

Cutting Clutter

Md. Mojibur Rahman

mrahmanelt@iitism.ac.in

Cut Clutter from Writing

- We often take too long to say too little. Writing clearly and cleanly takes work, but it's vital. When we write simply, we know what we've said, and we know other people will understand it.
- Clutter is words, phrase, or sentences that take up space, and they contribute little to the message.
- Clutter may also be commonly referred to as wordiness or conciseness.
- It's a common problem for any one who writes but one that's easily solved by learning to recognize the most common symptoms of clutter.

Don't Draw Excessive Attention to the Writer

- Using expressions like -

I noticed...

I spotted...

I saw...

I observed...

- I could see...

An old man in a tattered coat leaning into the wind

man – and puts it on the narrator or the writer.

- When you say something about the old man, you simply imply you ‘noticed,’ ‘spotted,’ ‘saw,’ ‘observed,’ or ‘could see’ him since there is 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

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

- Be specially cautious of forms of 'be' and 'would' when they precede an action verb.

Instead: The cooks were preparing pea soup last night.

Say: The cooks prepared pea soup last night.

Instead: Sara would take all the criticism.

Say: Sara took all the criticism.

Instead: I will have eaten the chips before the game.

Say: I will eat the chips before the game.

Never start an independent clause with the word “There”

- Action verbs create better visuals, and the “there” construction is more wordy.

Instead: **There was a rhinoceros charging across the road.**

Say: **A rhinoceros charged across the road.**

Never start an independent clause with the word “It”

Instead: It was a cold night when the cows broke out.

Say: On a cold night the cows broke out.

Instead: It's too bad they lost the game.

Say: Unfortunately, they lost the game.

Instead: It seemed Grandma was prepared for the worst.

Say: Grandma was prepared for the worst.

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

Instead: Nate began to cry when his dog died.

Say: Nate cried when his dog died.

Cut the adverb implied in the verb

Instead: She sprinted rapidly after the bus.

Say: She sprinted after the bus.

Instead: Grandpa stumbled clumsily over the cat.

Say: Grandpa stumbled over the cat.

Instead: Mary cried sadly because Bambi's mother died.

Say: Mary cried because Bambi's mother died.

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

Instead of	Say
Nemrous	Many
Facilitate	Ease
Remainder	Rest
Initial	First
Sufficient	Enough
Attempt	Try

Always be cautious of “that”

Instead: He thought that he was late.

Say: He thought he was late.

Instead: I am certain that he went home.

Say: I am certain he went home.

Use the active voice—put the actor in the sentence

Instead: It was decided that the committee would meet tonight.

Say: The committee will meet tonight.

Instead: The porch was swept by Kate.

Say: Kate swept the porch.

Don't use phrases that add words, not meaning.

Instead of	Say
Due to the fact that	Because
In the event that	If
With the possible exception of	Except
At the present time	Now
The reason why he went to the store because	He went to the store because

Avoid general adjectives or adverbs

- These words don't tell the reader anything important—they just take up space: kind of, sort of, individual, specific, definitely, actually, generally, really, basically, for all intents and purposes.
- Avoid Qualifiers-

Instead: He was very tired.

Say: He was tired.

He was exhausted.

Use verbs, rather than noun forms of verbs

- Active verbs take less space than gerunds (a noun with -ing, like frittering and spicing) or infinitives (to shout, to muzzle).

Instead: **Dancing is hard for me.**

Say: **I cannot dance.**

Instead: **To dream is soothing.**

Say: **Dreams soothe.**

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

I think...

I feel...

I believe...

I realize...

automatic weapons should be outlawed.

Instead, be direct, and do not qualify your opinions:

Automatic weapons should be outlawed.

Eliminate Wordiness

- For a sentence to flow well, it should not be cluttered with unnecessary words. Sentences should be concise and direct.

Instead: I enjoy power walking at a quick pace in the nighttime twilight under the dark sky.

Say: I enjoy power walking at night.

Instead: She is one of the many girls who attends and walks the corridors of my school.

Say: She attends my school.

Remove Redundant Words

- Remove words that are redundant. These are some common pairs of words that are redundant; one word should be removed from each pair.

first and foremost

each and every

any and all

hopes and desires

always and forever

final outcome

ancient history

future plans

free gift

terrible tragedy

reflect back

Remove Meaningless Intensifiers

- Intensifiers such as so, very, many, quite, really, and definitely are unnecessary. If they add no significance to the sentence, they can be removed.

Instead: : Lisa is definitely a very skilled writer.

Say: : Lisa is a skilled writer.

Instead: She really, truly dances quite well.

Say: She dances well.

Remove Unnecessary Prepositions

Instead: I go to work from between 9:00 a.m. to about 5:00 p.m. [with and take a one-hour break in between at about around noon.

Say: I work from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and take a one-hour break around noon.

Avoid Lengthiness

- Avoid lengthy expressions that make a sentence wordy. Eliminating this problem may require moving words around in the sentence.

Instead: At this point in time, there are currently far too many prisoners of war, also known as POWs.

Say: There are currently far too many prisoners of war (POWs).

Instead: If you really want to know, I can truthfully say that I actually don't really care about where we go to eat for dinner.

Say: I don't care where we eat dinner.

Sample Paragraph

- Original:

For nearly 20 years when asked the question what I would like to be when I grow up, I always used to think about writing, but I did not always consider writing as something I might like to be doing full-time. The foundation of my career goals started out in fifth grade, when my teacher told me a story I had written might be at a high enough standard to be publishable in the future. I was intrigued by this profession because I was always reading, but at the time I was always reading about marine mammals and had formed the impression that I would like to become a marine biologist because I had read everything about whales. As time passed and I became better acquainted with the study of science, I found that the job of a writer was something that would fit very well with my personality and goals in life, because it allows you to read about anything you want and you do not have to make a lot of measurements. (173 words)

- Stripped down without losing any of the meaning:

For 20 years I have liked writing, but I did not always think of making a living by it. I first thought of writing as a job when my fifth grade teacher told me I might turn a story of mine into a children's book. I read all the time, but back then I read about whales. I thought I wanted to study Marine Biology. As I learned more about research, I found I liked talking about whales better than swimming with them. (83 words).

Thank You