WRITING WITH CLARITY

Think of every sentence as a story with the main character (the subject) and the character’s action (the verb). If these two elements are unclear, chances are the sentence is unclear. The following five techniques will help to sharpen and clarify your writing.

1. For each unclear sentence, ask yourself, “Who is doing what to whom/what?”
   
   Example:
   
   *There has been effective staff information dissemination control on the part of the secretary.*
   
   Who:
   
   *Is doing what:*
   
   To whom/what:
   
   *Add adverbs/adjectives last:*
   
   *The secretary has effectively controlled how the staff disseminates information.*
   
   Example:
   
   *There will be a suspension of the program by the dean until his reevaluation of it has been completed.*
   
   Who:
   
   *Is doing what:*
   
   To whom/what:
   
   *The dean will suspend the program until he has reevaluated it.*

2. Un-smother the verbs!

   Many nouns have verb counterparts, especially those ending in -tion, -sion

   Smothered (noun) → Un-smothered (verb)
   
   Discovery → Discover
   Refusal → Refuse
   Authorization → Authorize
   Suggestion → Suggest

   Example:
   
   *A discovery of the first Neanderthal was made by anthropologists.*
   
   Who: *did what* to whom/what:
   
   *Anthropologists discovered the first Neanderthal.*

   Using the above techniques, revise the following sentence:

   *Authorization for my absence was given by the leader.*

3. There was/There is... NOT!

   If possible, avoid starting a sentence with these phrases; they will force a sentence into passive construction.
There was an objection on the part of parents toward the suggestion of the principal to increase class size.

Parents objected to the principal's suggestion to increase class size. (Note also that phrases like “suggestion of the principal” can be edited: “the principal’s suggestion.”)

There was vehement opposition from the representatives of the labor union regarding the policy changes made by the CEO of the company.

Labor representatives vehemently opposed the CEO’s policy changes.

4. AVOID WORD INFLATION!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INFLATED</th>
<th>→</th>
<th>CONCISE</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Along the lines of</td>
<td>→</td>
<td>like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At this point in time</td>
<td>→</td>
<td>now</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By means of</td>
<td>→</td>
<td>by</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Due to the fact that</td>
<td>→</td>
<td>because</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For the purpose of</td>
<td>→</td>
<td>for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For the reason that</td>
<td>→</td>
<td>because</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In order to</td>
<td>→</td>
<td>to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In spite of the fact that</td>
<td>→</td>
<td>although, though</td>
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<tr>
<td>Speak out in favor of</td>
<td>→</td>
<td>support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speak out against</td>
<td>→</td>
<td>oppose, criticize</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. AVOID REDUNDANCY

The colors of the reproductions were precisely exact.

The Department of Redundancy Department is closed all week, including Friday.

The quilt that was the highlight of her collection was a quilt dating from 1889.

ON A LIGHTER NOTE...

After he was asked to write a memo instructing federal workers what to do during an air raid, Former President Roosevelt’s aid wrote:

“Such preparations shall be made as will completely obscure all Federal and non-Federal buildings occupied by the Federal Government during an air raid for any period of time from visibility by reason of internal or external illumination. Such obscuration may be obtained either by black-out construction or by termination of the illumination.”

“'Tell them,' Roosevelt told the writer, 'that in buildings where they have to keep the work going to put something over the windows; and, in buildings where they can let the work stop for a while, turn out the lights'” (Florida’s St. Petersburg Times, 15 January, 2003).