

Wordy! Awkward! Unclear! Confusing! Colloquial! Redundant!

Has a teacher ever commented in the margins that your work is any of those adjectives above? Are you unsure what those words even mean in the context of writing?

These issues may be problems of STYLE, which has to do with word choice (diction) and the arrangement of the words in a sentence (syntax or sentence structure). Problems with style are when the words get in the way. You obviously have brilliant ideas, but... sometimes you can't get them out because you are trying too hard, you are too tired, you don't know how to speak academic-ese, you are in a rush, etc.

First, **definitions**:

Wordy: you've used more words than are necessary to get your idea across

Awkward: your reader can understand what you are trying to say, but the sentence does not sound "natural"

Unclear: your writing's meaning is obscured

Confusing: similar to unclear, except the lack of clarity may be as small an issue as mixed-up pronouns or as large an issue as mixed-up logic

Colloquial: your writing is too informal

Repetitive/Redundant: you are repeating words or ideas, or as a prof of mine used to say, "You are being repetitiously redundant and repeating yourself."

Methods for improving issues of style:

1. Read as much academic writing as you can. Also, read as many other kinds of writing as you can. Notice the different voices writers use, the different levels of formality, and the audience-specific vocabulary they employ.
2. Read the paper aloud or have a friend read it aloud and LISTEN to make sure what you are saying makes sense and that you are not repeating words or ideas.
3. Use vague words (such as "stuff" and "things"), informal words (such as 2nd person or contractions or slang), or informal constructions (such as "It was, like, totes random for him to, like, holla at us") in *drafts only* and change them to more specific and formal language later.
4. Pay attention to verbs. Cut all uses of *to be*, *to get*, *to have*, *to use*, and *to have*, for starters. Replace them with vivid, active verbs.
5. Avoid starting sentences with "it is," "there is," and "there are." Doing so obscures your sentence's true subject and adds unnecessary extra wording.
6. Notice how many prepositional phrases and verbal phrases you are using. Can any of them be cut?
7. Avoid adverbs, especially "really" and "very."
8. Review the sentence constructions recommended by your subject's style guide (MLA, APA, IEEE, CSE, etc.), the writing guide recommended for the course, or *The Everyday Writer* from your Comp courses.
9. Ask for help in the Writing Center.

Really, what it all comes down to is your AUDIENCE or the person/people you are writing to. For college papers, your teacher will specify what's appropriate. If he/she doesn't, mimic the style of the works you read in class.