

Common Writing Mistakes

Or How to Avoid the 7 Deadly Sins of Boring Prose

There's a great old joke about the optimistic vs. pessimistic child. The pessimist was given a whole room full of toys, but found problems with each and every one. The optimist was given an entire room full of manure. The people observing these children were surprised to enter the room and find the optimistic child digging excitedly through the manure. He said, "I know there's a pony in here somewhere." Most editors feel that way about bad writing. The more optimistic of these folks are convinced that amid the pile of pages, there must be a pony. And so they are willing to dig. But not all editors are—and an even smaller percentage of readers are. It is in your best interest to make their job easier by improving your writing. Here are some quick tips that can help. Even if your sentences look like the ones I've described below, you can edit them to make them better.

1. Passive Voice

Passive voice is probably the most common sin of boring writing. With passive voice, you need more words to express your thoughts, and the words you use seldom convey action. In most cases, passive voice makes sentences long and gaseous. The result is dull, dull, dull. Below is an example of this phenomenon. In this case, the author used passive voice to describe the program they used.

The curriculum was administered over the course of 11 weeks as designed. At its conclusion, a focus group was conducted to broadly assess the domains of impact as experienced by the participants.

This is classic passive voice. Apparently, no one is doing anything. It's all being done to them. Let's see what happens when we change this to active voice.

We administered the curriculum over 11 weeks. When the study was complete, we conducted a focus group and asked participants how the program affected their lives.

Not only is this easier to read, but you suddenly get a sense that there are real people conducting this study, and they want to know how their program changed people's lives. That's a lot more interesting, and readers would have no trouble understanding what these researchers did.

2. Jargon

Jargon is another hallmark of boring writing, and it happens in almost every field. Below is an example of a sentence that uses three jargon terms--self-efficacy, symptomatology, and temperament. If writing

for an audience outside of social science, the authors would need to define these terms. And even within those fields, the authors might find that simpler language improves their readability.

As expected, maternal self-efficacy beliefs correlated negatively with mothers' depressive symptomatology and perceptions of infant temperament indicating that mothers felt less efficacious as parents when their depression levels were high and when they perceived their infants as difficult.

Here's a possible revised version. As you can see, it's a lot more engaging.

Mothers felt they were less effective as parents when they were depressed and their infants had difficult temperaments.

This doesn't mean you can never use jargon in what you write. There's a time and a place for technical language. But when it becomes a barrier to readability, it's probably best to think of another way to get your point across. Before you drag out that big word, ask yourself whether your reader will understand it. Your goal as a writer is to communicate with your reader. If you are using unfamiliar terms, unless you define them, you are not communicating.

3. Abstractions

Abstract sentences are sentences with no people in them. Adding people minimizes abstractions and helps you avoid windy writing. Here's an example of an abstract sentence.

Debriefing of secondary trauma may be helpful because of the challenging and sometimes overwhelming task of providing treatment for HIV-positive women who often have chaotic lives, disclose sexual abuse and other traumatic experiences, experience multiple illnesses, and address death.

The first part of this sentence is pretty vague. First of all, who has secondary trauma? It is most likely the therapists. So let's start there.

Therapists working with HIV-positive women may develop secondary trauma because the needs of these clients can be overwhelming.

I needed to add some words because the information in this sentence is so abstract.

Next, we need to address the clients. Why are these clients a challenge?

These clients often have chaotic lives, disclose sexual abuse or other traumatic experiences, and have multiple illnesses. In addition, these women are facing death. Debriefing for therapists working with these women may be helpful.

We now have three sentences where there was only one. But it is much clearer, and we have a very good sense of how and why therapists might be affected by their work.

4. Noun Pileups

Noun pile-ups are another hallmark of gas-bag writing. When a sentence is abstract with a passive verb construction, it uses more nouns and modifiers to get the point across. Chaos results. Here's an example.

Most researchers have focused on the role of parenting practices as a central feature of family influences in crime.
(Word count: 19)

In a short 19 words, the authors managed to squeeze in 5 nouns, with modifiers. To revise this, let me ask some questions. First of all, do we need to include “researchers”? Since they are really not the central focus, could we simply state the finding and reference it? And it is really not “parenting practices” that increase crime, but harsh parenting. So how about this?

Harsh parenting is the single-most important influence in crime.

Or

Criminals have often experienced harsh punishment as children.

To make your work readable, keep an eye on how many nouns you use in a sentence, especially those with abstract meanings. The more you have, the higher your chances of being wordy and vague. Cut the number of nouns you use, or at least make them more concrete. And choose nouns that are precise over those that need the help of modifiers. Your readers will thank you.

5. Weak Verb Constructions

Weak verb constructions are fellow travelers with passive voice and abstract nouns. Verbs are--or should be--the workhorses of a sentence. The more information you can convey with a verb, the better. Sometimes, we have weak verb constructions because we use nouns in their place. Turn your nouns into verbs, and watch your writing suddenly come to life. Here are some examples.

She made a suggestion.

He made an offer.

That was his intention all along.

On the surface, these sentences sound fine. They have people in them. There are active verbs. And they are short. But look what happens when we change nouns into verbs.

She suggested.

He offered.

He intended that all along.

It cut the word length of the first two in half and increased the readability of all three.

Sentences with weak construction often have “there” with various forms of “to be.” Here’s an example taken from the family violence literature.

Parents who are highly punitive sometimes are inattentive or neglectful.

Let’s change these descriptors to verbs.

Parents who harshly punish their children sometimes ignore or neglect them as well.

When it’s time to edit, be on the lookout for forms of “to be” and words like “there.” These often mean that weak verb constructions are afoot. As you change these, your tone and readability will dramatically improve.

6. Too Many Words

Strunk and White command readers to “omit needless words.” Let that be your mantra as well. So how can you do that? Get in the habit of questioning whether every word is pulling its weight. If it’s not, get rid of it. Here is an example. This sentence is so wordy that it lessens the emotional impact of what the author is saying.

Women who have had experiences that clearly constitute a rape may be in need of specialized programs. (word count: 17)

“Had experiences that clearly constituted a rape.” What? Let’s say this with fewer words.

Women who have been raped may need specialized programs. (word count: 9)

Or how about this?

Rape victims may need specialized programs. (word count: 6)

Here, we’ve cut the number of words by two thirds, and the sentence is clearer and more powerful.

Don’t worry about extra words as you write a first draft. But as you revise, kick out any extra words and watch how your writing improves.

7. Too Many Syllables

In the movie *Amadeus*, the Emperor Franz Joseph famously told Mozart that his music had “too many notes.” In a phrase, he went to the heart of many writing problems. Not only do we like having lots of words, but we want them to be as multi-syllabic as possible.

High syllable counts often mean that you need to simplify your language. Do this by using simpler words. English is naturally dramatic and has a high number of action verbs. With words such as strike, break, or slam, we can picture what is happening—we visualize these words. So when given a choice, choose the more readable word. Throw in a big word from time to time for variety, but keep your average syllable count down. Your writing will be the better for it.

Conclusion

Aim for lean prose, with all words in your sentences working as hard as possible. When you edit your manuscript, keep the following checklist nearby. By targeting the highlighted problems, you can dramatically improve your writing. You (and your editor) will be pleased with the results.

Editing Checklist

- Have you eliminated most instances of passive voice?
- Are you using jargon or specialized terms? If so, have you defined them?
- Are there people in your sentences?
- Are you using concrete nouns?
- Have you trimmed the number of nouns per sentence?
- Have you turned nouns into verbs wherever possible?
- Have you omitted all needless words?
- Have you simplified your words and lowered the number of syllables?

Adapted from: Kendall-Tackett, K. (2007). *How to Write for a General Audience*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.