

Lesson 09: Academic Writing--Third Person, Active Voice, Parallel Structure

Lesson Objectives:

- Students will learn to maintain third person point of view in academic writing.
- Students will learn to write sentences in active voice.
- Students will learn to write sentences using parallel structure.
- Students will further differentiate formal academic writing from other informal uses of language.

Third person point of view

Academic writing maintains a third person point of view. This means the subject pronouns **he, she, they, it,** or (less preferably) **one** are used instead of *I* or *you*. Look at the following two sentences:

I hated the movie. You have to concentrate so hard just to keep all the names of characters straight that you miss what's going on.

The first sentence, "I hated the movie," is an expression of the writer's personal feelings. This would be fine in many rhetorical situations such as an online review, but not for academic writing, which strives to be objective. When you are expressing an opinion in academic writing, you still do not have to write, "I think." You just have to give plenty of evidence supporting your position. The fact that these are your thoughts on the subject is already presumed because your name is on the paper. A more academic version of the first sentence simply introduces what is wrong with the movie:

The movie has several major flaws that prevent it from truly engaging an audience.

In the next sentence of the example, the second person pronoun *you* is used as a general pronoun meaning, "anyone watching the movie." This general *you* is used regularly in conversation, especially when making statements of universal wisdom ("You reap what you sow." "You've got to start somewhere." "You never know."). Because it is so commonly used, vigilance is necessary to avoid it in academic writing. The general third person pronoun, *one*, can be used to replace it. However, this often sounds stilted and is simply not the best wording of the sentence. Look at this revision:

One has to concentrate so hard to keep all the names of characters straight that one misses key plot points. ("What's going on," is also informal diction and has been revised here.)

This sounds just as awkward as the first draft of the sentence. There are two better ways to revise a sentence with a general *you*:

1. Think about a specific group of people the *you* actually refers to and use that as the subject of the sentence:

The audience has to concentrate so hard to keep all the names of characters straight that they miss key plot points.

2. Or look carefully at the sentence and decide what the main point really is. Then revise the sentence to make the main point the subject:

An excess of characters obscures the plot.

This method may also help keep your writing concise and in active voice.

Active voice

When writing, avoid using passive voice. Passive voice occurs when the subject **receives** the action of the verb instead of performing it. "Be" verbs often indicate passive voice.

For example:

- The picture was drawn by Joseph.

In this case, the drawing is the subject and it is being acted upon by Joseph.

- The ball was thrown to him.
- The cat was chased by the dog.
- He was given a trophy by the committee.

In each of these sentences, the subjects -- "The ball", "The cat", "He"--are not doing anything themselves. Each is having something happen to it--being thrown or chased or given.

Always use active voice. Active voice occurs when the subject performs the action of the verb.

For example:

- Joseph draws a picture.

Joseph is the subject and he is doing something (drawing).

- He threw the ball.
- The dog chased the cat.
- The committee gave him a trophy.

These sentences have been turned around so that the subjects --" He," "The dog," "The committee" -- are each doing something.

Writing in active voice keeps your writing concise and lively. It makes prose cleaner, clearer, and more direct. As you look at your sentences, make sure the subject is acting and not being acted upon. Avoid forms of the verb "to be" such as *was*, *is*, *were*, *are*. It helps to place subjects in front of the action they perform. Consider revising any passive voice sentences in the following ways:

- Change the sentence around.

The man was charged by the District Attorney.
The District Attorney charged the man.

- Rewrite using a different verb.

He was given the key to the city.
He accepted the key to the city.

- Be creative!

He was desperate to go to the concert.
In his desperation, he tried to sneak into the concert.

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Parallel structure

Parallel structure is "balancing" a sentence by keeping your words in the same pattern. Most parallel structures are joined with conjunctions such as "and" or "or." Look at the sentence below:

Jasmine was so happy that she danced across the street, hummed her favorite tune, and was jumping over the fence.

What's wrong with this sentence? It is not balanced. The format of the last thing Jasmine did does not match. This is an example of the same content with parallel structure:

Jasmine was so happy that she danced across the street, hummed her favorite tune, and jumped over the fence.

The sentence is now balanced by the repeating of the past tense verbs "danced," "hummed," and "jumped."

Here are two more examples of sentences that have parallel structure:

Example 1: I went to the mall, to the store, and then to the airport.

Example 2: Sally was playing her guitar, watching TV, and eating a cheeseburger.

Grading Rubric:

- **To get a 10:** All answers are correct the first time, or within the first revision. You can have no grammatical errors, within the first revision. Answers are in complete sentences; all lesson requirements have been met.
- **To get a 9:** You can have 1 incorrect answer and 1 or 2 grammatical errors (spelling, punctuation, capitalization, wrong word, run-on sentences, sentence fragments, etc.). Answers are in complete sentences; all lesson requirements have been met.
- **To get an 8:** You can have 1 incorrect answer and 3 grammatical errors (spelling, punctuation, capitalization, wrong word, run-on sentences, sentence fragments, etc.). Answers are in complete sentences; all lesson requirements have been met.
- **To get a 7:** You can have 1 incorrect answer and 4 grammatical errors (spelling, punctuation, capitalization, wrong word, run-on sentences, sentence fragments, etc.) **OR** all answers are correct but several grammatical errors remain. Answers are in complete sentences; all lesson requirements have been met.
- **To get a 6:** You can have 2 incorrect answers and 5 grammatical errors (spelling, punctuation, capitalization, wrong word, run-on sentences, sentence fragments, etc.). Answers are in complete sentences; lesson requirements have been met.
- **To get a 5:** [Plagiarism](#) - purposeful or mistaken which will lower your final grade for the course (so be very careful when posting your work!); lack of effort, disrespect, or attitude (we are here to communicate with you if you don't understand something).

Be aware that you will have a chance to revise your work. More than 2 revisions will result in a lower grade, so read the directions carefully and make sure you meet the requirements.

Assignment:

Part 1:

Rewrite each sentence in third person point of view.

1. You have to study hard to learn all the material in the class.
2. I wish campaign ads were not so negative.
3. Don't forget what we are fighting for!
4. The spacing of the poem draws your eyes downward as if you were watching a raindrop slide down the window pane.
5. You never know what you're going to get.

Part 2:

Rewrite each sentence in active voice avoiding the use of: am, is, are, was, were, be, being, and been.

6. The team was not led to victory by Joe Montana.
 7. Hillary Clinton, the wife of former President Bill Clinton, was appointed by her husband to lead a committee to study the issue of health care.
 8. The detectives who had investigated the case were admired by their fellow officers.
 9. The clubhouse had been left in a shambles, and the parking lot was littered with trash.
 10. Legislation that limits the right to purchase and to bear arms is opposed by the National Rifle Association.
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Part 3:

Rewrite the following sentences using parallel structure.

11. Willy enjoys riding his bicycle, dancing at clubs, and to hike up to Bear's Mountain.

12. Betsy like to swim, to dance, and running in the mornings.

13. Dr. Barns told his patient that he should not eat fatty foods, that he should eat more vegetables, and to exercise more often.

14. We use our stereo to listen to CDs, for playing tapes, or for listening to the radio.

15. I would prefer to fix an old car than watching television.

16. The nursery was cheerful and had a lot of sun.

17. He was determined to pass the math course, not only to earn his three credits, but also for a sense of achievement.

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