

Avoiding Awkward Sentences

Words that Have Little or No Meaning

When we write, we sometimes take on the same habits we have when we speak. Words or phrases that have little or no meaning fill space when we talk but have limited use in writing. Words such as *kind of*, *actually*, *in particular*, *really*, *certain*, *various*, *virtually*, *individual*, *basically*, *generally*, *given*, and *practically* give our brains a chance to collect our thoughts when speaking. When writing, we should have our thoughts already collected because this helps convey ideas more efficiently.

Example

Procrastination *actually* makes certain people *really* unsuccessful more than *virtually* any other particular habit.

Edited Example

Procrastination makes people unsuccessful more than any other habit.

Example

I am of the opinion that we should not prohibit children from talking in the hallways *entirely* and *completely*.

Revised Example

We should allow children to talk in the hallways on occasion.

Redundancy

Often, writing assignments require a minimum number of words. Because of this, it is tempting to use several words of description instead of one well-chosen word with the same meaning. This redundancy, however, makes sentences awkward and interrupts the flow to a piece of writing. To write effectively, you must eliminate words that simply rephrase other words for no purpose.

Example

The football team made *future* plans to *completely* concentrate on the *basic* fundamentals of each *individual* position.

Plans are always for the future; concentrating implies complete focus; fundamental means basic; and positions are individual. Therefore, the italicized words are unnecessary modifiers.

Edited Example

The football team made plans to concentrate on the fundamentals of each position. Some other common redundancies include *whole entire*, *big fat*, *complete truth*, *terrible tragedy*, *pitch black*, *various different*, *true facts*, *free gift*, and *final outcome*.

Words also imply categories, so you can often eliminate a word that names a category.

Example

The dinosaurs that were green colored were few in number during that period in history.

Edited Example

There were few green dinosaurs during that period.

Periods, such as the one in the sentence, are always periods *in history*.

These doubled words often occur in phrases, and sometimes these phrases are clichés.

Example

I hope you give this matter your full and complete attention.

Edited Example

I hope you give this matter your complete attention.

Some common doubled word phrases are *pick and choose*, *full and complete*, *hope and trust*, *any and all*, *true and accurate*, *each and every*, *basic and fundamental*, *hopes and desires*, and *first and foremost*. Often it works best to eliminate both words, but occasionally eliminating one of the two words works best.

Negatives

Changing negatives to affirmatives also eliminates extra words. Look for sentences that use *not* and see if you can rewrite the sentence to make it affirmative.

Example

NEGATIVE: She wore a sweater that was not different than mine.

Edited Example

She wore the same sweater as mine.

Double negatives make your writing sound more confusing. Some words are negative by definition, such as the verbs *preclude*, *exclude*, *fail*, *reject*, *avoid*, *deny*, *prohibit*, and *refuse* and such prepositions as *against* or *without*. Using a combination of these negative words will make your point very difficult to understand.

Example

DOUBLE NEGATIVES: Without failing to refuse denying an invitation, you have not avoided precluding buying a gift.

Edited Example

By accepting an invitation, you have agreed to buy a gift.

Exercise 1

Edit the following wordy sentences by eliminating words that have little or no meaning, words that are repetitive, words implied by other words, or by changing negatives to affirmatives. Write your answers on the lines provided.

1. Actually, a basic and fundamental part of cooking is making sure you don't have the wrong ingredients.

2. Each and every student deserves a fair and equal chance to try out for intramural sports.

3. First and foremost, the Board of Directors cannot make a decision without a consensus of opinion.

4. At an earlier time today, my sister told me she would pick me up after the end of work.

5. Various different people in our office were not against moving the water cooler to a location that would be less difficult for everyone to reach.

6. One accidental mistake some beginning swimmers make is not remembering to kick.

Qualifiers

The best writing requires confidence. Starting sentences with phrase such as *I feel, I think, I believe, in my opinion, or I am of the opinion that* can dilute what you have to say. Instead of using qualifying phrases like those, say exactly what you mean.

Examples

WITH QUALIFIER: I believe that homework should be eliminated.

WITHOUT QUALIFIER: Homework should be eliminated.

WITH QUALIFIER: I am of the opinion that bungee jumping should be an Olympic sport.

WITHOUT QUALIFIER: Bungee jumping should be an Olympic sport.

Without unnecessary qualifiers, your writing takes on a more confident tone.

You should also be careful not to over-use words such as *very, pretty, quite, rather, clearly, obviously, certainly, always, of course, indeed, inevitably, and invariably*.

These words can be useful in helping you make your point, but if you are using powerful language to begin with, you may find they are cluttering up your sentences rather than strengthening them.

Example

The cheese clearly overpowered the pasta and, of course, made the dish rather difficult to eat.

Edited Example

The cheese overpowered the pasta and made the dish difficult to eat.

Exercise 2

Locate the unnecessary qualifiers in the following sentences. Eliminate them and rewrite the sentences on the lines provided. Answers can be found at the end of the lesson.

7. In certain respects, the telephone appears to have done more to change the way we communicate than almost any other invention.

8. Obviously, the V-8 engine is very powerful, but it certainly isn't the only good engine design.

9. Several students inevitably fail, even though the curriculum is quite clear.

10. Apparently, scientists find it virtually impossible to estimate the size of the universe, but usually they can come pretty close.

11. Clearly, the very best skiers almost always suffer rather serious injuries.

Vocabulary

There is no substitute for an extensive vocabulary. The more words you know, the more able you are to replace whole phrases with one accurate word. Increase your vocabulary and you make your writing more powerful. Start by keeping a list of words that you do not know, list their definitions, and use them in your everyday life. Using *context clues* can also help you increase your vocabulary. When you see a word that you do not know, examine the words that surround it to see if you can discover the meaning. Often, a word can be deciphered by examining the clues the other words give.

Understanding word parts will help you understand words you do not know as well. Prefixes and suffixes have meanings that can change the definition of a word or its part of speech. Greek and Latin roots appear often in English, and the more roots that are familiar to you, the more words you can figure out in your reading and use in your writing.

A thesaurus can help you find words to use, but like spell check or grammar check, it can change your piece in ways you may not realize. Your voice can become inconsistent, or you can use words incorrectly.

Not all words offered in a thesaurus are exact synonyms. For example, if your piece repeats the word “freedom” too often, and you use a thesaurus to find a word to replace it, you would find “liberty.” This would work if your sentence says, “Our founding fathers fought for *liberty*.” “Freedom” and “liberty” do not mean exactly the same thing, but “fought for liberty” is probably close enough. In the thesaurus under “freedom,” you would also find “looseness,” which could possibly replace “freedom” if your sentence is discussing a piece of clothing. However, our founding fathers did not fight for “looseness.” This is an extreme example, but it illustrates the point that not all words in the thesaurus will work in all situations.

A thesaurus does not help you replace phrases either, which is important when you are trying to shorten sentences. Some common phrases can be shortened: *in the event that* becomes *if*; *concerning the matter of* becomes *about*; *are in a position* becomes *can*; *the reason for* becomes *why*; *because of the fact* becomes *because*.

Example

In the event that every union member decides to vote, we will have a huge turnout.

Edited Example

If every union member decides to vote, we will have a huge turnout.

Try to find the clearest way to write by eliminating unnecessary words from your sentences. Make sure, however, that you don’t end up with a series of short, choppy sentences.

Short, Choppy Sentences

Short sentences have their purpose. They tend to be clear and direct. A series of short sentences, however, can make the writing feel choppy and monotonous. There are many methods to revise short, choppy sentences, such as combining sentences, or using *verbal phrases*. Verbal phrases are formed from verbs, but act like nouns, adjectives, or adverbs in a sentence. The most common verbal phrases are participial phrases, gerund phrases, infinitive phrases, and appositives.

Participles and Participial Phrases

A participle is a verb form that can be used as an adjective, and a participial phrase is a phrase that contains a participle and any modifiers. For example,

when you change the verb “develop” to “developing” to describe something, you have created a participle. Adding modifiers to “developing” gives you a participial phrase.

Example

Developing off the coast of Haiti, a tropical storm brought rain and high winds to the West Indies.

The participial phrase *developing off the coast of Haiti* describes the tropical storm.

Example

We saw Lance Armstrong *receiving the yellow jersey* after the first mountain stage of the Tour de France.

The participial phrase *receiving the yellow jersey* describes Lance Armstrong.

Participial phrases can transform short, choppy sentences by adding description and detail.

Gerunds and Gerund Phrases

Gerund phrases can also bring variety to your sentences. A gerund is a verb ending in *-ing* that serves as a noun.

Example

Running is a good way to stay in shape.

Running is formed from the verb *run* and is used as a noun in this sentence.

Example

Until I revise many times, I am not happy with my *writing*.

Writing is formed from the verb *write* and is used as a noun in this sentence.

Gerund phrases occur when a gerund is combined with modifiers.

Example

Working on the shrimp boat was a good summer job.

The phrase *working on the shrimp boat* serves as a noun in the sentence.

Example

My brother enjoys *skiing at Crystal Mountain*.

The phrase *skiing at Crystal Mountain* serves as a noun in the sentence.

Infinitives and Infinitive Phrases

Infinitive phrases can also take the monotony out of your writing. An infinitive is a verb form composed of *to* plus the verb base.

Example

to walk to speak to cry to leave to eat

These verbs are often part of a verb chain, but are not the main action verb of the sentence.

Example

Fred tried *to speak* quickly.

The main verb is *tried*; what Fred *tried* is *to speak* quickly.

Example

There must be a way *to get past the road block*.

The infinitive phrase *to get past the road block* completes the phrase *must be a way*. The main verb in the sentence is *be*.

Appositives and Appositive Phrases

Appositives add description and detail to your writing to make it clearer. An appositive is a noun or pronoun used to identify or explain another noun.

Example

My cousin *Alejandro* can play the piano.

The noun *Alejandro* identifies the noun *cousin*, so it is an appositive.

Appositives are also combined with modifiers to make appositive phrases.

Example

My grandmother, *a talented cook*, used to make an excellent pot roast.

The phrase *a talented cook* is used to describe the noun *my grandmother*.

Exercise 3

Identify the italicized phrase in each of the following sentences as a participial phrase, a gerund phrase, an infinitive phrase, or an appositive phrase. Write the type of phrase on the lines provided.

12. Steve Largent, *a former football player*, is now a politician.

13. The doctor will try *to diagnose* the illness.

14. *Having scored the winning goal*, Christopher celebrated.

15. Mr. Ouimet enjoys *jogging to work*.

16. *Invented for the U.S. military*, compact discs have many uses.

17. I can't find my shoes, *the ones with the red stripes*.

18. Vasili was glad *to be invited to the birthday party*.

Punctuation

Punctuating sentences correctly helps you to avoid short, choppy sentences. Punctuation tells the reader how to read a sentence. If the reader can't get all the way through a sentence without stopping to take a breath, then the sentence is too long. On the other hand, if the sentence has too many places to pause, it will feel choppy. Commas tell the reader to pause, so using commas correctly and listening to the sound of your writing will help you to avoid creating choppy sentences.