media.

<u>Eliminate nominalizations</u> – The term "nominalization" might sound complex, but it is actually a helpful grammatical term to remember. Nominalizations are nouns derived from verbs or adjectives. For example:

Verb	**Nominalization**	**Adjective**	**Nominalization**
discover	discovery	careless	carelessness
move	movement	difficult	difficulty
resist	resistance	different	difference

Nominalizations often make writing stuffy and stilted. See the example below in which nominalizations are transformed back into verbs.

Example: The <u>acknowledgement</u> of the fact is increasingly widespread that television is a <u>replacement</u> for reading in American culture.

People increasingly **acknowledge** that television **has replaced** reading in American culture

4. Identify and fix misplaced modifiers.
We use modifiers to give more information about a given subject. Check out the following examples:

   ❖ **We use prepositional phrases as modifiers (to define, to limit).**
      o   the room *with the lavender paint*
      o   the girl *in the straw hat*
      o   this handout *about grammar*
   ❖ **We use clauses beginning with words like *that, who, since,* and *because* to modify.**
      o   the worst storm *since the winter of 2010*
      o   Herbert, *who tipped his canoe*

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❖ **And we use phrases beginning with** *–ing* **words (participles), which also modify.**
   o the chapter *containing the examples*
   o *hanging from the skylight,* the plumber

Occasionally, writers forget to place modifiers and participles near the subjects that they modify, resulting in confusing and illogical sentences.

Example: King Laius approached the intersection of three roads in a chariot.

              In a chariot, King Laius approached the intersection of three roads.