Seven quick tips for Writing Clearer Sentences

1. Go from old to new information

Confusing: The student reported her wallet missing, having gone to the Jacobs Fitness Center, and then she returned to her dorm and discovered her purse was empty.

Better: After she left the Jacobs Fitness Center and returned to her dorm, the student discovered her purse was empty and reported her wallet missing.

2. Use active voice

Confusing: Her wallet was discovered missing by the student.

Better: She discovered her wallet was missing.

3. Avoid interrupting the main point of the sentence

Confusing: Campus crimes, because of the growing popularity of cell phones and PDAs, can even involve theft of personal information.

Better: Because of the growing popularity of cell phones and PDAs, campus crimes can even involve theft of personal information.

4. Avoid multiple negatives

Confusing: She did not discover it was missing until she was not at the Fitness Center any more, so she did not remember when she had last seen the wallet.

Better: She did not remember when she had last seen the wallet because she only discovered it was missing after she had left the Fitness Center.

5. Avoid unclear pronoun references

Confusing: Campus officers talked to several students about the incident, but they didn’t have any new information and could not pin down the details. This made it difficult to write a good report.

Better: Campus officers talked to several students about the incident, but the students didn’t have any new information and could not pin down the details. The lack of information made it difficult to write a good report.

6. Avoid dangling modifiers

Confusing: Wandering aimlessly around campus, his books got lost somehow.

Better: Wandering aimlessly around campus, he lost his books somehow.

7. Make sure the parts of the sentence work together

Confusing: It was difficult to find a stone mason and agreeing on a timetable for the work.

Better: Finding a stone mason and then reaching an agreement on a timetable for the work was difficult.