

Writing - Week 10

Concision, Hedges, *This* and *It*

In my personal opinion, it is necessary that we should not ignore the opportunity to think over each and every suggestion offered.

- Does this sentence follow the principles of clear writing?
(Characters, actions, etc)
- Is this a graceful sentence?

In my personal opinion, it is necessary that we should not ignore the opportunity to think over each and every suggestion offered.

Some issues:

- opinion is always personal → remove *personal*
- this statement is opinion → remove *in my opinion*
- *This over* and *not ignore* both mean *consider*
- *Each and every* is redundant
- *suggestion* is always *offered*.

Rewrite as:

We should consider each suggestion.

Today (Lesson 9, Williams & Bizup)

- Concision
 - Clearing away empty words & phrases helps the point of a sentence come through more clearly
 - Same holds for *ideas*, or longer units of text: remove material that is not relevant to your overall point.
 - Focus on English here, same point holds for math
- Hedges and Intensifiers
- *This, That, It*, and other pronouns
- Conclusions

How to revise for concision

1) Delete meaningless words

Some words are meaningless (like clearing your throat) and should be deleted:

kind of	actually	particular	generally	certain	various
virtually	individual	basically	really	given	practically

Rewrite this sentence:

Productivity actually depends on certain factors that basically involve psychology more than any particular technology.

Productivity depends on psychology more than technology.

2) Delete doubled words

English writers are in the habit of pairing an Anglo-Saxon word with a Latin or French word:

full and complete

hope and trust

any and all

true and accurate

each and every

basic and fundamental

hope and desire

first and foremost

various and sundry

Rewrite this sentence:

If and when we can define out final aims and goals, each and every member of our group will be ready and willing to offer aid and assistance.

If we define our goals, we will all be ready to help.

3) Delete what readers can infer

Redundant modifiers

terrible tragedy

basic fundamentals

final outcome

various different

future plans

true facts

free gift

each individual

consensus of opinion

Do not try to predict future events that will completely revolutionize society, because past history shows that it is the final outcome of minor events that unexpectedly surprises us more.

Do not try to predict revolutionary events, because history shows that the outcome of minor events surprises us more.

3) Delete what readers can infer (continued)

Redundant categories. Each word implies its general category.

large in **size**

unusual in **nature**

of a bright **color**

round in **shape**

of a strange **type**

at an early **time**

honest in **character**

area of mathematics

in a confused **state**

- *During that period of time, the membrane area became pink in color and shiny in appearance.*
- *The city manages the educational system and public recreational activities.*
- During that period, the membrane became pink and shiny.
- The city manages education and public recreation.

3) Delete what readers can infer (continued)

General Implications.

Imagine trying to learn the rules for playing the game of chess.

- *learn implies trying*
- *rules implies playing the game*
- *chess is a game*

Imagine learning the rules of chess.

(Delete what readers can infer)
Caveat: unless you are Yogi Berra

“It ain’t over till it’s over.”

“It’s déjà vu all over again.”

“You can observe a lot by watching.”

“If you can’t imitate him, don’t copy him.”

“We have deep depth.”

“A nickel ain’t worth a dime anymore.”

“We made too many wrong mistakes.”

“Half the lies they tell me aren’t true.”

4) Replace a phrase with a word

As you carefully go over what you have written to improve wording and catch errors of spelling and punctuation, the thing to do before anything else is to see whether you could use sequences of subjects and verbs instead of the same ideas expressed in nouns.

- carefully go over what you have written to improve wording and catch errors of spelling and punctuation → edit
- the thing to do before anything else → first
- use X instead of Y → replace
- sequences of subjects and verbs → clauses
- the same ideas expressed in nouns → nominalizations

As you edit, first replace nominalizations with clauses.

4) Replace a phrase with a word

Try this yourself:

- *We must explain the reason for the delay in the meeting.*
 - *Despite the fact that the data were checked, errors occurred.*
 - *In the event that you finish early, contact this office.*
-
- We must explain the reason for the delay in the meeting.
 - We must explain why the meeting is delayed.
 - Despite the fact that the data were checked, errors occurred.
 - Even though the data were checked, errors occurred.
 - In the event that you finish early, contact this office.
 - If you finish early, contact this office.

5) Change negatives to affirmatives.

Do not write in the negative. → Write in the affirmative.

not careful → careless

not many → few

not the same → different

not often → rarely

not allow → prevent

not stop → continue

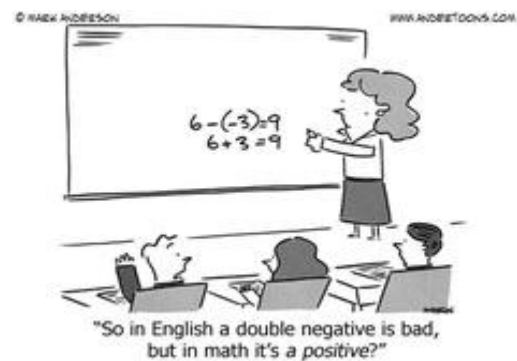
Some words are implicitly negative:

preclude, prevent, lack, fail, doubt, reject, avoid, deny, refuse, exclude, contradict, without, against, lacking, except, unless, except when, ...

Except when you have failed to submit applications without documentation, benefits will not be denied.

You will receive benefits only if you submit your documents. OR

To receive benefits, submit your documents.



6) Remove redundant metadiscourse.

- Metadiscourse is language that refers to
 - the writer's intentions: *to sum up, candidly, I believe*
 - directions to the reader: *note that, consider now, as you see*
 - the structure of the text: *first, finally, in this section*
- Almost everything you write needs metadiscourse
- Too much buries your ideas:
 - *The last point I would like to make is that in regard to men-women relationships, it is important to keep in mind that the greatest changes have occurred in how they work together.*
- Prune the metadiscourse to tighten the sentence:
 - The greatest changes in men-women relationship have occurred in how they work together.
- Now that you can see what the sentence says, make it more direct:
 - Men and women have changed their relationships most in how they work together.

What kind of metadiscourse should you keep?

Discuss!



What kind of metadiscourse should you keep?

- Explain thinking or writing
 - In this paper, we will argue/claim/show...
 - I conclude from these data that...
- Trace logic or form of argument
 - First,....; In addition ...; Most important, ...; Consequently, ...
- Address readers
 - As you recall...; Consider ...; Let X be a random variable
- Describe organization of document
 - This paper is divided into three parts...
 - The proof proceeds as follows...
- Refer to other parts of the document
 - In the passage above...; As demonstrated by Figure 1....
- Express an opinion
 - No unexpectedly ...; We conclude that....; It seems unlikely that....

6) Remove redundant metadiscourse (continued)

Remove these kinds of metadiscourse:

- **Metadiscourse that attributes your ideas to a source.**

Don't announce that something has been *observed, noticed, noted*, etc, just state the fact:

- *High divorce rates have been observed to occur in areas that have been determined to have low population density.*
- → High divorce rates occur in areas with low population density.

- **Metadiscourse that announces your topic.** Don't tell your reader that you are about to state what your sentence is about.

- *This section introduces another problem, that of noise pollution. The first thing to say about it is that noise pollution exists not only...*
- → Another problem is noise pollution. First, it exists not only...

Examples: simplify these sentences (*Do on your own*)

- 1) Critics cannot avoid employing complex and abstract technical terms if they are to successfully analyze literary texts and discuss them in a meaningful way.
- 2) Scientific research generally depends on fully accurate data if it is to offer theories that will allow us to predict the future in a plausible way.
- 3) Most likely, a majority of all patients who appear at a public medical clinical facility do not expect special medical attention or treatment, because their particular health problems and concerns are often not major and for the most part can usually be adequately treated without much time, effort, and attention.
- 4) Do not discontinue medication unless symptoms of dizziness and nausea are not present for six hours.

Can you be too concise?

Yes! See examples from the excerpt from Williams & Bizup, posted to the website.

CONCISE, NOT TERSE

Having stressed concision so strongly, I must now step back. Readers don't like flab, but neither do they like a style so terse that it's all gristle and bone. Here is some amiable advice from the most widely read book on style, Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*:

Revising is part of writing. Few writers are so expert that they can produce what they are after on the first try. Quite often you will discover on examining the completed work, that there are serious flaws in the arrangement of the material, calling for transpositions. When this is the case, a word processor can save you time and labor as you rearrange the manuscript. You can select material on the screen and move it to a more appropriate spot, or, if you cannot find the right spot, you can move the material to the end of the manuscript until you decide whether to delete it. Some writers find that working with a printed copy of the manuscript helps them to visualize the process of change; others prefer to revise entirely on screen. Above all, do not be afraid to experiment with what you have written. Save both the original and the revised versions; you can always use the computer to restore the

manuscript to its original condition, should that course seem best. Remember, it is no sign of weakness or defeat that your manuscript ends up in need of major surgery. This is a common occurrence in all writing, and among the best writers. (205 words)

We can shorten that paragraph just by erasing its redundancy:

Revising is part of writing. Few writers are so expert that they can produce what they are after on the first try. Quite often you will discover on examining the completed work, that there are serious flaws in the arrangement of the material, calling for transpositions. When this is the case, a word processor can save you time and labor as you rearrange the manuscript. You can select material on the screen and move [material] to a more appropriate spot, or, if you cannot find the right spot, you can move the material to the end of the manuscript until you decide whether to delete it. Some writers find that working with a printed copy of the manuscript helps them to visualize the process of change; others prefer to revise entirely on screen. Above all, do not be afraid to experiment with what you have written. Save both the original and the revised versions; you can always use the computer to restore the manuscript to its original condition, should that course seem best. Remember, it is no sign of weakness or defeat that your manuscript ends up in need[s] of major surgery. This is a common occurrence in all writing, and among the best writers. (149 words)

With some rewording, we can cut that version by another third (revisions are italicized):

Revising is part of writing, because few writers produce what they are after on the first try write perfect first drafts. If you use a word processor and find often you will discover flaws in your arrangement, of the material. When this is the case, a word processor can save you time and labor as you rearrange the manuscript. you can move material to a more appropriate spot, or, if you cannot find one, the right spot, you can move the material to the end of the manuscript until you decide whether to delete it. Some writers find that working with a printed manuscript helps them to visualize the process of change; others prefer to revise on screen. Above all, experiment. Save both the original and the revised version; you can always go back to it restore the manuscript to its original condition. It is no sign of weakness or defeat that your manuscript needs surgery. This is common in all writing, and among the best writers. (99 words)

And if we cut to the bone, we can reduce that in half:

Most writers revise because few write a perfect first draft. If you work on a computer, you can rearrange the parts by moving them around. If you save the original, you can always go back to it. Even great writers revise, so if your manuscript needs surgery, it signals no weakness. (51 words)

Hedges and Intensifiers

- *Hedges* qualify your certainty in what you are claiming
 - adverbs: usually, often, sometimes, almost, virtually, possibly, allegedly, arguably, perhaps, apparently, to a certain extent, somewhat
 - adjectives: most, many, some, a certain number of
 - verbs: may, might, can could, seem, tend, appear, suggest, indicate
- *Intensifiers* increase your certainty in what you are claiming
 - adverbs: very, pretty, quite, rather, clearly, obviously, undoubtedly, certainly, of course, indeed, inevitably, invariably, always
 - adjectives: key, central, crucial, basic, fundamental, major, essential
 - verbs: show, prove, establish, as you can see, it is clear that
 - the absence of a hedge!

When to use hedges

There seems to be some evidence to suggest that certain differences between Japan and Western rhetoric could derive from historical influences possibly traceable to Japan's cultural isolation and Europe's history of cross-cultural contacts.

When to use hedges

There **seems to be some** evidence to **suggest** that **certain** differences between Japan and Western rhetoric **could** derive from historical influences **possibly** traceable to Japan's cultural isolation and Europe's history of cross-cultural contacts.

- Too many hedges
- Do you trust this author?
- Does this author know what they're talking about?

When to use hedges

This evidence proves that Japanese and Western rhetorics differ because of Japan's cultural isolation and Europe's history of cross-cultural contacts.

When to use hedges

This evidence **proves** that Japanese and Western rhetorics differ because of Japan's cultural isolation and Europe's history of cross-cultural contacts.

- No hedges
- Too aggressive?
- Author sounds foolish?

When to use hedges

This evidence suggests that aspects of Japanese and Western rhetoric differ because of Japan's cultural isolation and Europe's history of cross-cultural contacts.

When to use hedges

This evidence **suggests** that **aspects** of Japanese and Western rhetoric differ because of Japan's cultural isolation and Europe's history of cross-cultural contacts.

- Just the right amount of hedging
- Author appears confident, but not arrogant nor unwilling to consider other points of view
- Creates more trust in author?

Moral: *You should use hedges, but in moderation.*

When to use hedges

Even the most significant breakthroughs use hedges!

We **wish to suggest** a [not *the*] structure for the salt of deoxyribose nucleic acid (D.N.A)... A structure for nucleic acid has already been proposed by Pauling and Corey... **In our opinion**, this structure is unsatisfactory for two reasons: (1) **We believe** that the material which gives the X-ray diagrams is the salt, not the free acid... (2) **Some** of the van der Waals distances **appear** to be too small.

-- From “Molecular Structure of Nucleic Acids”, by Watson & Crick, in which they discovered the double helix of DNA (the “most significant breakthrough in the history of genetics”)

When to use intensifiers

The most common intensifier is the absence of a hedge.

Rewrite Watson & Crick without hedges:

We state here the structure for the salt of deoxyribose nucleic acid (D.N.A)... A structure for nucleic acid has already been proposed by Pauling and Corey... This structure is unsatisfactory for two reasons: (1) The material which gives the X-ray diagrams is the salt, not the free acid... (2) The van der Waals distances are too small.

- Too aggressive?

When to use intensifiers

Compare (hedges & intensifiers bold):

For a century now, all liberals have argued against any censorship of art, and every court has found their arguments so completely persuasive that not a person any longer remembers how they were countered. As a result, today, censorship is totally a thing of the past.

For about a century now, many liberals have argued against censorship of art, and most courts have found their arguments persuasive enough that few people remember exactly how they were countered. As a result, today, censorship is virtually a thing of the past.

Which passage do you find most persuasive?

When to use intensifiers

Compare (hedges & intensifiers bold):

For a century now, **all** liberals have argued against **any** censorship of art, and **every** court has found their arguments so **completely** persuasive that **not** a person **any** longer remembers how they were countered. As a result, today, censorship is **totally** a thing of the past.

For **about** a century now, **many** liberals have argued against censorship of art, and **most** courts have found their arguments persuasive **enough** that **few** people remember **exactly** how they were countered. As a result, today, censorship is **virtually** a thing of the past.

Which passage do you find most persuasive?

When to use intensifiers

Moral: *When readers encounter an intensifiers, like obviously, undoubtedly, it is clear that, all, every, etc, they reflexively think the opposite.*

In your own writing, think about whether the intensifiers are necessary to convey your point.

This, They, It, ...

- Pronouns like “This” and “It” can be ambiguous.
- *This is a consequence of Theorem 2.*
 - What does “this” refer to?
- *Condition 3 is not satisfied for the steepest descent method, which is why we do not consider it further.*
 - Is “it” the condition, or the method, that is not being pursued?
- Be careful when you use such pronouns.
- Consider adding extra text to refer to the object explicitly.

Misusing pronouns can be funny! (But not in an academic paper)

- The ladies of the church have cast off clothing of every kind, and they can be seen in the church basement Friday afternoon.
- Guilt, vengeance, and bitterness can be emotionally destructive to your children. You must get rid of them.
- For those of you who have children and don't know it, we have a nursery downstairs.
- The driver had a narrow escape, as a broken board penetrated his cabin and just missed his head. This had to be removed before he could be released.
- (In an annual report of a famous New England boarding school): Where do the girls live? Our answer has been simplicity itself: assign girls to regular dormitories, thus removing them from use by boys.

-- From *Anguished English*, by Richard Lederer

Exercise: Handout 8