

Teaching Writing as Inquiry: Clear Thinking Requires Clear Prose

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Unless faculty make prose style one of the criteria they evaluate in student papers, students will often turn in sloppy, bloated writing that they haven't bothered to edit. Indeed, students frequently assume that faculty don't really care *how* ideas are expressed as long as the "correct" information is presented. But such writing is not only difficult (even painful) to read: it is also a manifestation of lazy or muddled or simply incomplete thinking. While we shouldn't expect students to be great prose stylists, we can—and should—**demand clear writing as a fundamental element of clear thinking.**

One powerful way to encourage students to write clearly is to review polished drafts (you should refuse to look at rough drafts). Skim quickly, looking only for a few elements—probably *the quality of the central purpose and idea, the organization of the train of thought, the quality of the supporting reasoning and evidence, and the quality of the prose*. Don't write comments. Instead, circle or bracket the problematic area and use abbreviations or simple signs to indicate a weakness in one of the 3 to 5 elements you are looking for.

To keep the task simple, look for these 3 prose elements in student writing:

1. a **coherent train of thought**
2. **emphasis** on important ideas
3. **conciseness**

A coherent train of thought, in analytical writing, is usually structured by a **strong thesis**.

- A strong thesis makes a significant claim, requiring reasoning, evidence, and examination of multiple perspectives/options to support it (as opposed to a weak thesis, which states the obvious or otherwise has insignificant purpose).
- The thesis is frequently located at the end of the introduction—the introduction serving to create a context for the thesis. (Different kinds of contexts are created for different audiences and genres.)
- The thesis may overview the parts of the claim: for example, "Although a war in Iraq would benefit the U.S. military/industrial complex and major oil companies, there are compelling moral, legal, and security reasons (both domestic and international) for finding alternate ways to deal with Saddam Hussein." *Notice how such a thesis creates a **train of thought**: the writer has committed herself to discussing, first, the economic benefits some segments of the economy would experience from a war against Iraq, followed by 3 reasons against doing so (the third split into two parts)—the sequence of ideas in the thesis anticipating the sequence of ideas in the discussion which follows.*

Coherence is created by

- repetition of key terms, particularly terms from the thesis, as well as from other train-of-thought anticipating sentences. *Important: **key terms** are repeated, not **claims**, not **reasoning**, not **evidence** (such repetition will be perceived as **redundancy**).* New paragraphs usually have a key term from the thesis in the opening sentence. Headings usually repeat key terms from the thesis.
- consistent movement from old to new: that is, new ideas and information are introduced in the context of ideas already presented. (This is a common cause of incoherence: new material is abruptly introduced and—at the end of it—is linked back to previously introduced ideas.)

- connectives or structural patterns which reveal how the train of thought is moving from sentence to sentence. “For example,” “In other words,” “Given the necessity for economic growth,” “However,” “But”—these are all connectives. Similarly, question can supply connective material: for example, “If our opponent is immoral, why should our approach be grounded in morality?” Structural patterns occur when parallel pieces of evidence are introduced in identical sentence patterns: *Here is one piece of evidence. Here is another. Here is a third.*

Emphasis is a matter of being sure that the audience knows which ideas are important—which means that the writer has to have figured that out. Clear emphasis is achieved through

- placing important ideas in important places. That happens at multiple levels. It should be observed at the sentence level, where all subjects and predicates (all independent clauses) contain significant material—and significant material is not buried in subordinate clauses and phrases. And it should be observed at the paragraph level, where beginnings and endings are most significant. A coherent train of thought can be followed by reading paragraph openings.
- using visual devices. *Visual devices* are not to be confused with *visual aids* (i.e., figures and tables, which can be useful ways to explain an idea). Visual devices—such as headings, underlining, italics, bullets and numbers, font changes, etc.—focus a reader’s attention on specific aspects of a text. (There is a danger in overusing them. **HAVE THEY BEEN OVERUSED in this text?**)
- directly asserting the importance or significance of an idea. Phrases such as “more importantly,” or “the key factors,” or “a minor issue” help clarify to the reader what is (and is not) important.

Conciseness results from precise words and phrases and from efficient sentence structures. To help students write concisely, try these strategies:

- list conciseness as an evaluation criterion, and don’t require minimum paper lengths (instead, require adequate development of a significant purpose),
- review drafts, bracketing (or circling) wordy sentences and passages,
- present models of wordy constructions revised for clarity & efficiency.

Here’s an example:

Original:

Games are anything from board games to video games and anything in between. There are certain attributes that you need for something to be a game. The first attribute I believe you need for something to be a game is for it to have some kind of stakes. Whether it be winning, getting better, or just for a work out, mind or body, games all have stakes. The second attribute I believe is that all games need to have a purpose and rules. There should be some objective to the game and rules you must play by in the game. Board games and sports have fairly strict rules, whereas mind games or social games have very loose rules. These games do have purposes too, some are beating the other team or other players, others are to get the girl or boy to like you, and there are many other purposes games can have. The last attribute I think a games needs is that it must be fun to someone. Not everyone likes every game, but every game should be liked by at least one person. Some people like Monopoly but those people don’t have to enjoy the game of Life. I enjoy all types of games. (12 sentences, 206 words)

Possible Revision:

From dominos to flirting, games have four attributes in common: purpose and rules, stakes and entertainment value. (1 sentence, 17 words)