Suggested Revision of Essay Introduction

The following responds to the Practice activity presented on pages 359-360 of *Acting on Words.*

Sample essay introduction

Video lottery terminals, available to the public, pose a danger for many of the vulnerable people who are playing them. They are often located in bars, where people tend to drink and lose some of their best judgment about how to spend their money and their time. They sometimes pay out money, but over a year, what would someone who likes to play them, spend annually? Probably a lot more than you would think. The government, bars, and casinos may make money from VLT machines, but not the players, especially those who start to become addicted. Does society have a duty to intervene with new laws and regulations when people's choices harm themselves only and not really anyone else? Should society ban video lottery terminals?

Revised essay introduction

Video lottery terminals (VLTs) pose a danger for many vulnerable people. The VLTs are often located in bars, where some people tend to lose their best judgment about how to spend their money and time. The machines sometimes pay out money, but over a year, what would a frequent user spend? The amount would probably be a lot more than the winnings. The government, bars, and casinos certainly make money from VLT machines, but not the players, especially those who become addicted. Does society have a duty to intervene with new laws and regulations when people's choices harm themselves only rather than anyone else? Government obligations in relation to video lottery terminals are still dangerously uncertain.

Commentary

1. Revisions for conciseness and logic

The paragraph's first sentence is a good opening, but can be far more concise. Some of this conciseness will come from a stricter logic in expression. Since all video lottery terminals are "available to the public" (with restrictions only according to age), we can safely delete this qualifier as unnecessary. Similarly, the "vulnerable people" for whom VLTs pose a danger must be those "who are playing them," so we can delete this qualifier as redundant, too. Certainly, other people may financially suffer from the VLT user's habit, such as his or her children, but the "vulnerable people" in the paragraph are the gambling participants.

All redundancies are a form of illogic. More careful thinking about the nature of the object, person, scene, or concept you wish to describe will eliminate such "doubling" in your writing and, in the process, give you greater conciseness.

Here is another example for conciseness as logic:

> The rabid dog is out of its mind, as it hobbles uncertainly and menacingly toward the chicken coop where the chickens go about their normal business.

Better

> The rabid dog hobbles menacingly toward the chicken coop.

Since, by definition, a rabid dog *is* "out of its mind" and hobbling *means* to move "uncertainly," and chicken coops are "where the chickens go about their normal business," why waste words explaining that? Avoid the Department of Redundancy Department. And even though "rabid" already indicates "menacingly," you might argue that this adverb emphasizes— without sacrificing conciseness—the defining quality of the situation: menace.

2. Revisions to remove unclear pronouns and employ strong nouns

The second sentence of this unrevised introduction begins with an unclear pronoun reference, since "they" can refer to either "video lottery terminals" or "vulnerable people." The third sentence in this sample introduction also begins with an unclear pronoun reference, further muddying the attempt to communicate clearly: "they" here may refer to "people" or "machines," or be alternating between the two. Whenever you offer an unclear pronoun reference, you weaken the clarity of your writing. When in doubt about the certainty of your pronoun references, use a noun. The noun will correct the grammatical error and make your sentence emphatic: "The VLTs . . . The machines..."

Here is another example for unclear pronouns:

> Many people consider Buddy Guy to be an innovator in Chicago blues, one of the most exciting contemporary blues guitarists, and a strong influence on Eric Clapton and Jeff Beck. He apprenticed as a young musician with Muddy Waters. This has been acknowledged by both Jimi Hendrix and the Rolling Stones.

Better

> Many people consider Buddy Guy to be an innovator in Chicago blues, one of the most exciting contemporary blues guitarists, and a strong influence on Eric Clapton and Jeff Beck. Buddy Guy also apprenticed as a young musician with Muddy Waters. Guy's talent has been acknowledged by both Jimi Hendrix and the Rolling Stones.

"He," beginning the second sentence, is an unclear pronoun reference: it could refer to Buddy Guy, Eric Clapton, or Jeff Beck. "This," beginning the third sentence, is an even more unclear pronoun reference because a reader can only guess at the smorgasbord of choices it ambiguously refers to: that someone apprenticed with Muddy Waters? That Buddy Guy is a strong influence on Clapton? On Beck? That Buddy Guy is an exciting blues musician? That he is a Chicago blues innovator? All of these options? Perhaps some? Only one? Replacing "this" with "Guy's talent" settles the dizzying ambiguity.

3. Revisions for conciseness and grammar

Again, carefully edit for wordiness and repetitions: "someone who likes to play" the VLTs is, more concisely, "a frequent user," while "over a year" and "annually" are redundant, so eliminate one or the other. The fourth sentence in the unrevised introduction is a sentence fragment. You can build the fragment into an independent clause, as we have done here or, if the previous independent clause is not a question, select among the options of joining the fragment to the previous independent clause with a comma, a full colon, or a dash. After attending to this sentence fragment, you may want to revise that sudden shift to the second-person pronoun, "you"; it is probably too informal for a college or university essay.

Here is another example of wordiness, repetition, and sentence fragment:

> Many reports filed by journalists who are widely respected are now pointing to the questionable and dubious lobbying influence of lots of pharmaceutical companies. Especially on the health policy in Canada, university researchers, and the health of individuals.

Better

> Many respected journalists point to the dubious lobbying influence of pharmaceutical companies on Canadian health policy, university researchers, and individual health.

Conciseness and compression will come more naturally to you if you think your way through your expression. Once you know what you want to say, you can eliminate the unnecessary qualifiers and doublings (and even sentence fragments).

4. Revisions for facts and logic

Some essayists try to offer their speculations or opinions as solid facts: "the first step in the slow death of Canadian democracy is the banning of nudity in restaurants," or "everyone knows that all the worst disco became the best hip hop without the flared pant legs." Such tactics of pushing opinions as indisputable facts can seem like simple-minded

bullying rather than fair argument. In the fifth sentence of our unrevised introduction, the opposite occurs: a solid fact is wrongly presented as a speculation. Governments, bars, and casinos indisputably make a great deal of money from VLTs—not only "may," possibly, if all goes well, make money. Keep your facts and speculations clearly identifiable, both to avoid confusing the reader and to assure the reader that *you* know the difference between the two.

Here is another example of a fact/opinion confusion and redundancy as illogic:

> People that we know, especially parents who raised us and teachers who taught us, may die, but we will remember their words, since they spoke them to us.

Better

> People we know, especially parents and teachers, will die, but we will remember their words.

5. Revision for a more assertive thesis statement

The unrevised introduction's thesis statement appears as a question, and in fact as a question that follows a previous question. Most instructors view a volley of questions in introductions suspiciously, and for good reason. As an essayist, you must assert a view, an argument. Asking rhetorical questions may well help you *think* your way into your discussion, through your draft revisions, but bombarding the reader with questions in the final paper usually reveals that your thinking is still in a preliminary stage. You may well be only writing until you can think of some point to assert: "What is the effect of Einstein's discoveries on world religions?" "What policy most represents Stephen Harper's Canadian vision?" "Do hamburgers offer any health benefits?" "Can we define the basic elements of jazz?" A careful assertion far outweighs such loose-cannon rhetorical questions, especially those acting as thesis statements and topic sentences.

Here is another example of weak questions:

Do students pay attention to grammar lessons? What is the nature of education? Is freedom from all work always better than the vigour of commitment and discipline? Should I have worn this shirt?

Better

Students will likely pay attention to grammar lessons if an announced quiz or exam follows soon after.