

Writing Clearly

One of the major concerns that students have is whether their writing “makes sense”. Equally, students may receive feedback stating that their points “lack clarity” at times. Writing clearly is one of the most important aspects of academic work, and we can improve the clarity of our work by using the tips outlined below.

1. Be Specific

To achieve clear meaning, you should write with precision by providing specific details, relevant examples, and succinct explanations of the points that you make, e.g.

Examples	Why is this unclear?
<i>The theory provides an explanation for several aspects of the phenomenon, though it might not account for all possible variables involved.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Does not specify which aspects of the phenomenon are explained.▪ Does not specify which variables might be excluded from consideration by the theory.
<i>The data supports the hypothesis to some extent, although the strength of this support is difficult to quantify without further analysis.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Does not explain how the data supports the hypothesis.▪ Does not clarify the degree of support.▪ Leaves the reader unsure of the validity of the results.
<i>The research could be applied in many areas, including education, healthcare, and technology, though it is unclear which specific aspects of these fields would benefit most from the findings.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Although it lists very broad fields, it does not provide concrete examples of how or in what way the research would be applied within those areas.

2. Use Correct Grammar + Punctuation

Grammar and punctuation function as syntactical signs that instruct the reader how to read a text (a bit like road signs for a driver). As such, it is extremely difficult for a reader to interpret the meaning of a work without the correct use of both. Ask yourself whether you have a clear understanding of the meaning and usage of the following:

Nouns, adjectives, conjunctions, verbs, phrasal verbs, tenses, conjugation, participles, prepositions, adverbs, subordinating conjunctions, commas, apostrophes, full stops, colons, semicolons, forward slashes, hyphens, dashes, quotation marks, parentheses, passive + active voice, positive + negative forms, mixed forms, parallel structure, discourse markers, grammatical markers, etc.

If you are not confident about the above, it is strongly recommended that you consult with the many grammar and punctuation available on the UCD Writing Centre website: <https://www.ucd.ie/writingcentre/about/handoutsandvideos/>

3. Avoid Fillers

Students often write “around” a point by using too many “filler” words and phrases that are unnecessary to the sentence, and which complicate or obscure meaning, e.g.

Fillers	What could I use instead?	Example
In order to	To	<i>In order to analyse the data...</i> <i>To analyse the data...</i>
Due to the fact that	Because	<i>Due to the fact that participants were...</i> <i>Because participants were...</i>
In spite of the fact that	Despite/ although	<i>Results varied in spite of the fact that...</i> <i>Results varied despite...</i>
It is possible that	Could/ might/ may/ can	<i>It is possible that practices will be improved by...</i> <i>Practices may be improved by...</i>
For the purpose of	To (+ verb)	<i>For the purpose of improving the quality...</i> <i>To improve the quality...</i>
It is important to note that	Can be omitted	<i>It is important to note that the results...</i> <i>The results...</i>
In the event that	If	<i>In the event that the application does not...</i> <i>If the application does not...</i>
There are a number of	Many/ several	<i>There are a number of factors that contribute...</i> <i>There are many factors that contribute...</i>
Has the capacity to	Can	<i>The project has the capacity to...</i> <i>The project can...</i>
As to whether	Whether	<i>Scholars are uncertain as to whether...</i> <i>Scholars are uncertain whether...</i>
For all intents and purposes	Can be omitted	<i>For all intents and purposes, the surveys...</i> <i>The surveys...</i>
Needless to say	Can be omitted	<i>Needless to say, without proper management...</i> <i>Without proper management...</i>

4. Get to the Point

Along with “filler” words and phrases, students often overcomplicate their sentences by “stretching” the point, rather than relaying the bare facts of what they are trying to say. Ask yourself: what do I want the reader to know about this subject? Using bullet-points can also help to highlight the raw information and get rid of anything unnecessary, e.g.

Wordy	Simpler
<p><i>Given the multifaceted and intricate nature of the socioeconomic variables that are interconnected within the broader framework of global economic systems, it is imperative to undertake a comprehensive and in-depth analysis in order to elucidate the potential impacts and consequences that may arise as a result of these complex and interdependent dynamics.</i></p>	<p><i>Because of the complex relationship between socioeconomic factors in the global economy, a thorough analysis is needed to understand their potential impacts.</i></p>
<p><i>Through the utilisation of advanced technological methodologies and cutting-edge analytical frameworks, it becomes increasingly apparent that the integration of artificial intelligence into contemporary business models holds the potential to revolutionise operational efficiencies, streamline decision-making processes, and ultimately catalyse a paradigm shift in organisational dynamics.</i></p>	<p><i>Using advanced technology, artificial intelligence can improve business operations, decision-making, and organisational structures.</i></p>
<p><i>In light of the fact that the results of the experiment were not consistent with the predictions that were made based on the previous research, further studies need to be carried out in order to fully understand the reasons for this discrepancy.</i></p>	<p><i>Because the results were inconsistent with previous predictions, further studies are needed to understand the discrepancy.</i></p>
<p><i>The primary objective of this paper is to carefully examine, thoroughly analyse, and rigorously explore the various different aspects of the complex relationship that exists between environmental factors, such as air quality and climate conditions, and human health outcomes, particularly those related to respiratory diseases and long-term chronic conditions.</i></p>	<p><i>This paper examines the complex relationship between environmental factors, such as air quality and climate conditions, and human health outcomes, particularly respiratory diseases and chronic conditions.</i></p>

5. Avoid Jargon

Jargon is one of the reasons students get lost in complicated sentences. Students are often anxious to “sound smart”, which causes them to use language that they don’t fully understand, and which is often alienating to readers, e.g.

Jargon	Clearer
<i>Through the synergistic integration of transdisciplinary frameworks and the adoption of meta-analytical methodologies, we aim to operationalise the multi-dimensionality of human agency within the complex socio-ecological paradigms, leveraging ontological and epistemological approaches to yield a heuristic understanding of the interplay between environmental determinants and adaptive resilience.</i>	<i>Our goal is to better understand how human behaviour interacts with environmental factors by using a variety of research methods and theories, with a focus on improving how we respond to challenges and change.</i>

6. Avoid Unclear Pronouns

Pronouns are words that refer to an unnamed someone or something, e.g. *I, you, he, she, it, this, that*, etc. It is important that we avoid using pronouns that do not refer to the subject clearly. For the sake of clarity, it is often better to restate the subject, e.g.

Unclear Pronouns	Problems	Clear Subjects
<i>When Joyce and Proust first met, he mostly talked about duchesses.</i>	The use of “he” is vague. Who mostly talked about duchesses?	<i>When Joyce and Proust first met, Proust mostly talked about duchesses.</i>
<i>After putting the last object on the tray, he poured water on it.</i>	The use of “it” is vague. Was the water poured on the object or on the tray?	<i>After putting the last object on the tray, he poured water on the tray.</i>
<i>Kennedy was admired for his views and criticised for his affairs. This is evidenced in newspapers from this time.</i>	The use of “this” is vague. What is evidenced – the fact that he was admired or criticised?	<i>Kennedy was admired for his views and criticised for his affairs. This admiration is evidenced in newspapers from this time (or) This criticism is evidenced in newspapers (or) Both this admiration and criticism is evidenced in newspapers.</i>

7. Simplify Sentence Structure

Syntax refers to the way we structure our sentences/ the order of the words in a sentence. While it is correct to use a variety of syntactical structures, often the simplest and clearest chronology to use is:

Subject + Action + Object

The subject is a noun that performs the action of the sentence. The verb is the action of the sentence. The object is the thing that is impacted directly or indirectly by the action.

The researcher tested the chemical.

Here, **the researcher** is the subject because they perform the action, **tested** is the action, and **the chemical** is the object because it has been impacted by the testing. This is often the best sentence structure for clarity, e.g.

Correct, But Confusing	Components	Simpler Structure
<i>In the implementation of the policy, significant challenges were encountered by the department, leading to unintended problems.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Subjects: department, this. ▪ Actions: implement, encounter, lead. ▪ Objects: policy, challenges, problems. 	<i>The department implemented the policy and encountered significant challenges, and this led to unintended problems.</i>
<i>In discussions of existentialism and its implications for modern ethics, the rejection of objective moral values by some philosophers has been considered controversial, sparking ongoing debates about the role of individual choice and responsibility in ethical decision-making.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Subjects: philosophers, this. ▪ Actions: reject, spark. ▪ Objects: values, debates, choice, responsibility. 	<i>Some existentialist philosophers reject objective moral values, and this has sparked debates about individual choice and responsibility in ethical decision-making.</i>
<i>Within the field of cognitive psychology, an increase in research on memory distortions and their connection to eyewitness testimony has been observed, raising questions among legal scholars about the reliability of such testimonies in court cases.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Subjects: psychologists, scholars. ▪ Actions: research, question. ▪ Objects: distortions, impact, testimony, reliability, court. 	<i>Cognitive psychologists have increasingly researched memory distortions and their impact on eyewitness testimony, and legal scholars question its reliability in court.</i>

8. Arrange Lists Carefully

Tied to sentence structure is how we arrange lists in our sentences. This is straightforward when the items in our list are small, or only require 1 word, e.g. *Critical thinking requires observation, analysis, and reasoning*. Each item in this list only requires 1 word.

However, in academic lists, the items are often much longer, e.g. *Effective study habits include minimising distractions, setting specific goals, and maintaining a structured schedule*. The first item of this list requires 2 words, the second item requires 3 words, and the final item requires 4 words.

A good rule for achieving clarity is to arrange your lists according to how many words each item uses. Sentences can be made much clearer by **putting the items with the highest number of words nearer the end of your sentences**, as in the second example above, and as in the table below, e.g.

Correct, But Confusing	“Heavier” Items at End of Sentence
<p><i>Successful leadership requires (1) the capacity to adapt strategies based on shifting market conditions, (2) good communication, and (3) the skill to foster collaboration among diverse teams.</i></p>	<p><i>Successful leadership requires (1) good communication, (2) the skill to foster collaboration among diverse teams, and (3) the capacity to adapt strategies based on shifting market conditions.</i></p>
<p><i>Effective psychotherapy involves (1) implementing evidence-based interventions that integrate behavioural, psychodynamic, and humanistic approaches tailored to individual psychological profiles, (2) establishing a strong therapeutic alliance, and (3) continuously evaluating treatment efficacy through longitudinal assessment methods.</i></p>	<p><i>Effective psychotherapy involves (1) establishing a strong therapeutic alliance, (2) continuously evaluating treatment efficacy through longitudinal assessment methods, and (3) implementing evidence-based interventions that integrate behavioural, psychodynamic, and humanistic approaches tailored to individual psychological profiles.</i></p>
<p><i>A comprehensive analysis of literary texts requires (1) the ability to interpret symbolism within historical and cultural contexts, (2) the skill to evaluate intertextual relationships that reveal thematic and ideological continuities across different works and periods, and (3) the capacity to deconstruct narrative structures.</i></p>	<p><i>A comprehensive analysis of literary texts requires (1) the capacity to deconstruct narrative structures, (2) the ability to interpret symbolism within historical and cultural contexts, and (3) the skill to evaluate intertextual relationships that reveal thematic and ideological continuities across different works and periods.</i></p>

9. Bookend Quotations

Quotations from scholarly works are a key part of academic writing, but sometimes the reader may be confused because of the way we have integrated those quotations. For example, quotations without any context or explanation are unclear, especially if we immediately move on to another quotation.

Where possible, it is useful to provide an introductory sentence before the quotation, as well as another sentence that reflects, builds on, explains, or applies the quotation in some way. Bookending the quotation in this way provides clearer context for the quotation, enables the reader to see the value of the quotation, and implicitly justifies the inclusion of the quotation in our work, e.g.

Quotation Without Context	Bookended Quotation
<p><i>The role of memory in shaping personal identity has been a central concern in psychological and philosophical discourse. "[M]emory is not merely a repository of past experiences but an active process through which individuals construct and reconstruct their sense of self over time" (Brown 1989). Equally, Jones (2006) argues...</i></p>	<p><i>The role of memory in shaping personal identity has been a central concern in psychological and philosophical discourse. <u>For example, Brown (1989) challenges the traditional notion that identity is rooted in a stable, unchanging core, and instead proposes that our sense of self evolves through the act of remembering and reinterpreting past experiences: "memory is not merely a repository of past experiences but an active process through which individuals construct and reconstruct their sense of self over time". Brown's perspective highlights the dynamic nature of memory, suggesting that identity is not a fixed entity but a fluid narrative shaped by continuous reinterpretation. Equally, Jones (2006) argues...</u></i></p>

10. Read Out Loud

During the writing process, our main focus tends to be on getting information onto the page as quickly as possible. Often when we reread our own work silently, we cannot "see the wood for the trees" because we are merely scanning (usually quite quickly), rather than reading the words slowly and carefully.

As such, it is strongly recommended that you read your work out loud during the drafting process. Doing so will down the reading process, and it will help you "hear" what does not make sense, rather than trying to "see" it.