PHIL1026 – Applied Ethics

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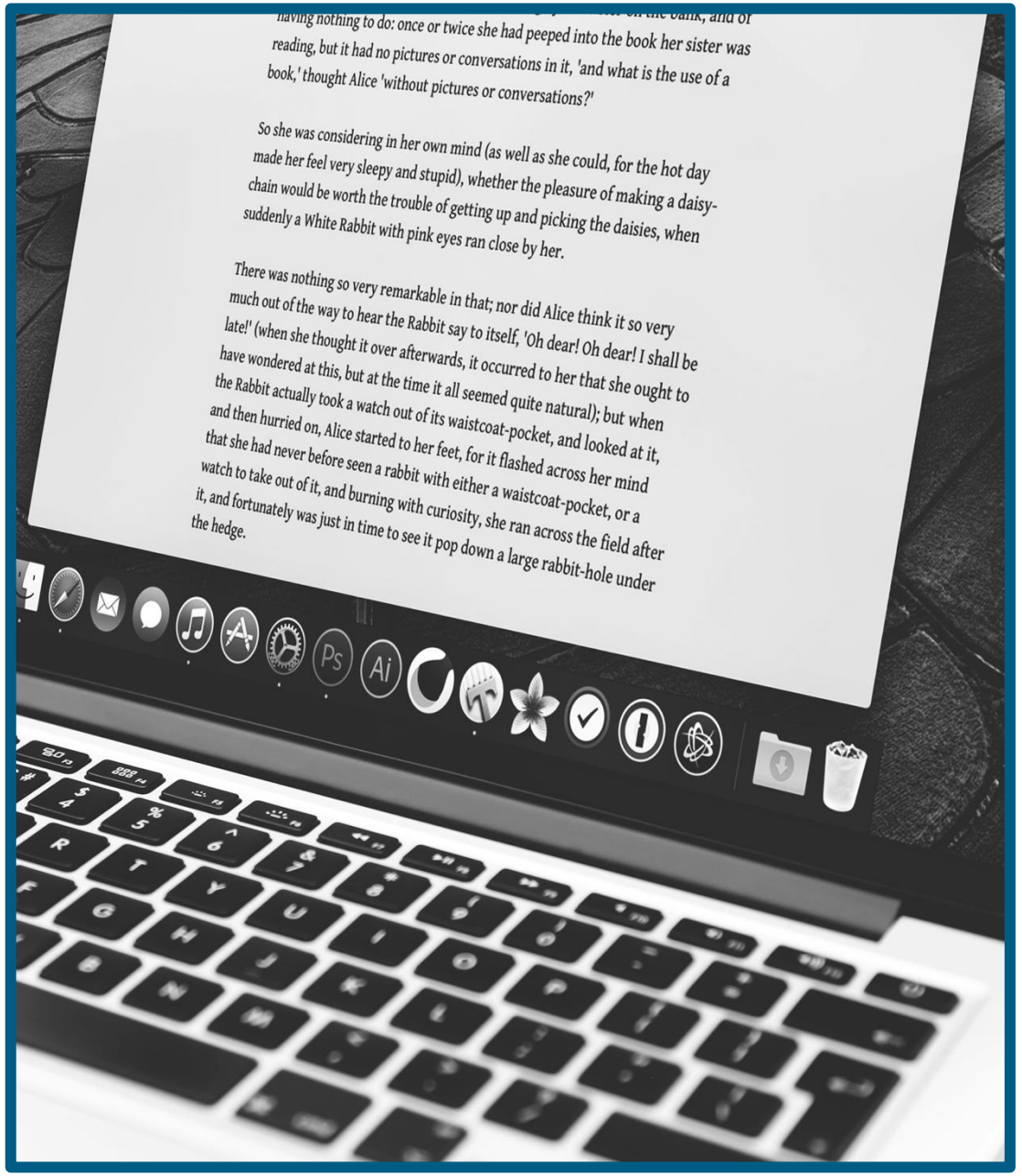
4 Tips for Better Essays



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What're We Doing Here?

- I'm not going to go through everything that there is to writing an essay!

- Instead: I have 4 tips that I hope you'll find helpful – especially if you're not used to writing philosophy essays – based on things students often do and that I think could be improved on.

- For further advice:

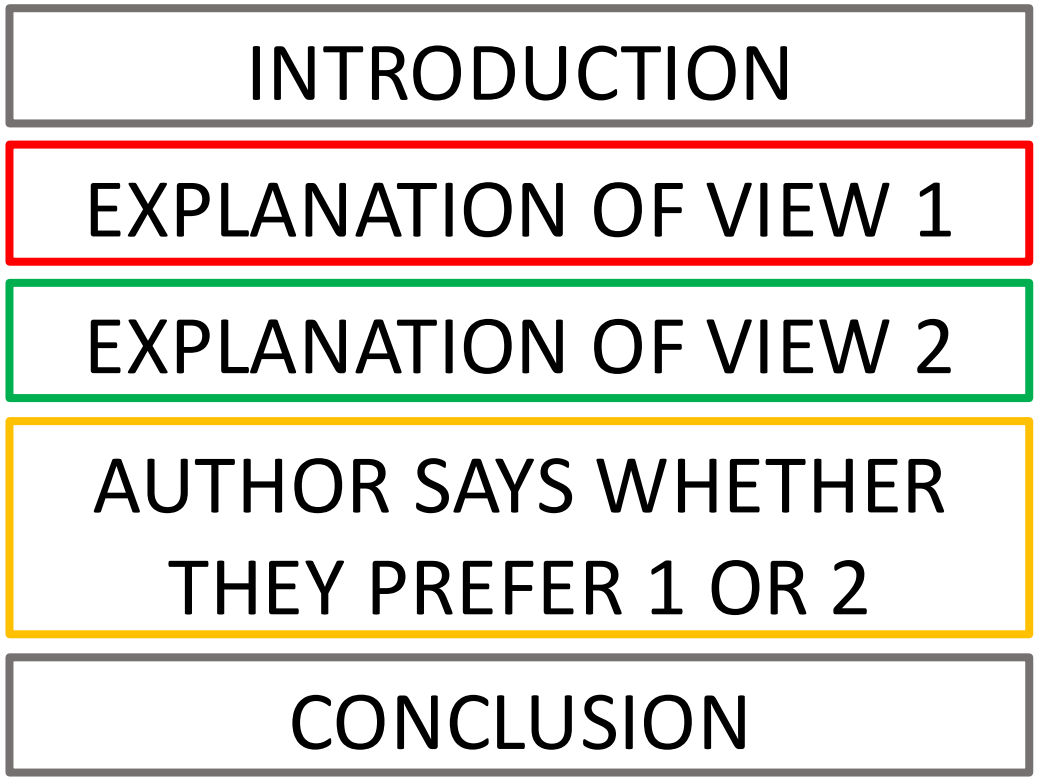
  - Philosophy Student Handbook, mark scheme, and model essays (Blackboard).
  - Have a look at these philosophy essay writing resources.
  - For referencing: CiteThemRight is absolutely brilliant.
  - Advice & Feedback hours: we're more than happy to advise on essays.

Tip 1: Arguing

- A common piece of feedback we give: “this needs to be more argumentative”.
- Your job in a philosophy essay is to **argue for a view**.
- By analogy: you are here to play tennis. But people often write essays like they’re umpiring a tennis match, rather than playing in it.

Arguing I

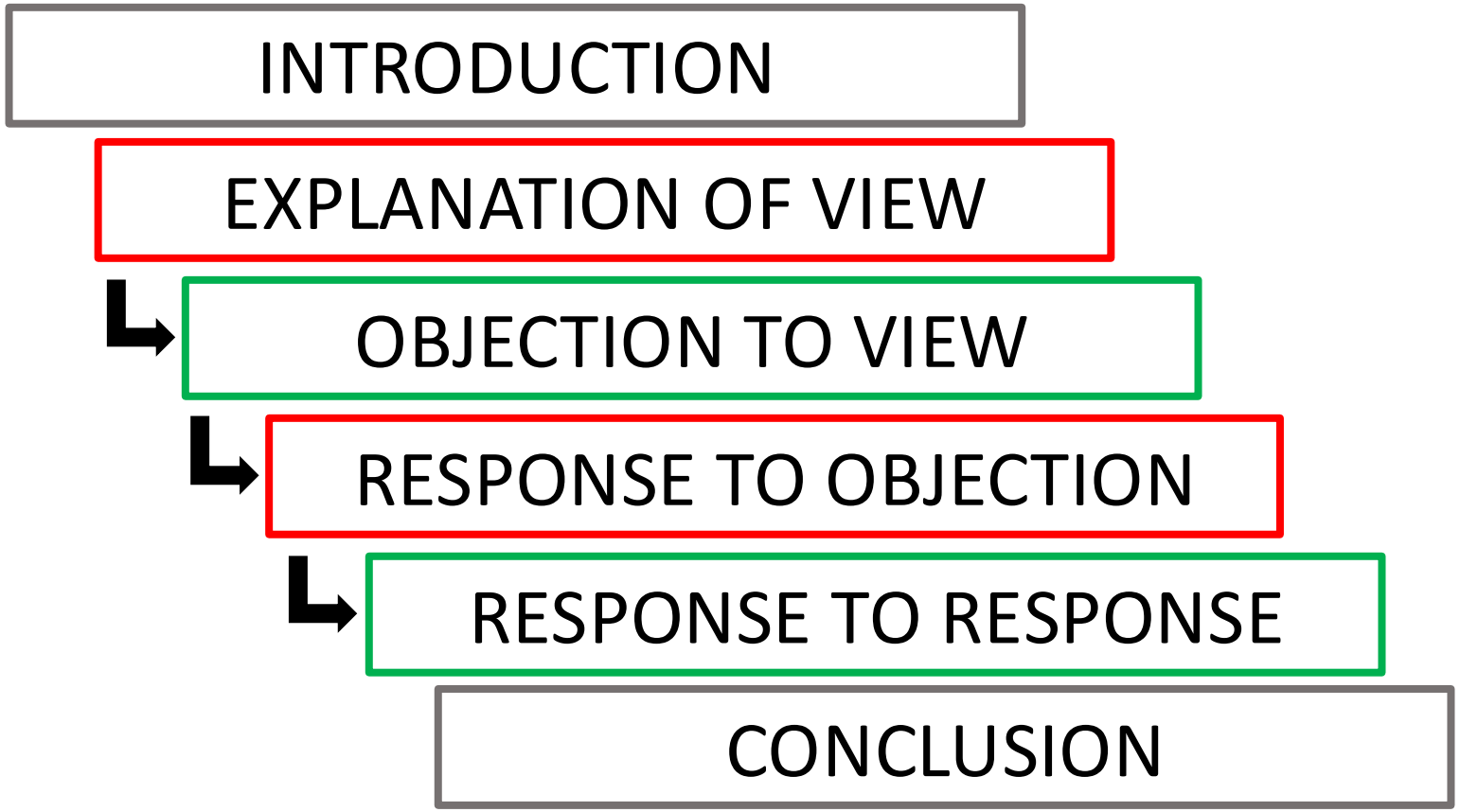
- Here's a common essay **structure**:



- The problem here is that you spend a lot of the essay **explaining** the views, and not much **critically examining** them or **arguing** (and there probably isn't space to do all three parts of this structure well anyway).
- This is like umpiring a tennis match rather than playing tennis – *you* don't have much role in the essay.

Arguing II

- Here's a **more argumentative** possible structure:



- Here, you spend much more time **arguing**. You're giving your own objections or responses to them, and/or reconstructing arguments from the literature, and/or anticipating what your opponent might say to you. All of these are great to do.

Arguing III

- We want to hear what <u>you</u> think, and see <u>you</u> argue, not just reproduce views and arguments from the literature.

- But here's a common **framing** of a point:

> …Thomson (2014: 227) argues that it is permissible to unplug yourself from the violinist, because of rights you have over your own body. Furthermore, she says that, since the violinist case is analogous with a pregnancy, it is permissible to have an abortion because of rights you have over your own body. In my opinion, Thomson is right in the violinist case, and so I agree with her on abortion…

- This is a perfectly fine rendering of part of Thomson's view. But **it's not very argumentative**; it presents an existing view and then quickly agrees with it. This ends up sounding – frankly – a bit wet.

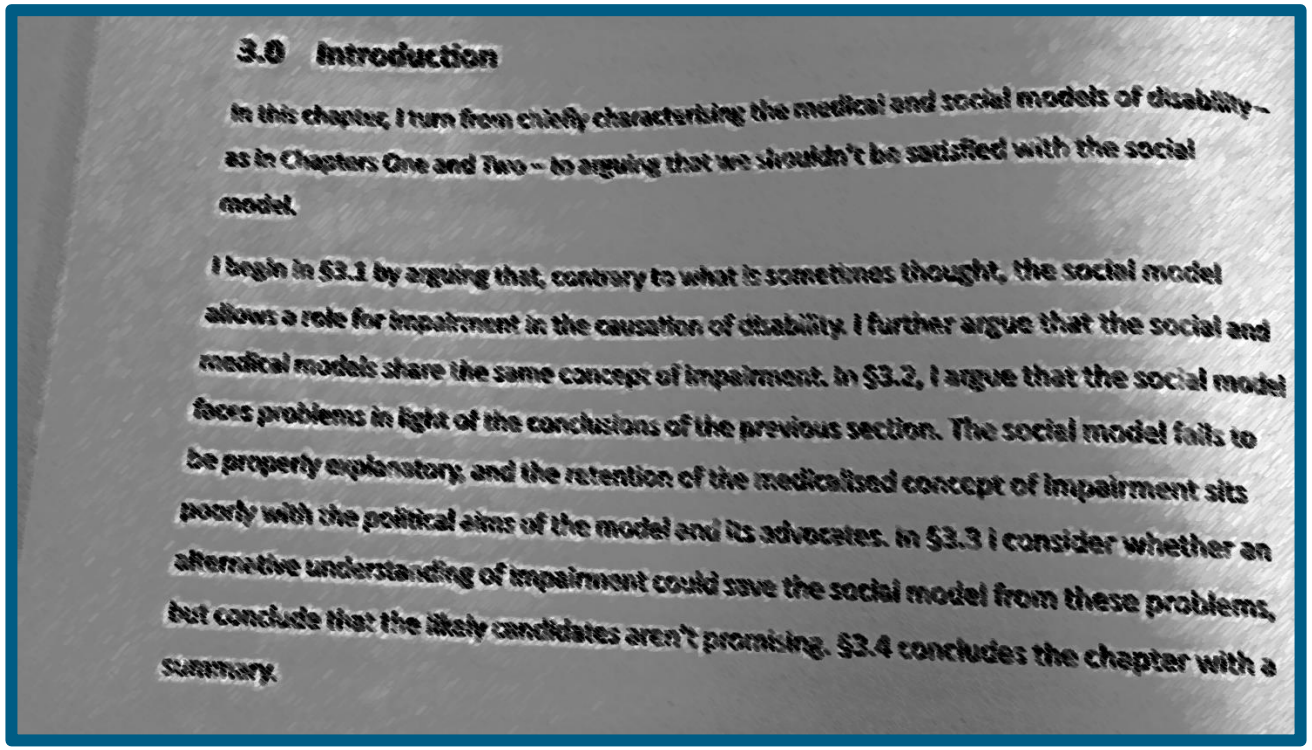
Arguing IV

- Getting your own view to shine through in an essay **doesn't require you to come up with new philosophy**!

- You can do a lot just by altering how you frame your points:

> …In Thomson's violinist case, I've shown above that you are clearly permitted to unplug yourself from the violinist. This is because the rights you have over your own body straightforwardly trump any claim the violinist has against you. Given that Thomson (2014: 227) observes that the violinist case is structurally analogous with a pregnancy case, I argue that abortion is also permissible. My view is that if it's permissible to unplug yourself from the violinist, then it is permissible to have an abortion...

- This is – more or less – the same material as the previous framing. But notice how much more it sounds like the author making a case for their view.



3.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I turn from chiefly characterising the medical and social models of disability – as in Chapters One and Two – to arguing that we shouldn't be satisfied with the social model.

I begin in §3.1 by arguing that, contrary to what is sometimes thought, the social model allows a role for impairment in the causation of disability. I further argue that the social and medical models share the same concept of impairment. In §3.2, I argue that the social model faces problems in light of the conclusions of the previous section. The social model fails to be properly explanatory, and the retention of the medicalised concept of impairment sits poorly with the political aims of the model and its advocates. In §3.3 I consider whether an alternative understanding of impairment could save the social model from these problems, but conclude that the likely candidates aren't promising. §3.4 concludes the chapter with a summary.

Tip 2: Introductions

- The single most common piece of feedback I give is "rewrite your introduction, like this…".
- Your introduction has **exactly one job**: to make sure that nothing that happens in the rest of the essay is a surprise to the reader.

Introductions I

- Here's a common sort of introduction:

> Whether or not it can be moral to have an abortion is a question that has troubled philosophers for a long time. The morality of abortion and the legality of abortion are distinct issues. Abortion involves the early ending of a pregnancy. In this essay I will present arguments for and against abortion before arriving at my own view on whether it can be moral to have an abortion.

- This is an "introduction" in the sense that it fills up a bit of space at the top of the page, before you get on to the meat of the essay.

- But it doesn't really **do** anything…

Introductions II

- Here's that paragraph again, annotated:

This doesn't add anything

These don't add much either – they're fairly obvious, and could be brought in later on if they turn out to matter much.

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This is much too quick and vague – it doesn't really set out what happens in the essay, and it doesn't make it at all clear what the author's view/answer is.

Introductions III

- A schematic for an ideal introduction:

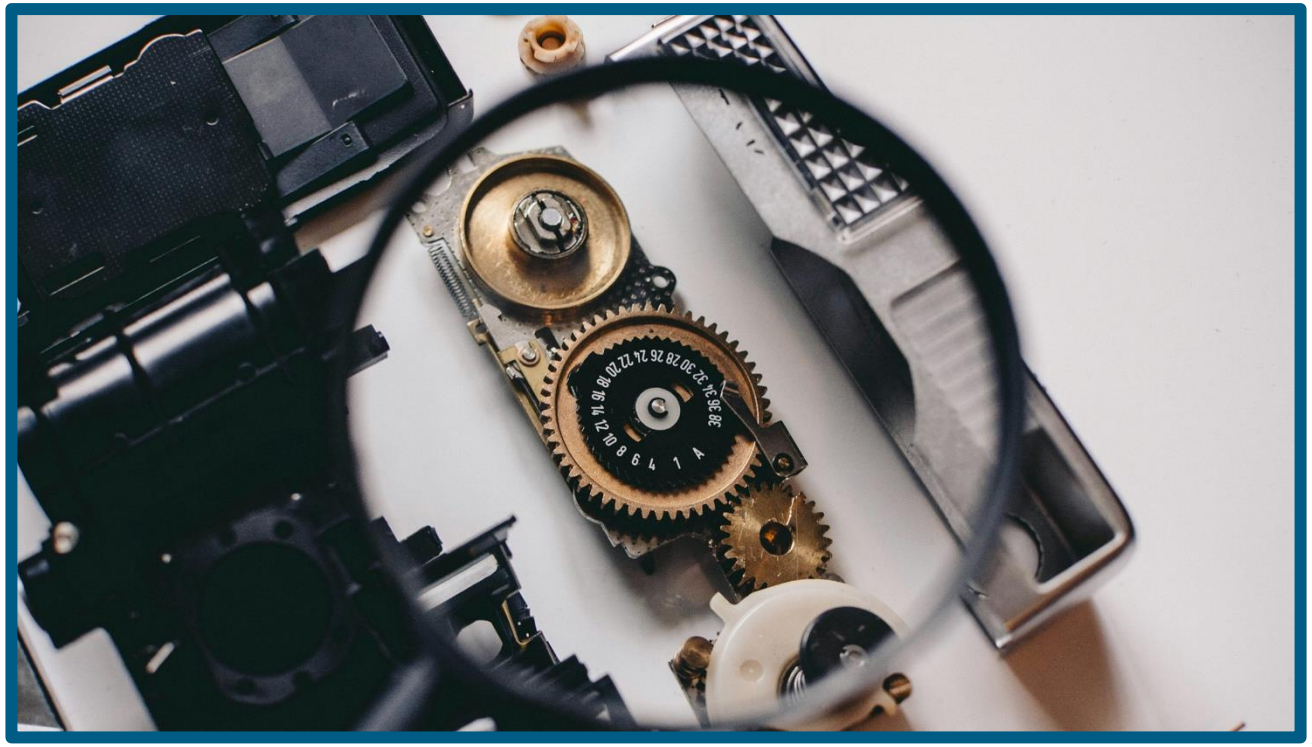
  In this essay, I argue that *P*. First, I do *x*. Then, I do *y*. Then, I do *z*…

- For example:

  In this essay, I argue that it is always permissible to have an abortion. First, I set out Thomson's view that women's rights over their own bodies mean that abortion is permissible. Second, I argue that these rights always hold, by appeal to an intuitive analogy. Third, I reject an objection from Marquis, that the value of a foetus's future makes abortion impermissible in some cases. I show that this does not undermine the primacy of rights over one's own body.

- This is fully clear on **what the author's view is**, **what happens in the essay**, and **in what order.**

- Nothing that happens in the essay will surprise the reader now, and the content will be much clearer to them.



Tip 3: Show, Don’t Just Tell

- Good explanations and arguments rely on showing how and why views work, not just saying that they do.
- Being clear on *how* your points work will make your writing clearer and your arguments stronger.

Show, Don’t Just Tell I

- Some things you might find yourself saying in the course of an essay:
  - That a view has some implication.
  - That two parts of a view contradict each other.
  - That a view faces some objection.
  - That an objection succeeds or fails.

- In each of these cases, it’s not enough to just **say** that that’s the case.

- You need to show **how/why** it’s the case.

- How does the implication follow the view? Why would an objection (if it’s right) be an objection – which parts of the view does it target, and why are they a problem? Why does an objection fail – because it misrepresents the view, or is already answered by some other part of the view, etc.?

Show, Don’t Just Tell II

- **Be specific & explicit about your view**. Don’t be a weasel.

- Things people like to say sometimes:
  - “Whether or not it’s wrong to φ depends.”
    - What does it depend on? Why is that the thing that matters?
  - “It’s relative.”
    - Relative to what? Why?
  - “It will depend on the empirical facts.”
    - Okay! But which facts, and why those ones?
  - “It’s subjective.”
    - That’s quite a big claim! And is also not necessarily an answer to whether φ-ing is wrong; you’ll need to say a bit more there.

Tip 4: Proofreading Isn’t an Afterthought

- Proofreading is boring, and laborious, and I hate doing it.
- But it’s important – and for more than just correcting basic typos and spelling mistakes.

Proofreading I

- We mark you on **presentation**, so doing the basics of spelling and grammar well is important, and proofreading should catch that sort of mistake.

- But proofreading is, really, about making sure **the essay reads as clearly as possible**. So, here are three other sorts of problem to read carefully for…

- **1** – "minor" typo, major meaning change:

  Marquis argues that abortion is permissible because of the foetus's valuable future.

- **2** – ambiguity of meaning:

  Thomson doesn't argue that the foetus is not a person.

Proofreading II

- **3** – sentences that are hard work for the reader:

> Thomson argues that it is permissible to unplug yourself from the violinist, because of rights you have over your own body, and she says that because the violinist case is analogous with a pregnancy it is permissible to have an abortion because of rights you have over your own body.

- Long, winding sentences like this are really common, because we tend to speak more like this, and writing in short, sharp sentences can feel really unnatural.
- But: use full stops judiciously. Make just one point per sentence (and just one big point per paragraph).
- Try reading your work out loud. If you're running out of breath part way through a sentence, then that's a good indication that it should be two (or more) sentences.