

# Polish your Essays Tutorial



# General Editing Guidelines

- ✓ You need to make your essay easy to read and remember
- ✓ We are going to focus on the biggest impediments to readability
- ✓ After you've cleaned your writing up, go to your university's writing center to have a pro give your essay a line-by-line check for grammar, spelling and wording.
- ✓ Check out our very short video on the habits of excellent editors.



# 1. Use Signposts



# Signposts

We will polish your topic sentences first. Look at the sentence that begins each paragraph. A successful topic sentence will:

- ✓ Tell the reader what *specific* content they will get
- ✓ Frame content in terms of review criteria
- ✓ Provide a single clear takeaway point

Before you edit your sentences, work through the exercises in this section. When you finish, go to your topic sentences and edit them following the principles that we discussed.



# Signposts

Recall the 3 types of readers discussed in the [Write for Reviewers tipsheet](#)

- ✓ Skimmer
- ✓ Scanner
- ✓ Depth reader

*An effective topic sentence addresses all 3.*



# Signposts: Topic Sentences

## Be Specific

### **Satisfactory:**

“I attended the University of Chicago and my research experience started there.”

### **Better:**

“In my first year at the University of Chicago, I worked with my mentor, Prof. Plum, on a research project that aimed to better understand how sleep affects learning.”



# Signposts: Topic Sentences

## Connect to the review criteria

### **Satisfactory:**

“In my second year at University X, I started to work in Prof. Plum’s lab.”

### **Excellent:**

“My research in Prof. Plum’s lab taught me how to design a testing protocol and to troubleshoot it when problems arise.”

“My longest project at Fish and Wildlife required extensive collaborations.”



# Signposts: Topic Sentences

## Use topic sentence to make holistic connections and advance your story

“When I arrived at University X, I was thrilled to devote my full time and attention to my research questions.”

“Due to my own experiences with disrupted and restricted sleep, I believe educating students – both with and without disabilities – about sleep is important.”



# Signposts: Topic Sentences

## Make holistic connections in topic sentences

“My research at University X has also given me a way to help the community, especially the homeless.”

“My time in Morocco not only inspired me to help others, but also taught me the need to transfer scientific knowledge into society.”



# Signposts: Topic Sentences

**You know what convinces reviewers. Frame your topic sentences accordingly!**

- ✓ Be specific, concrete
- ✓ Address the review criteria
- ✓ Make holistic connections
- ✓ Put up signposts to the plot



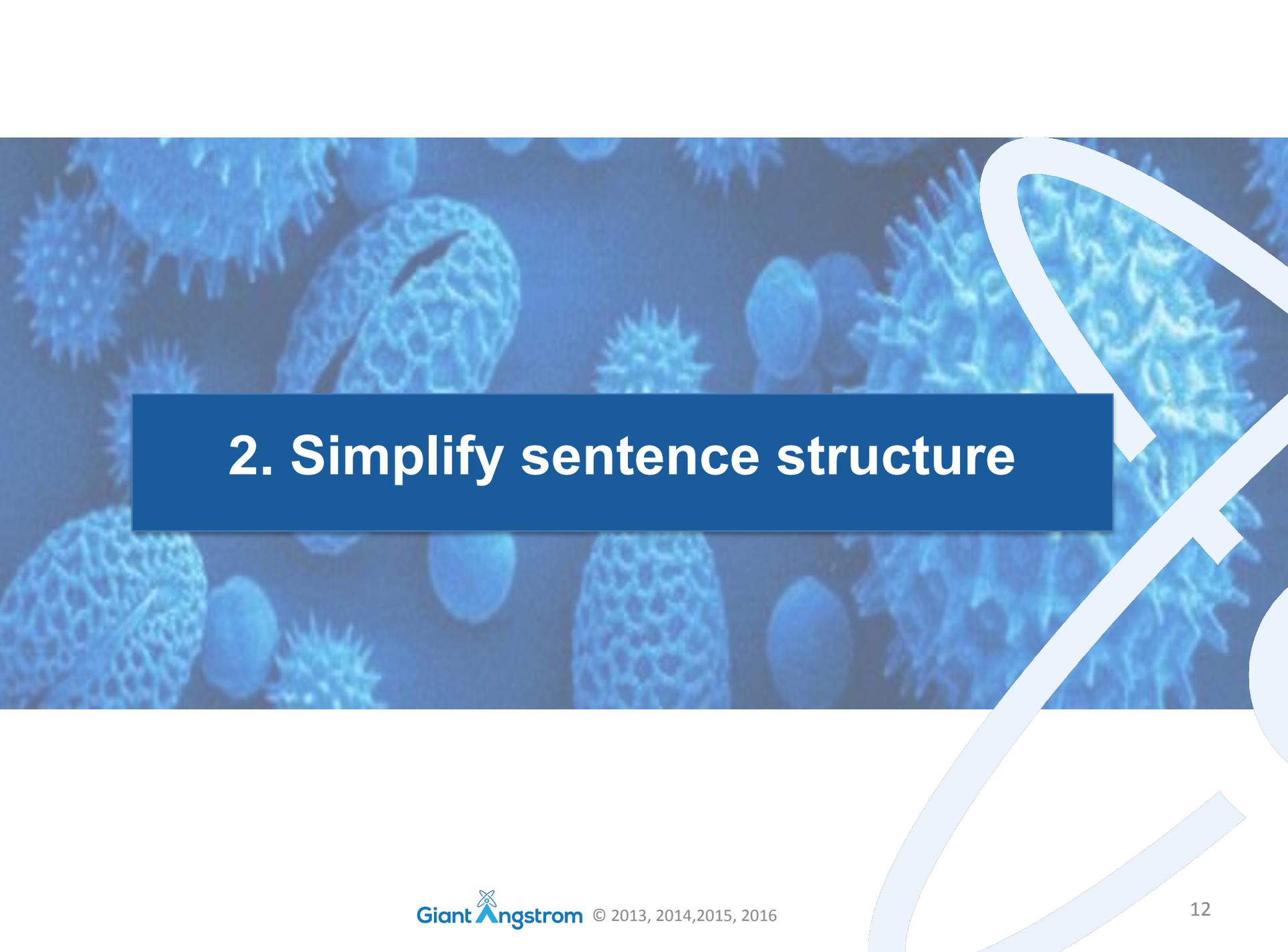
# Signposts: Stress Position

**Readers expect the most important takeaway point to come last.** Use the “stress” position to give the reader the takeaway point that you want them to remember.

For example, after a paragraph discussing a research trip, the linguist uses this final sentence to remind the reviewer what that research experience shows about their intellectual merit and broader impacts:

“My experience abroad and my knowledge of Swahili (the lingua franca of East Africa) lays the groundwork for future fieldwork in East Africa, which is one of the world’s endangered language hotspots most need in of documentation, and where I hope to develop an areal specialty post-PhD.”

**After you rework your topic sentences, look at the final sentence of each paragraph. Use the stress position to make connections to the review criteria too!**



## 2. Simplify sentence structure



# Simplify sentence structure

**Highlight very long sentences. Look for sentence that:**

- ✓ Take up 2 or more lines on the page
- ✓ Contain more than 2 clauses
- ✓ Or use a lot of phrases to tack on ideas.

**You should highlight sentences that look like this:**

The mice to which we administered the antibiotics, and which were allowed to exercise regularly, as opposed to untreated mice kept in smaller cages survived well, suggesting that the exercise facilitates the effectiveness of the new antibiotic

**Notice all of the commas that we need to string these phrases together. Tons of commas can indicate problem sentences.**



# Simplify sentence structure

**To break up long sentences:**

- ✓ Turn phrases into clauses
- ✓ Break those clauses up into individual sentences.

**Let's practice with our model. Turn the first three phrases into one sentence, and the last phrase it its own sentence:**

The mice to which we administered the antibiotics, and which were allowed to exercise regularly, as opposed to untreated mice kept in smaller cages survived well, suggesting that the exercise facilitates the effectiveness of the new antibiotic.



# Simplify sentence structure

## Here's the original:

The mice to which we administered the antibiotics, and which were allowed to exercise regularly, as opposed to untreated mice kept in smaller cages survived well, suggesting that the exercise facilitates the effectiveness of the new antibiotic

## Your edited sentence should look something like this:

The mice survived in greater numbers when we gave them antibiotics *and* allowed them to exercise. This suggests that exercise improves the new antibiotic's effectiveness.

**Go back to your essay, and improve any of the sentences that you highlighted in the same way.**



## 3. Prefer the active voice



# What are active and passive voice?

## **Passive Voice:**

The age of rocks will be measured by their relative position in sediment

## **Active Voice:**

A rock's position in sediment indicates its age.

Passive voice sentences turn an active verb (like “indicate” or “measure” into a verb phrase (“like will be measured). As a result, the sentences grammatical subject and object trade places, and you get **more wordiness**.

You don't need to eliminate all passive voice sentences (sentence variety is good!), but you should use the active voice when you can. Remember, this isn't a research paper! That means that first person pronouns are fair game (we, I, the team, etc).



# Prefer Active Voice

**Find the main verb of each sentence. If its in the passive voice (will be measured, be measured, had been measured), then highlight it.**

Let's practice with a model, before you flip some of your sentence to active voice. Turn the passive voice sentence below into active voice sentence:

Atmospheric oxidized and reduced N data **will be collected** using passive diffusion samplers and ion exchange resin bulk samplers to measure total N deposition along multiple transects at intervals perpendicular to the freeways. Soil N and leaf tissue N of dominant plant species **will be measured** along the same transects. Stable isotopes of NO<sub>x</sub> are highly correlated with N source and can be used as an indicator of anthropogenic N deposition. Short distance gradients will not differ in climatic factors, but edaphic factors including texture, other soil nutrients, and pH **will be measured**.



# Prefer Active Voice

**Compare the original with your edit. Even leaving some passive voice for variety (sentence 2), we have eliminated 3 lines of text! Now, do the same for your passive voice sentences.**

## **Original Text:**

Atmospheric oxidized and reduced N data will be collected using passive diffusion samplers and ion exchange resin bulk samplers to measure total N deposition along multiple transects at intervals perpendicular to the freeways. Soil N and leaf tissue N of dominant plant species will be measured along the same transects. Stable isotopes of NO<sub>x</sub> are highly correlated with N source and can be used as an indicator of anthropogenic N deposition. Short distance gradients will not differ in climatic factors, but edaphic factors including texture, other soil nutrients, and pH will be measured.

## **Model Edit:**

We will measure atmospheric N (oxidized and reduced) using passive diffusion and ion exchange resin bulk samplers, along multiple transects perpendicular to the freeways. Soil N and leaf tissue N of dominant plant species will be measured along the same transects. We will use stable isotopes of NO<sub>x</sub> to measure anthropogenic N deposition. Ignoring climate, we will also record edaphic factors (texture, soil nutrients, pH).



## 4. Avoid Nominalization



# Avoid Nominalization

**Nominalization:** noun and noun phrases created from verbs or adjectives

Example: There was **considerable erosion of the cliff face** as a result of the torrential rains and strong winds.

Revision: The torrential rains and strong winds eroded the cliff face considerably.

Nominalizations encourage misunderstanding, because the parts of speech don't reflect what's going on in the situation that you are writing about.

In the situation described above, the rain is the doer of the eroding. Since the subject is the "doer" of the verb, we should make the rain the grammatical subject. "Eroding" is the action so it should be the verb. Finally, the cliff is what receiving the action, so we should make it the object of the verb.



# Avoid Nominalization

## Eliminate confusing nominalization:

- ✓ As you read each of your sentences, ask yourself: what action happens in this sentence?
- ✓ Are you using a verb to express the action? If not find the nominalization, replace it with an action word, and make that the verb.
- ✓ You don't need to replace ALL nominalizations, but you should keep an eye out for them and check to see if they make it hard for your reader to understand what you are describing.



## 5. Be concise



# Be concise

**Delete meaningless words, especially over-qualifications.**

Here are some examples of meaningless words that we see in a lot of science writing.

1) I was **very** excited about grad school

“I was excited about grad school” conveys the same meaning

2) We were **nearly certain** that the problem was the motor

“We believed the motor created the problem” says the same thing

3) It was **very likely** that the Salmon had contracted the disease from invasive species.

“We inferred that the invasive species infected the Salmon” gets rid of excessive qualification and passive voice



# Be concise

**Use a word instead of a phrase. For example:**

Instead of...	Use...
At this time	now
As a means of	to
During the period of	during
Due to the fact that	because
And as a result	so
In the event that	if
Provide a synopsis	summarize

While these seem like small edits, you can free up a lot of space by turning phrases into single words. That's space you can use to add more evidence of your excellence! If you find a phrase, but can't think of a word to replace it do a web search.



## Be concise

**Delete things that you know the reader will infer. For example:**

“My research was very successful. I presented my findings at a conference and published them in the Journal of Journal Studies”

Your reader will know that you were successful if you published, so you can just say, “I presented my findings at a conference and published them in the Journal of Journal Studies,” and let your reader do the rest

## Next Steps

You have eliminated the biggest sources of misunderstanding. Now, take your essays to the writing center for a final grammar and spelling check.

Struggling with corrections? We can help! [Contact us for help in the writer's room](#)