CLEAR AND CONCISE WRITING

You should:

1.   Identify characters.

Sentences should be about someone or something. Characters can be concepts, theories, institutions, etc., as long as your readers can identify a "who" in the sentence.

NOT: Decisions in regard to the launch of the new product rests with senior management.

BUT: Senior management must decide whether or not to launch a new product.

2.   Use verbs to name actions.

Actions can be physical movements, mental processes, feelings, relationships as long as the sentence tells a story about someone doing something.

NOT: Our lack of knowledge about the condition in the factory precluded a determination of committee action effectiveness in fund allocation to those areas in greatest need of assistance.

BUT: Because we knew nothing about the condition of the factory, we couldn't determine how effectively the committee had allocated funds to areas that most needed assistance.

3.   Structure your prose according to readers' expectations.

A. Have subjects followed by their verbs as soon as possible.
B. Every unit of discourse (e.g., phrase, clause, sentence, paragraph) should serve a single function or make a single point.
C. Use the "topic position" (i.e., at the beginning of the sentence) to give the reader perspective, linkage, and context.
D. Place in the "stress position" (i.e., material that arrives at the end of the sentence) new information you want the reader to emphasize.
E. In general, provide context before asking the reader to process any new material.*

- Adapted from: George D. Gopen and Judith A. Swan, "The Science of Scientific Writing," *American Scientist, Volume 78, pp.550-558.*

You should try to avoid:

1. Nominalizations

Nominalizations are verbs that have been turned into nouns. For example:

discover	into	discovery
move	into	movement
fail	into	failure

NOT: A review was done of the records of the personnel department.
BUT: We reviewed the personnel department records

2. Stacked Nouns

Stacked nouns occur when two or more nouns are used in a row unnecessarily

NOT: Based on an extensive training needs assessment review.

BUT: After we extensively reviewed our training needs . . . .

3. Passive Voice

In the passive voice, the subject expresses the goal of the action. Use the passive voice if the subject is unknown, or if you want to de-emphasize the subject.

EXAMPLE: I made a mistake.
A mistake was made by me.
A mistake was made.

4. Redundancies

Redundancies come in all shapes and sizes.

Often words are doubled in English.
EXAMPLE: full and complete; true and accurate

Sometimes modifiers can be redundant.
EXAMPLE: personal beliefs; terrible tragedy

Or categories can be redundant:
EXAMPLE: We decided to make the office walls blue in color.

5. Negative Constructions

The affirmative usually states things more directly and concisely.

NOT: Don't write in the negative.
BUT: Write in the affirmative.

6. Misplaced Modifiers

Misplaced modifiers are "misplaced" because they literally have no place in the sentence. Watch out for words and phrases such as: kind of, really, basically, actually, generally, for all intents and purposes.

7. Needless Words

Remember Strunk and White's famous dictum: Make every word tell.