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### Avoid Words That Bad Writers Love

Because it's easy at the level of the single word to detect and punish crime the legislative attitude toward prose reaches its heaven in lists of Bad Words. Some perfectly good English words have died this way: for instance, "ain't." Good writers have mental lists of words to avoid. At a minimum certain words will tag you as incompetent simply because good writers have decided so. For example, though it's unfair to the inexperienced and there's nothing whatever in the nature of the linguistic universe to justify it, you might as well know that in some company if you use "hopefully" to mean "I hope" you will be set down as a fool. Hopefully General Booth entered heaven is supposed to mean "with hope," not "I hope."

If economic prose would drop "via," "the process of," "intra," "and/or," "hypothesize," "respectively," and (a strange one, this) "this" the gain in clarity and grace would be big. If it would drop "at least minimal," "process of," "thus," "overall," "basic," and "factor" the world would be saved. The best practice provides the standard. Virginia Woolf would not write "and/or" or "he/she" because she wanted prose, not a diagram. Some others that I'm sure Virginia would have disliked appear in my personal list of *Bad Words*.

### Vague nouns and pronouns:

**concept:** a vague, Latinate (that is, pretentiously derived from Latin), front-parlor word; consider "idea," "notion," or "thought."

**data:** over- and mis-used in economics. "Data" are plural, although the word is clearly on its way to becoming singular in the language. "Data" means "givens" in Latin, and that is how you should use it, not as a do-all synonym for "facts," "statistics," "information," "observations," and so forth. The word embodies, incidentally, a dangerous attitude toward observation—that it is "given" by someone else—but the point here is one of style. "Datum" is one "data," though only pedants use it.

**function:** in the sense of "role" is Latinate.

**situation:** vague. "Position" or "condition" are better, depending on the meaning.

**individuals:** for plain "people."

**agents:** the same.

**structure:** vague. There are no obvious alternatives to structure because the word usually doesn't mean anything at all. On this and other similar words in economics, see Fritz Machlup (1963, 1967).

**process:** usually empty, and can be struck out (sometimes with its "the") without changing the meaning: "the economic development process" or "the transition process" become plain "economic development" or "the transition."

**the existence of:** strike it out, and just name the thing.

**time frame:** means "time"; it originates in the engineer's dim notion that "time" means "passage of time" alone,

and not "a point in time" (another engineering expression). But the notion is false.

### **Pretentious and feeble verbs:**

**critique:** elegant variation for "criticize" or "to read critically" or "to comment on."

**implement:** Washingtonese, a rich and foolish dialect of Economese.

**comprise:** fancy talk for "include" or "consist of."

**analyze:** over- and mis-used in economics as a synonym for "discuss" or "examine." Look it up in your dictionary. It meant in Greek "cut to pieces."

**hypothesize:** for "suppose" or "expect." This word tags you (similar words: "finalize," "and/or," "time frame").

**finalize:** boardroom talk. See "hypothesize," academic boardroom talk.

**state:** in the mere sense of "say"; why not say "say"? "State means "assert, with conviction."

**try and do something** is "try to do something" (strangely, "try and" is common among educated English people; in the United States it is a marker of incompetence).

**the reason was due to:** try again.

### **Pointless adjectives:**

**former... latter; the above; the preceding:** and other words that request the reader to look back to sort out the former and latter things. Don't request the reader to look back, because she will, and will lose her place. Never ask the reader to solve a puzzle, because she won't be able to and will get angry.

**aforementioned:** what are you writing, a will?

**intra/inter:** do not use. Do not present verbal puzzles to your reader. Everyone has to stop to figure out what these prefixes mean. Use "within" and "between." "International" and "intramural" are fine, of course, being well domesticated. But "The inter- and intra-firm communication was weak" is silly. Fancy talk.

**interesting:** a weak word, made weak by its common sarcastic use and by its overuse by people with nothing to say about their subject except that it is interesting. It arouses the reader's sadism.

**kind of, sort of, type of:** vague, vague, vague. Use sparingly.

### **Useless adverbs:**

**fortunately, interestingly, etc.:** cheap ways of introducing irrelevant opinion.

**respectively:** as in "Consumption and investment were 90% and 10% of income, respectively." Why would anyone reverse the correct order of the numbers? (Answer: someone who does not express parallel ideas in parallel form.) Drawing attention to the lack of parallelism by mentioning explicitly that it did *not* take place is a bad idea. When the list is longer, distribute the numbers directly; "Consumption was 85% of income, investment 10%, and government spending 5%."

**very:** the very general rule is to think very hard before using "very" very much, and to very often strike it out. It's a weak word.

**for convenience:** as in, "For convenience, we will adopt the following notation." A silly phrase, when you think about it. All writing should be for convenience. What would be the point of writing for inconvenience?

Often you'll find that adverbs can be dropped (look for words ending in -ly). They often convey your opinion, which only your mother cares about.

### **Clumsy conjunctions:**

**due to:** usually signals a clumsy phrase, due to not arranging the sentence to sound right.

**via:** plain "by" is the word wanted.

**in terms of:** clumsy and vague; compare "due to."

**thus** and **hence:** use traffic signals sparingly.

**plus** to mean **and:** use "and" until the language has finished changing "plus" into "and," which will take another century or so. I know you use it when you talk. Well, speech can be improved by writing, too.

The vocabulary of economics, like other vocabularies, is enriched by coinages and borrowings: the Laffer curve, the affluent society, the agency problem. Contrary to a widespread impression among non-economists, though, mastering the vocabulary of economics is not the same as mastering economics.

Everyone, economist or not, comes equipped with a vocabulary for the economy. It might be called Ersatz Economics. In Ersatz Economics, prices start by "skyrocketing." When "sellers outnumber buyers" prices fall from "exorbitant" or "gouging" levels, down through "fair" and "just." If this "vicious cycle" goes on too long, though, they fall to "unfair" and "cutthroat," the result of "dumping." Likewise, the woman in the street believes she knows that unions and corporations have more "bargaining power"

than do their victims, and therefore can "exploit" them. A consumer can "afford" medical care, maybe only "barely afford" it, "needs" housing, and views food as a "basic necessity." Business people maintain their "profit margins," probably "obscene" or "unwarranted," by "passing along" a higher wage, which causes workers to demand still higher wages, in a "spiral." The protection of the American worker's "living wage" from "unfair competition" by "cheap foreign labor" should be high on the nation's list of "priorities," as should be the "rebuilding" of our "collapsing" industrial "base."

To write thoughtfully in economics you must clear your mind of such cant, as to understand astronomy you must stop talking about the sun "rising."