

## Some Elementary Guidelines for English Style

As *JSYS* editors, we spend 75 percent of our time performing the same tasks that high-school English teachers did fifty years ago—making corrections to improve the English grammar and style of *JSYS* articles, from both native and non-native speakers of English.

Prior to submission of a manuscript, we urge authors, especially those working on their first journal article, to study William Strunk and E.B. White, *The Elements of Style* and to incorporate as many of its principles into their own writing as possible.

What follows is a short list of the most important of these principles as they relate to the basic English style of most *JSYS* articles. We advise you to review this list, study the before and after examples, and make similar corrections to your own article BEFORE you submit your manuscript. This is not difficult. Most of these corrections are mechanical and easy to incorporate, either as you compose your first draft or as you undertake a second revision prior to submission.

### Rule 1 – avoid the passive voice

BAD:

The New Policies were implemented by Wang Anshi and Emperor Shenzong in 1069.

BETTER:

Wang Anshi and Emperor Shenzong implemented the New Policies in 1069.

Or

In 1069, Wang Anshi and Emperor Shenzong implemented the New Policies.

Which choice you make will depend on what you want to emphasize. Generally, put the most important element early in the sentence. In the first example, the emphasis is on Wang and the Emperor as agents of (doers of) the action; in the second, the emphasis is on the date.

Here is another more complex example:

BAD:

Modern readers' impression of thirteenth-century Chinese literature has been shaped by a "Chinese" ethnocentric narrative that propagates the anti-Mongol sentiment of Southern Song loyalists.

BETTER:

A "Chinese" ethnocentric narrative that perpetuates the anti-Mongol sentiments of Southern Song loyalists has shaped modern readers' impression of thirteenth-century Chinese literature.

In virtually all of the writing we do, the passive voice weakens the presentation because it hides the subject somewhere in the middle of the sentence; it often also hides the true object of the verb. Notice that the real subject (the real agent, the real “doer”) here is the “ethnocentric narrative” not the impression of modern readers.

Try to write sentences that have a clear subject–verb–object structure. In this example, “narrative... shapes... impression.” After you write a sentence, ask yourself: Where is the subject, where is the verb, where is the object? Is the relationship of all three to each other clear? Have you chosen the most precise but also the most vivid nouns and verbs?

Avoid the passive voice, **even in dependent clauses** (phrases that are less than sentences and “depend on” or modify another word):

BAD:

The dynamics in Liu’s poems on the Central Asian steppes illustrate the process through which he learned to embrace new things **presented by** the rise of the Mongols.

BETTER:

The dynamics in Liu’s poems on the Central Asian steppes illustrate the process through which he learned to embrace new things **that the rise of the Mongols presented.**

### **Rule 2 – avoid impersonal pronouns, principally “it, his, their, this....”**

Use of such pronouns (stand-ins for nouns), especially when you place them far from the noun they refer to, creates ambiguity and confusion.

BAD:

In 1069, Wang Anshi and Emperor Shenzong implemented the New Policies. Critics later attacked **them**, but **it** was not successful, and **they** returned again later.

Whenever you are prompted to write these pronouns, think: what noun does the pronoun stand in for? Two nouns are always more descriptive than one noun and one pronoun, or a single pronoun. Note here that “them” can refer to Wang and Shenzong, or to the New Policies, so it’s not clear who or what the “critics” are attacking. Likewise unclear is the referent of “it,” probably the attack, but perhaps even the New Policies if we understand them as a single administrative entity. Lastly, “they” probably refers to the policies, but “they” could also be the critics. If you string a few sentences like this one together, your reader will be totally lost.

BETTER:

In 1069, Wang Anshi and Emperor Shenzong implemented the New Policies. Critics later attacked these **programs**, but this **challenge** was not successful, and the **policies** returned again later.

Avoiding the pronouns enables you to use another noun to describe the first noun. Here “programs” is another way of saying “New Policies”; “challenge” describes how the “critics” acted. The revised sentence is more precise, clear, and vivid.

### Rule 3 – Avoid dangling participles

A participle is a verb form, ending in “ing” that functions as an adjective: “the running man,” meaning “the man who runs.” The greater the distance in the sentence between the participle and its noun, the greater the danger of ambiguity.

BAD:

**Implementing** the New Policies in 1069, critics attacked Wang, **challenging** the policies that returned later.

Notice in this sentence, the participial clause “implementing...” obviously refers to Wang and Shenzong, not to the “critics.” Likewise, “challenging...” refers to the critics, not Wang. Try to avoid putting more than one participial phrase in one sentence and put the participle as close as possible to the noun it modifies.

BETTER:

**Critics, challenging** the New Policies implemented in 1069, attacked Wang, but the policies later returned.

Below is an example that includes both a passive voice and a dangling participle:

BAD:

**From the above analysis, we can see** that Song and Su were the central figures connecting high-ranking officials in the Society, **challenging** historical understanding that this community was **led by** Wang.

BETTER:

This **analysis** demonstrates that Song and Su were the central figures connecting high-ranking officials in the Society and **challenges** the traditional understanding that Wang **led** this community.

In general, a revision that results in fewer words is always preferable to a more wordy formulation. Here, “the analysis demonstrates” (three words, with clear subject and strong verb) replaces the clumsy seven-word opening. Worse, the referent of “challenging” is the very distant “analysis,” itself not the subject, but buried in a weak prepositional phrase (“From the above analysis”). This revision also eliminates the unneeded passive in the final clause. There is no problem with the participial phrase “connecting...,” since “connecting” occurs directly after its referent “figures,” and their relationship is clear.

### Rule 4 – Construct sentences with nouns and strong verbs –

Avoid stringing together prepositional phrases, trim unnecessary words wherever possible, and avoid unnecessary adjectives:

BAD:

The **most remarkable feature** of this community **was that it** attracted ninety scholar-officials to join, many of whom were high-ranking officials.

BETTER:

Remarkably, this **community attracted** ninety scholar-**officials**, and many were high-ranking officials.

Note this revision reduces a sentence of 21 words to one with only 11 words, but with no loss of meaning.

Here is another, more difficult example:

BAD:

The Society represents the earliest significant religious community **in** the Song that exemplified the engagement **of** Buddhist ideas and monks **with** the literati stratum **through** newly formed bureaucratic and literary networks.

BETTER:

The **Society represents** the earliest, significant Song religious community to utilize the dynasty's newly formed bureaucratic and literary networks and thus **exemplifies** the **engagement** of Buddhist ideas and monks with literati society.

There's a lot going on here, but the key idea is the "newly formed bureaucratic and literary networks." However, its placement in the final prepositional clause weakens its relationship to the other elements in the sentence. The revision does not shorten the sentence and results in two main clauses joined by "and": "The Society represents.... and exemplifies." Better perhaps to make two shorter sentences. This division enables you to add a few nouns and high impact verbs to clarify the relationship of the ideas to each other. Note the two sentences in this revision are no longer than the original sentence. You can write this as two separate sentences; or, with a semi-colon, as below.

BEST:

The Society was the earliest, major religious community in Song to access the dynasty's newly formed bureaucratic and literary networks; and this **intersection demonstrates** the **engagement** of Buddhist ideas and monks with literati society.

In conclusion, whenever you find yourself writing "by," "XXXing," or "it," think again and revise.

We look forward to your revised submissions.