

12 Ways to Cut Clutter From Writing

Clutter is words, phrases, or sentences that take up space but do no needed work; they contribute little, if anything, to the message of the piece. Clutter may also be commonly referred to as wordiness or conciseness. It's a common problem for anyone who writes but one that's easily solved by learning to recognize twelve of the most common symptoms of clutter:

1. Don't draw excessive attention to the writer.

Using expressions like
“I noticed...”
“I spotted...”
“I saw... an old man in a tattered coat leaning into the wind”
“I observed...”
“I could see...”

takes the reader's attention away from what should be most important—the old man—and puts it on the narrator or the writer. When you say something about the old man, you imply you “noticed,” “spotted,” “saw,” “observed,” or “could see” him since there's no other way you could know those things about him. Since the “seeing” announcement is unnecessary, simply revise the sentence.

“An old man in a tattered coat leaned into the wind.”

2. Don't use verbs that require helping verbs if a simpler form will do.

Be especially cautious of forms of “be” and “would” when they precede an action verb.

Instead of “The cooks *were preparing* pea soup last night,” say, “The cooks *prepared* pea soup last night.”

Instead of “Sara *would take* all the criticism,” say, “Sara *took* all the criticism.”

Instead of “I will *have eaten* the chips before the game,” say, “I will *eat* the chips before the game.”

Instead of “Jose *was slaughtering* the dragon,” say, “Jose *slaughtered* the dragon.”

3. Never start an independent clause with the word “There.”

When you do, you usually end up with a helping verb—most commonly a form of the verb “be”—immediately after the word “There.” Action verbs create better visuals, and the “there” construction is more wordy. Notice the difference between sentence (a) and (b) and how avoiding “there” makes the sentence both more concise and more active.

- (a) There was a rhinoceros charging across the road.
- (b) A rhinoceros charged across the road.

However, students usually don't think about using an action verb (charged) instead of “there was” and so would probably write, “A rhinoceros was on the road.” Now compare this to sentence (b) above, and the improvement without the “there” is even more obvious. Remember: simply avoid “there,” especially when inclined to start a sentence with it.

4. Never start an independent clause with the word “It.”

When this occurs, a helping verb or weak verbs such as “seems” usually follows “It.” Try to use action verbs or more concise ways of saying the same thing.

For example:

It was a cold night when the cows broke out.

In this sentence, one preposition can take the place of three words (“It,” “was,” and “when”):

On a cold night the cows broke out.

2nd example:

It's too bad they lost the game.

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Again one word replaces three ("It's too bad"):

Unfortunately, they lost the game.

In order to make writing vivid and memorable, focus on what things *are* or what they're *doing* rather than on how they *seem*:

It *seemed* Grandma was prepared for the worst.

In this example, the writer has two choices: either it's obvious Grandma *was* prepared, in which case the writer should have said this:

Grandma was prepared for the worst.

Or it's not obvious Grandma was prepared; in which case, concrete details about Grandma's preparedness should be included:

A stack of firewood stood in the corner, and jars of canned fruit, vegetables, and meat covered the pantry shelves.

5. Don't use two or more action verbs when only one is needed to make the meaning clear.

Nate began to cry when his dog died.

The moment at which Nate *began* to cry is not all that important; as long as the reader understands he *was* crying, the reader will know he began. Consequently, the writer could use just one action verb (*cry*) rather than two (*began, cry*):

Nate cried when his dog died.

More examples:

Mom [started to] holler ^ after Gloria broke the vase.

With the wolf close on my heels, I [continued running] through the woods.

6. Cut the adverb implied in the verb.

Adverbs modify verbs, adjectives, and other adverbs and usually end in "-ly". (The word "usually" in the previous sentence is an adverb describing the verb "end.") Often students mistakenly assume that adverbs produce better description; however, notice in the following sentences how choosing a precise, active verb makes the adverb [in brackets] unnecessary:

She **sprinted** [rapidly] after the bus. (Is there any other way to sprint?)

Grandpa **stumbled** [clumsily] over the cat. (Stumbling usually is done clumsily.)

With rain falling in sheets, the hobo **ambled** [slowly] down the railroad tracks.

(Ambled means a slow walk.)

Mary **cried** [sadly] because Bambi's mother died. (The circumstances make it clear

Mary was not crying happily.)

7. Use the short word rather than the long one *when they mean the same thing*.

<i>Instead of</i>	<i>{</i>	<i>numerous</i>	<i>say</i>	<i>{</i>	<i>many</i>
		facilitate			ease
		remainder			rest
		initial			first
		sufficient			enough
		attempt			try

8. Always be cautious of “that.”

When using the word “that,” try reading the sentence without it; if the sentence still makes sense, cut it.

Instead of “He thought that he was late,” say, “He thought he was late.”

Instead of “I’m certain that he went home,” say, “I’m certain he went home.”

9. Use the active voice rather than the passive.

Whenever a verb shows the subject of the sentence *doing something*, the sentence is in the active voice:

Kate swept the porch.

Whenever the subject does not act but is *acted upon*, the sentence is in the passive voice:

The porch was swept by Kate.

Notice that in the active voice we can say exactly what we said in the passive voice without using either “was” or “by.”

10. Don’t use phrases that add words, not meaning.

Instead of, “due to the fact that,” write, “because.”

Instead of, “in the event that,” write, “if.”

Instead of, “with the possible exception of,” write, “except.”

Instead of, “at the present time,” write, “now.”

Instead of, “the reason why he went to the store is because,” write, “he went to the store because.”

11. Avoid using qualifiers.

Qualifiers are adverbs that make distinctions in quality, quantity, or degree.

For example:

He was very tired

“Very” explains to what degree he was tired. However, the distinctions made by qualifiers are usually either (a) unimportant or (b) made by using a more precise word without the qualifier. If *a* is true for the above sentence, “He was very tired,” write this instead:

He was tired.

If *b* is true, write this:

He was exhausted.

Qualifiers like “rather,” “very,” “a little,” “pretty,” “somewhat,” “sort of,” etc., kind of try to make some rather pretty little and somewhat unimportant distinctions.

12. State personal opinions or beliefs directly and without labeling them as belonging to you.

Since you are the writer and all other information or opinions from outside sources will be documented, it will be apparent that any opinions or beliefs you state *without* documentation do, in fact, belong to you. Therefore, don’t write,

I think...
I feel...
I believe... } automatic weapons should be outlawed.

I realize...

Instead, be direct, and don't qualify your opinions:

Automatic weapons should be outlawed.

Practice eliminating clutter

Directions: Cut clutter from the following sentences, but don't cut details or change the writer's meaning. One or more of the twelve ways to cut clutter may apply to any of the sentences.

1. Maria would say that she would give advice to her co-workers due to the fact that they trusted her.
2. On these dates I thought to myself that he was boring and not a spontaneous kind of person.
3. He would snarl and turn his face at me.
4. There are different parts in the body where insulin could be administered.
5. Diabetics wear a special kind of footwear.
6. To sum up this essay, there are many things that Laredo can be symbolized by.
7. My grandmother is someone who is admired very much by her family and has lived here all her life.
8. After all, everywhere he would go people would speak Spanish.
9. Every time you watch the Laredo news almost every time you will probably see something relating to drugs.
10. In conclusion, this is how I see my dad, a United States Customs employee who deals with millions of pounds of every day type drugs.
11. My grandmother for example would be one of the persons who still follow old culture beliefs.
12. Last time I really felt bad when I noticed that the people seem to have a very poor opinion about my country, and I began to wonder why things are that way.
13. One can look down and notice her extremely muddy, old, ruined huarache, which protect her dry cracked feet.
14. I can still remember that one particular time when Garcia showed me his true colors.
15. Officer Garcia has short black hair; not to mention it's very well groomed.
16. I would say it would be unusual if I came back home early.
17. Once inside we made our way to our usual spot on the far end corner of the bar.
18. Gus and I quickly made our way toward the front of the stage.