“One day I will find the right words, and they will be simple.”
- Jack Kerouac
PICTURE THIS…

You are trapped in a lecture hall. You voluntarily signed up to be there because you care quite deeply about the topic and others’ ideas, but the air feels quite cold, lunch happened four hours ago, and you failed to get a good night’s sleep.

Still, you do your best to pay attention. The speaker, however, wanders, becomes repetitive, and seems disorganized; he had announced at the beginning that there would be four topics, but, just as your water bottle runs dry, he starts on his sixth topic…

Would you possibly feel like…
In my years of teaching, many of my evenings feature stacks of papers to read. Like most good professors, I enjoy reading students’ thoughts. When I can’t follow them though, I feel frustration, the opposite of persuaded and am, therefore, less likely to award a grade that reflects a powerful argument. On the other hand, clear, concise writing makes me SO HAPPY.

Consider practicing the art of clarity and concision as an act of empathy for your reader.
If you ensure clear, concise writing, your reader will be much happier because, even if they do not agree with your argument, they are more likely to be able to understand your thoughts, recognize that you have made your point and, therefore, succeeded in the assignment.

Even more crucially, at the graduate and professional level, clear, concise writing means the difference in proposal success and even can, therefore, help save lives.
Make a list (coaches can help) of areas you know you could improve then check those areas as you go through two revisions: one for clarity and one for concision (part of the concision review can be for grammar, punctuation, and style).

Clarity: Does My Draft Make Sense?

Concision: Are My Words Precise, and Does Each One Matter?
Most of us, given clear skies and a good map, rather enjoy a good adventure...

WORKSHOP ROADMAP

Revise for Clarity
- Explicitly State Thesis and Roadmap
- Follow Natural Order & Unite Ideas
- Master Rules & Norms
- Practice Parallelism

Revise for Concision
- Search for & Destroy Common Pitfalls
- Work toward Simplicity (Subjects/Verbs)
- Eliminate Redundancies
- Write Naturally
Congress must pass a budget for the government to function thereby ensuring citizen security and wellbeing.

This paper defines primary government functions and provides a timeline of major budget issues since 1945, then it explores economic, security, and personnel issues that can arise from a non-functioning government.
This paper defines primary government functions and provides a timeline of major budget issues since 1945, then it explores economic, security, and personnel issues that can arise from a non-functioning government. The economic section focuses on three major areas—the cost of shutdowns, federal employee pay, and government financial services; the security section details impacts to essential services arising from lack of non-essential staff support, as well as increased threats of terrorism and international partners’ perceptions. The last section analyzes morale and productivity during the last three U.S. government shutdowns, demonstrating that personal and professional stress arising from a non-functioning government also has a detrimental impact on both our economy and security.
Together, these islands make up the state of Hawaii.
Paragraphs are like islands for your reader:

together, they demonstrate your thesis, and, also,
each paragraph provides a break and reset for your reader, much like the ideal island vacation! 😊
Paragraphs are like islands for readers; give them the mental vacation they deserve. Your grades – and much more – will thank you.

- Picture yourself reading a book. You find yourself growing thirsty. You think to yourself, okay, I’ll get to the end of this chapter and then go get some water (or a glass of wine!). When you return, refreshed, you want the book to remind you of where you were and start again. (It’s a new chapter!) Like chapter beginnings, paragraph beginnings are important.

- For body paragraphs, ensure that your first sentence, known as your *topic sentence*, does both of its jobs:
  1) Clearly and explicitly states the main point of the WHOLE paragraph
     - Avoid the trap, especially when writing about historical happenings, of starting with the first thing that happened.
     - Remember that your topic sentence needs to be analysis, not summary; avoid starting with just a fact.
     - Avoid starting with a quote.
  2) Implicitly or explicitly relates to the thesis (advance the argument or main point)/ so-what
     - Go back once you’re done with the draft and ask yourself the following. If I read the Introduction, all the topic sentences, and the Conclusion, would I understand the paper?
     - The thesis and topic sentences represent the skeleton of your argument. Without them, the paper holds up about as well as any of us would without our bones…
Would You Like More Information on Thesis Statements and How to Write Papers and Theses/Dissertations, Including the All-important Topic Sentence?

Sign up for *Writing Winning Arguments* and *The Secret Key to Writing*, both of which can be found on the Workshops sign-up page. Also, the coaches simply adore helping students discover their thesis statements… almost more than coffee. 😊

Most writers find it easier to adjust a thesis statement than a whole paper, and the thesis statement of nearly every paper I have ever written has changed—either slightly or dramatically—by the time I had a draft.
CLARITY: FOLLOW NATURAL ORDER

➢ To achieve logical flow, follow the natural order of information:
  ➢ Larger context before details
  ➢ Principle before example
  ➢ Definition before use of term
  ➢ Definition of acronym before use of acronym
  ➢ Early before late (chronological)
  ➢ Purpose of list before items in list
1) How does this read?
Colonel Smith dispatched a telegram about the size of the advancing force to his commanding officer.

1) Better; basic ideas kept together:
Colonel Smith dispatched a telegram to his commanding officer about the size of the advancing force.

2) How does this read?
In the aftermath of 9/11, the United States founded the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in 2002.

2) Better; keep senses of time together:
In 2002, in the aftermath of 9/11, the United States founded the Department of Homeland Security (DHS).

3) How does this read?
By 1890, among adults, half the men and a third of the women knew how to read in Kansas.

3) Better; basic ideas kept together, avoids inadvertent interpretation:
By 1890, among adults, half the men and a third of the women in Kansas knew how to read.
CLARITY: MASTER RULES & NORMS

Breaking Grammar Rules quick check:

**Solid or Rule-Breaker (RB)?**

Having finished my dinner, the waitress offered dessert.

*RB! Try:* Once I finished my dinner, the waitress offered dessert.

**Solid or Rule-Breaker (RB)?**

For who am I holding this glass of wine?

*RB! Try:* For *whom* am I holding this glass of wine?

**Solid or Rule-Breaker (RB)?**

I cut down only the trees which were marked with yellow ribbons.

*RB! Try:* I cut down only the trees *that* were marked with yellow ribbons.

Grammar describes the structure of language; grammar rules also cover things like article usage, pronoun confusion, alternatives to *however, its* versus *it’s*, subject/verb agreement, and verb tense. For more, see *Mastery Series: Grammar*. 

CLARITY: MASTER RULES & NORMS

Breaking Punctuation Rules quick check:

Solid or Rule-Breaker (RB)?
I walk to the beach because the sun shines.

Solid! A comma before because would break the rules.

Solid or Rule-Breaker (RB)?
I walk to the beach; because the sun shines.

RB! Semi-colons need full sentences on either side.

Solid or Rule-Breaker (RB)?
Jesus’ followers wrote about their experiences.

RB! Try: Jesus’s followers wrote about their experiences.

Punctuation are the marks that act like road signs for the reader; learning punctuation rules can be one of the most straightforward and helpful aspects of writing. Most of us do not learn them until we are adults. For more, see Mastery Series: Punctuation.
CLARITY: MASTER RULES & NORMS:
Spelling

- Appreciate spellcheck but do not depend on it.
  - Turn spellcheck off while you’re drafting, then remember to run it on your drafts before submission.
  - Please also read your drafts aloud from paper. Spellcheck will not catch many errors where we use one word when we mean another.
- Use edit/find to search for subsequent uses of a word if you realize you’ve spelled it incorrectly or are using the wrong one (material for materiel, for example).
- Keep a real dictionary – Merriam Webster or Oxford English Dictionary are both great and also accessible in electronic form— handy while writing. MS Word’s dictionary is insufficient for graduate and professional writing.
- Allow enough time for a second set of eyes to review your paper.
CLARITY: MASTER RULES & NORMS:

Spelling

Watch out for homophones (words that sound the same but have different meanings)

- I decided to wear comfortable, _____clothes on the _______ from San Francisco to New York. (insert plane/plain)

- With all that squeaking, I recommend taking one of your lunch _to get your _____ checked. (insert breaks/brakes)

- The _______ ’s fundamental, or __________, concern was the safety of the kids. (insert principle/principal)
TRY THESE! WHICH IS CORRECT?

- The dog ate its bone. The dog ate it’s bone.
- Who’s shirt is this? Whose shirt is this?
- Who goes there? Who goes their?
- They’re walking down the street. There walking down the street.
- Do you want to go, to? Do you want to go, too?
- The tenants moved out quickly. The tenets moved out quickly.
- Slow your roll! Slow your role!
- You’re moving too slow for me. Your moving too slow for me.

CORRECT:
- The dog ate its bone.
- Whose shirt is this?
- Who goes there?
- They’re walking down the street.
- Do you want to go, too?
- The tenants moved out quickly.
- Slow your roll!
- You’re moving too slow for me.
Other sometimes confusing words: choose correctly!

- Affect / Effect
- Angel / Angle
- Assets / Assess (forgetting the final s on the last one is really embarrassing!)
- Carat / Caret / Carrot
- Casual / Causal
- Comprise / Compose / Consist
- Council / Counsel
- Cue / Queue
- Disinterested / Uninterested
- Further / Farther / Furthermore
- Lay / Lie
- Lose / Loose

- Material / Materiel
- Method / Methodology
- Personal / Personnel
- Regardless (Irregardless)
- Tenants/ Tenets
- Than / Then
- That / Which
- Threw / Through (thru)
- Toward / Towards
- Versus / Verses (vice)
To truly change in your writing, we advise considering the effect of your words on readers and reading out loud, both of which will likely positively affect your grades.

I drove farther down the coast in order to understand my understanding of the ocean. Farther, I wanted to understand the differences between one beach town and the next.
In the military and in technological fields, you may see EVERYTHING CAPITALIZED. Which makes you feel better?

Please make sure you capitalize correctly in academic writing.

OR:

PLEASE MAKE SURE YOU CAPITALIZE CORRECTLY IN ACADEMIC WRITING.

WRITING IN ALL CAPS (EVEN IN TEXTS AND EMAILS) IS GENERALLY CONSIDERED YELLING. IT’S ALSO HARD TO READ. COPY THAT?
Capitalize proper nouns.

- *Africa* is a proper noun, but the term *continent* is not.

Capitalize special ranks, titles, or positions only when used before a person’s name.

- Also, please note that capitalizing a general title (Manager) without your name, on a resume for example, may look a bit awkward as it is not correct.

Which one is correct? I worked as the manager / Manager of three states.

Which one is correct? I served as the U.S. Regional manager / U.S. Regional manager.

YES! President Emmanuel Macron is currently serving a five-year term as president in France.

Caveat: based on tradition, capitalizing Sailor, Soldier, Marine, et cetera is fine. Be sure to be consistent.

Capitalize major words in publication titles or works.

- If the publication title includes “the,” capitalize the “the” also, as in *The New York Times* or *The BFG* by Roald Dahl.

Capitalize the chapters, sections, and figures of your thesis when referring to them by name: Chapter IV.

Capitalize compass directions when they identify a specific region rather than a general direction.

- *Students from the West often melt in humidity; students from western Oklahoma often melt in humidity.*
CLARITY: MASTER RULES & NORMS: 
Italics and Underlining

- Italics and underlining are interchangeable, provided you pick one and stick to it.
  - I advise italics both because I think it looks nicer (my preference) and because the Thesis Processing Office prefers it as do many editors and publishers.

- Italicize the name of large works; put titles of smaller (in length) works in quotation marks.
  - For example, a record’s name is italicized while the track names are in quotation marks. The album *Purple Rain* features “Purple Rain” as its last track. Books, magazines, journals, newspapers, movies, and most reports all receive italics.

- Use italics to format a letter, word, phrase, or sentence used as a linguistic example.
  - The following chart explains the difference between *effect* and *affect*.

- Use italics to indicate foreign language terms that are not commonly used in English.
  - Tacos, delicious as they are, do not need italics.

- Use italics to introduce a new, technical, or key term.

- Use italics to indicate letters used as statistical symbols or algebraic variables.
Consistency is key when formatting numbers in an academic paper. Follow these guidelines:

- Spell out numbers zero through nine.
  - *Over the course of one week, four participants submitted their surveys.*
- Use numerals for numbers 10 and greater.
  - *The air outside feels like 100 degrees in the shade!*
- Use numerals whenever you need to place a lot of numbers in a small space, a string of data or a timeline, for example.
- Percentages are always a number, and formulas are formulas, of course.
- Because the English gods say you must spell out any number that starts a sentence, you will most often see writers avoid starting sentences with numbers.
  - *The year 2020 already interests me is an easier sentence to write than the next sentence. Two thousand and twenty will be an interesting year.*
CLARITY: MASTER RULES & NORMS: Abbreviations and Acronyms

- Use periods after a shortened version of a person’s name: A. W. Birmingham
- Dealing with our country (TPO preference):
  - Spell out United States when it is a noun: *I live in the United States.*
  - Abbreviate United States to U.S. (with periods) when it is an adjective: *U.S. foreign policy dictates...*
- Spell out acronyms the first time they appear, followed by the acronym in parentheses, like so:
  - *The Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) is located in Monterey, California.*
  - *Leadership requires that staff submits documents by close of business (COB) on Friday.*
  - It is fine to re-introduce a frequently used acronym at the beginning of a new thesis chapter.
- Use periods surrounding Latin abbreviations (stylistic suggestion: I spell out *et cetera* when I use it): e.g., a.m., p.m., i.e., et. al.
- No periods for state names, acronyms: NPS needs no periods
NAVFAC is organized both as a tiered organization, and as a matrix organization. Macroscopically, the headquarters element of NAVFAC is an echelon II command. The two subordinate commands, NAVFAC LANT and NAVFAC PAC, as well as the Engineering and Expeditionary Warfare Center (EXWC) and the Navy Crane Center, are Echelon III commands under the headquarters element. NAVFAC LANT and PAC align with, and support, Navy Fleet Forces Command and NAVFAC PAC aligns with and supports Pacific Fleet. The various regional Facilities Engineering Commands (FECs) are subordinate to NAVFAC PAC and NAVFAC LANT. The FEC commanding officers (COs) also act as the regional engineers (REs) to the CNIC regional commanders. The installation Public Works Departments (PWDs) and Facilities Engineering and Acquisition Divisions (FEADs) answer to their regional FECs as subordinate divisions and support their respective installation commanding officers and their tenant commands. The PWDs are also tenant commands on their respective installations (NAVFAC, 2015).
CLARITY: PRACTICE PARALLELISM IN WRITING

Similar to matching, parallelism gives equal weight to words with the same level of importance; using parallelism in a list (three or more things) automatically sounds better to your reader.

PARALLEL STRUCTURE HELPS TO

- Give rhythm to language
- Show the relationship between ideas

- Use with a gerund (-ing): traveling, eating, walking
- Use with infinitive phrases (to, the): to write, to ponder, to revise
- Use with adverbs (-ly): quickly, slowly, craftily
What is wrong with this picture?

Sasquatch enjoys taking long walks in the forest, playing with small woodland creatures, and to devour wandering tourists.
As clear as possible? To succeed is opening a new opportunity.

Clearer: To succeed is to open a new opportunity.

As clear as possible? Her priorities were eating, drinking, and sleeping.

Clear!

As clear as possible? Every single night she brushed her teeth, flossed her toes, and watered her squash.

Clear! Who does not floss their toes? 😊

As clear as possible? I like swimming better than to dive.

Clearer: I like swimming better than diving. OR: I like to swim better than to dive.

As clear as possible? She ate quickly, brushed her cat thoroughly, and read her book.

Clearer: She ate quickly, brushed her teeth thoroughly, and quietly read her book.
Concision...

“Perfection is not when there is no more to add, but no more to take away.”
-Antoine de Saint Exupery
Avoid stating “I think” or “I believe”

You would not be giving the statement if you did not.

I think Congress should pass the law.

I think Congress should pass the law.

Congress should pass the law.
Eliminate unnecessary introductory material.

- It is important to consider that Congress could pass the law.
- It is important to note that Congress could pass the law.
  - Congress could pass the law.
- There are many reasons to love. One reason to love is that it creates more love.
  - Of many, one reason to love is that it creates more love.
- People might consider loving more. This is important because love creates more love.
  - Because love creates more love, people might consider loving more.
CONCISION: Search for & Destroy Common Pitfalls

- Avoid vague statements that do not clearly state what is going on
  - Passing the law could really affect the people.
  - Passing the law could mean large changes.
  - Passing the law could positively affect people.
  - Passing the law could mean that people starve.
CONCISION: Search for & Destroy Common Pitfalls

- Eliminate some prepositional phrases.
  - I run down the street on Tuesday. (relatively concise)
  - I run down the street across the highway through the trees down to the beach and jump into the lake on Tuesday.
  - Does anyone really remember that you were running?
CONCISION: Search for & Destroy Common Pitfalls
Practice eliminating multiple prepositional phrases

- The countries that had defeated Germany gathered outside of Paris and signed the Treaty of Versailles in January of 1919.
  - Put dates first, and delete “of” between month and year:
  - In January 1919, the countries that defeated Germany gathered outside of Paris and signed the Treaty of Versailles.
  - Replace two prepositions with one, and put another prepositional phrase up front: In January 1919, gathered near Paris, the countries that defeated Germany signed the Treaty of Versailles.

- This war was of inevitable nature because Athens was growing at a rapid rate, and it brought concern not only to Sparta but also to city states in the surrounding areas.
  - Use a conjunctive adverb in place of six words,
  - Replace “was” phrases with an apostrophe and an adjective,
  - Use specific wording when possible, and
  - Take an adjective out of the prepositional phrase and place it behind the noun it modifies.

- Inevitably, Athens’s rapid growth created concern—for both Sparta and surrounding city states—that led to war.
CONCISION: Search for & Destroy Common Pitfalls

• The core of the Earth:
  • the Earth’s core

• I ate all of the cakes.
  • I ate all the cakes.

• In order to determine the correct path, I consulted the compass.
  • To determine the correct path, I consulted the compass.

• Needless to say
  • Needless to say

• The fact that Maduro bribes leaders corrupts Venezuela.
  • Venezuela suffers corruption partially because Maduro bribes leaders.

• As a matter of fact, Maduro bribes leaders.
  • Maduro bribes leaders.

• I am in the process of gathering data.
  • I am gathering data.

• I admit to eating all the cakes. I admit eating all the cakes.
CONCISION: Work Toward Simplicity with Verbs

• It is his belief that writing is easy.
  • He believes that writing is easy.

• He made a comparison between apples and oranges.
  • He compared apples and oranges.

• His success was caused by continued work.
  • He succeeded because he continued to work.

• Give an analysis of the data and then create a summary.
  • Analyze the data and then summarize it.
1) How does this read?
Cost cutting in the Department of Motor Vehicles’ annual budget has brought a reduction in services either through shutting down offices or eliminating positions.

1) Better; same ideas, seven fewer words:
Cuts to the Department of Motor Vehicles’ budget have reduced services through office closures and position elimination.

2) 28 words.
The corporate lawyers met in a room for fourteen hours and were able to come up with a list of nine bylaws that would guarantee themselves bureaucratic immortality.

2) Better; 16 words:
After fourteen hours, the corporate lawyers had crafted nine bylaws that would guarantee themselves bureaucratic immortality.
CONCISION: Eliminate Redundancies

WHAT WAS THAT? WHAT DID YOU SAY? WHAT?

- Absolutely-essential/ absolutely necessary
- Advance planning / advance warning
- Added bonus
- Alternative-choice
- Anonymous-stranger
- Ask the question

- Many more redundancies exist. Google or ask.
CONCISION: Eliminate Redundancies

1) How does this read?
This study, in assessing the counterinsurgency in Iraq, will apply lessons from the counterinsurgency in Vietnam, in order to propose a universally applicable theory of counterinsurgency.

1) Better; avoids repeating words:
In order to propose a universally applicable theory of counterinsurgency, this study will apply the lessons of Vietnam to the Iraq conflict.

2) How does this read?
The cornerstone to the government providing essential emergency services to its citizens is ensuring there has been effective planning to anticipate a variety of challenges to deliver these critical services.

2) Better; includes essential elements with minimal connecting words:
Effective planning is the cornerstone to government delivery of essential emergency services.

3) How does this read?
Spending lavishly on expensive weapon systems, while failing to live within our means, undermines the fiscal credibility of the DoD.

3) Better; same meaning, nine fewer words:
Overspending on weapon systems undermines the fiscal credibility of the DoD.
CONCISION: Eliminate Redundancies

1) How does this read?

1) Better; same ideas, seven fewer words:

2) Too many words?
The purpose of the phone-alarm service is to provide a wake-up call to travelers who don’t carry any kind of alarm clock.

2) Better; ten fewer words:
The phone-alarm service wakes up travelers who don’t bring their own alarms.

3) Lean enough?
From the underground pamphlets, these future revolutionaries read and learned of the new ideas that would transform their society.

3) Better; two fewer words:
From the underground pamphlets, these future revolutionaries learned of the new ideas that would transform their society.
CONCISION: Write Naturally…

- On behalf of all writers, I apologize for any of us and for any time that we use twelve words when we need two; what really tempts me to cry, though, is the existence of academese, which is not a language but rather the convoluted craziness that seems to come from academics falsely believing they are being paid by the word.

- Actually, let’s talk about word count.

- Let’s also talk about why academese exists: it’s harder to write simply. It takes longer. We have to craft out not only what we are truly saying, but also what we truly think.

- Take the time. One time, a five line email—that took me at least an hour to craft to avoid extraneous words and thoughts—earned me a $40,000 scholarship.
Questions?

Viewing these without the in-person workshop and have questions or things to discuss? Email Instructor at cohunt@nps.edu.