

Sara Aird  
English 2500  
Final Project

## Introduction: Author's Note

My final project was reading *On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction* by William Zinsser and creating a personal revision guide. *On Writing Well* is a collection of strategies to improve nonfiction writing, including unity, structure, and motivation. Over the course of this class, I noticed that my revising strategy was not intentional. I have ambitions to publish my nonfiction writing, and in order to create polished pieces, I decided a revision guide would be a great tool. I also pulled information from our course textbooks: *Rhetorical Grammar* by Martha Kolln and Loretta Gray and *Style: The Basics for Clarity and Grace* by Joseph M. Williams and Joseph Bizup. I have divided the guide into 2 phases: coherence and concision. In each phase, I include questions and suggestions from my research sources to drive the revision process.

## Revision Guide

### Phase 1: Coherence

Coherence is the reader's experience of making sense of what we have written: knowing the purpose of what has been written, understanding how each section supports this purpose, and understanding how the new information fits into known information.

- Unity
  - “As for what point you want to make, every successful piece of nonfiction should leave the reader with one provocative thought that he or she didn't have before. No two thoughts, or five - just one. So decide what single point you want to leave in the reader's mind. It will give you a better idea of what route you should follow and what destination you hope to reach: it will affect your decision about tone and attitude.”  
(*On Writing Well*, 52)
  - Consider the following questions to clarify what you are trying to say.
    - What question are you posing?
    - What problem are you trying to solve?
    - What is the universal emotional theme?
    - What am I trying to say?
  - Tense
    - Which tense works best to convey this story?
  - Point of View:
    - Which point of view best supports your theme or message?
  - Mood
    - In what capacity will I address the reader? Formal or informal?  
Informative or conversational? Casual or business? (*On Writing Well*,52)

- Motivation:

What keeps the reader moving forward? Motivation is how you keep the reader interested in your content. Readers are often motivated to read writing that feels applicable to their lives and experiences. When writing, consider who will see themselves in your writing?

- Opening paragraph
  - State the problem or question as early as you can.
  - Does your opening paragraph catch the reader's attention?
  - After reading through your writing, where does the story truly begin?
- Paragraph to Paragraph - Think subthemes and how they are related.
  - How is each paragraph or section relevant to the point?
  - Circle the key subthemes and other words related to purpose. Do these subthemes support the purpose?
  - "Take special care with the last sentence of each paragraph - it's the crucial springboard to the next paragraph." (On Writing Well, 55)
- Closing paragraph
  - Summarize the theme by connecting the dots of the sub-themes without repeating yourself.
  - The last sentence of your piece is very important.
  - Avoid "cranking" - continuing on when it isn't necessary. Repeating yourself. Watch out for phrases like:
    - "In summary,..."
    - "What insights can we glean..."
  - "For the nonfiction writer, the simplest way of putting this into a rule is: when you're ready to stop, stop. If you have presented all the facts and made the point you want to make, look for the nearest exit." (On Writing Well, 64)

- Sentence Cohesion

Sentence Cohesion is how sentences tie together. We often accomplish a sense of cohesion between sentences by preceding known information first followed by new information. Each sentence should be a springboard for the next one.

- Known-Not Known Information Contract
  - Highlight where readers encounter new information.
  - Where is new information found within your sentences?
- Main Characters (Subjects) + Action Verbs
  - Underline the first 7-8 words in a sentence. (Style, 40)
    - Do you find the subject and verb in these first 7-8 words?
- Repetition
  - Repeating words for theme emphasis
  - Parallelism
    - Example: Today, my goals are *rest, relaxation, and recharging*. Tomorrow, my goals will be *energy, exertion, and exercise*.
    - Parallelism in structure and word choice.

## Phase 2: Concision

Concision refers to clear and accessible writing. It is often the result of precise rewriting. “But the secret of good writing is to strip every sentence to its cleanest components. Every word that serves no function, every long word that could be a short word, every adverb that carries the same meaning that’s already in the verb, every passive construction that leaves the reader unsure of who is doing what - these are the thousand and one adulterants that weaken the strength of a sentence.” (On Writing Well, 8)

- **Simplicity**

Simplicity is about accessibility. Do you write in a way that is accessible for your audience? How we write: word choice, sentence length, tone, is strongest when we are clear and concise.

- Questions to consider:
  - What am I trying to say? Have I said it? Is it clear to someone encountering the subject for the first time? (On Writing Well, 9)
- Clear thinking = Clear writing
  - Strip every sentence to its cleanest components.

- **Clutter**

The best writing is rewriting. Often what you put on the page can be refined. Cut where you can.

- Is every sentence doing useful work?
  - Consider adverbs that say the same thing as the verb.
    - Smiling happily
  - Consider adjectives that state known facts.
    - Tall skyscraper
  - Consider sentences that repeat the previous sentences.
- Six Principles of Concision (Style, 83)
  - Delete words that mean little or nothing.
  - Delete words that repeat the meaning of other words.
  - Delete words implied by other words.
  - Replace a phrase with a word.
  - Change negatives to affirmatives.
  - Delete useless adjectives and adverbs.
- Hedging
  - Avoid words like “maybe”, “perhaps”, “sometimes”, unless you want to speak to the nuance of the subject.
  - Hedging can sound less confident which can cause your reader to question your opinion or expertise. However, if you want to convey that you don’t know or are unsure, hedging could work.

- Word Choice

Consider your audience when you consider your word choice. Each speciality, genre, organization, community, etc. have specific language that drives their dialogue. Word choice is important to communicating to specific communities.

- Tangible subjects + action verbs
  - Circle all subjects and verbs.
  - Watch for “to be” verbs and passive voice.
  - Substitute short words for long words.

- Shape

Shape refers to the construction and variety of your sentences. Varying sentence length and complexity adds elegance and rhythm to your writing.

- Rhythm
  - Read your writing out loud.
  - Analyze sentences for length. Consider alternating between short and long sentences.
  - Are you using a variety of sentence types?
- Sentence Sprawl
  - How many words does it take to arrive at a verb?
  - How many supporting clauses follow a verb?
  - How often do you interrupt your sentences with clauses?
- Emphasis
  - Analyze your sentences for emphasis.
    - Consider:
      - Comma Placement
      - End Focus
        - Check on where your emphasis is.
        - Are you highlighting what is most important?
      - Interrupting Phrases
      - Power Words
        - Use sparingly. Make sure writing supports power words.