Clarity Checklist

1. Beware of Stringy Sentences

Many stringy sentences are caused by one of two issues: overusing coordinating conjunctions or comma splices.

**Overusing Coordinating Conjunctions:** Coordinating conjunctions (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) join thoughts together, but overusing coordinating conjunctions leads to stringy and confusing sentences.

- **EXAMPLE:** He needs to go to the store and buy groceries, but he also needs to drop off her car at the auto shop and attend a 4:00 p.m. meeting.

**Quick Fixes:**

**Look for ideas that are repetitive.**

- Can you combine these thoughts and condense the sentence?
  - o He needs to go to the grocery store . . .

**Use a subordinate clause.** A subordinate clause is a clause that contains a subject and a verb but is not a sentence.

- o Not only does he needs to go to the grocery store . . .

**Putting it All Together:**

Not only does he need to go to the grocery story, but he also needs to drop car off at the auto shop. After visiting the auto shop, he needs to attend a 4:00 p.m. meeting.

**Exercise:** I hoped the Bears would win the game, and I hoped no one was injured.

I wanted the other team to lose, but I didn’t want anyone to get hurt.

**The Comma Splice:** Comma splices occur when writers try to join two independent units with commas instead of periods or semi-colons.

- **EXAMPLE:**
  - Henry was walking to the grocery store, he saw a dog.
  - Liz was late for school, however, her teacher did not notice.
  - Annie ran the marathon, she took first place.

**Quick Fixes:**

- ✓ Use the period. Make your run-on into two sentences.
  - o Henry was walking to the store. He saw a dog.
- ✓ Use a subordinating clause.
  - o While Henry was walking to the store, he saw a dog.
- ✓ Use a semicolon. Like the period, the semicolon marks the end of a complete sentence. A semicolon can be used with a conjunctive adverb (therefore, however, consequently, moreover, thus). The Hacker guide provides a complete list of conjunctive adverbs on page 62.
  - o Liz was late for school; however, her teacher did not notice.
- ✓ Restructure the sentence. Combine ideas into one sentence.
  - o Annie took first place in the marathon.

**Exercises:**

Alex and Kelly worked on a paper, they created a thesis.

We thought Stephanie was going to open the window, instead, she opened the door.
2. Beware of Is, Are, Was and Other “To Be” Verbs

“To be” Verbs: Verbs like “is,” “are,” “was,” and “were” all come from the infinitive “to be.” These verbs are not descriptive. They do not tell the reader why or how an actor acts. For clearer and more concise sentences, replace “to be” verbs with more active and descriptive verbs.

EXAMPLE:
The sunset was beautiful.
The child was angry and screamed.

Quick Fixes:

✓ Replace the “to be” verb with a more descriptive verb.
  o The sunset looked beautiful.
✓ Restructure the sentence using a descriptive verb.
  o The angry child screamed.

Passive/Inactive Voice: “To be” verbs can also lead to passive sentences. Passive voice occurs when the main subject of the sentence (the “doer”) is not the one actively “doing” in the sentence.

EXAMPLE:
The child was removed from the daycare center.
Cheating on a test would be in violation of the Lake Forest Honesty Code.

Quick Fixes:

✓ Add an actor.
  o The parent removed her child from the daycare center.
✓ Remove words and change a descriptive noun into verb form.
  o Cheating on a test violates the Lake Forest Honesty Code.

Exercises:
A verdict was reached by the jury.
Even though the students were resistant to the teacher’s methods, the students were respectful to their teacher.

The mischievous store clerk was responsible for the prank.
3. Beware of Pronouns

Vague Pronouns: Pronouns like “this,” “that,” “these,” “which,” and “it” often cause confusion.

EXAMPLE: My scholarship gives me an opportunity to go to college. This could change my life.

Quick Fix:
✓ Eliminate the pronoun and specify.
  o The money provided by the Ruth Jean Erickson Scholarship will give me the opportunity to attend college, which could give me access to career options that could change my lifestyle.
✓ Change “this” into an adjective. Add a noun after “this.”
  o This funding could change my life.
  o This education could change my life.

Exercises:
Allison promised to stop smoking, but I do not believe it.

Suri goes to the gym three times a week and eats a vegetarian diet. She claims this gives her more energy.

Professor Alberts allows students to arrive late to class, which bothers me.