Plain Language: Avoiding Wordiness

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Learning Outcomes

By the end of this workshop, you should be able to:

- Write clearly in plain language.
- Recognize zombie nouns (nominalizations) and understand strategies for avoiding them.
- Recognize your own wordy sentences and know how to edit them to be clearer.
What is Plain Language?

- Clear and precise writing with a minimum of jargon.
- Sentences with characters for subjects.
- Writing that avoids zombie nouns.
- Sentences with strong and active verbs.
Does the Passive Voice Equal Wordiness?

- The passive voice is often maligned as the cause of wordiness. I contend that good writing must contain the passive voice.

- Use the passive voice if
  - You are not sure who performed the action (the agent)
  - You don’t want to mention the agent
  - The agent isn’t important
  - You want to focus on the receiver of the action

- Use the passive voice if it helps you to improve the flow of one sentence to the next.
Which Passage Predominantly Uses the Passive Voice?

- In the last 25 years, mysterious crop circles **have appeared** around the world. People **have discovered** these formations in more than 20 countries, including the United States, Canada and Australia. They **have found** them in grain fields in southern England. These large flat circles **are caused by** a force that flattens the grain but does not destroy it.

- In the last 25 years, mysterious crop circles **have appeared** around the world. These formations **have been discovered** in more than 20 countries, including the United States, Canada and Australia. Many of them **have been found** in grain fields in southern England. These large flat circles **are caused by** a force that flattens the grain but does not destroy it. ¹
Two Versions of a Sentence from Familiar Story

Version one

Once upon a time, as a walk through the woods was taking place by Little Red Riding Hood, a wolf’s jump from behind a tree occurred, causing her fright. ²

Version two

Once upon a time, Little Red Riding Hood was walking through the woods, when a Wolf jumped out from behind a tree and frightened her.
Two Versions of Another Sentence

Version one

Despite his knowledge of the need by the cities for new revenues for the improvement of their schools, the premier was resistant to the budget bill in order to give encouragement to the cities for an increase of local taxes. ³

Version two

Although he knew that the cities needed new revenues to improve schools, the premier resisted the budget bill because he wanted to encourage cities to increase local taxes.
Zombie Nouns (Nominalizations)

Which sentence is written in plain language?

- The proliferation of nominalizations in a discursive formation may be an indication of a tendency toward pomposity and abstraction.  
- Writers who overload their sentences with nominalizations tend to sound pompous and abstract.
## Examples of Zombie Nouns (Nominalizations)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VERB/ADJECTIVE</th>
<th>ZOMBIE NOUN</th>
<th>ZOMBIE NOUNS: USED WITH PREPOSITIONS AND WEAK VERBS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Affect (v)</td>
<td>Effect</td>
<td>Has/have an effect on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyze (v)</td>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>Do/does an analysis of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applies (v)</td>
<td>Applicability</td>
<td>Has/have applicability for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contribute (v)</td>
<td>Contribution</td>
<td>Makes/makes a contribution to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decide (v)</td>
<td>Decision</td>
<td>Make/makes a decision about</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explain (v)</td>
<td>Explanation</td>
<td>Has/have an explanation for</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Zombie Nouns in Academic Writing

Helen Sword, in her book *The Writer’s Diet*, cites this passage to show zombie nouns in academic writing.

- The capacity of a decision unit to induce innovation implementation within an adoption unit is crucial to organizational success. Risk and complexity are characteristics of innovations that can lead to resistance within organizational adoption units. Communication costs, types of power, and communication channels are structural characteristics that can be used by a decision unit to overcome this resistance. The interaction of these factors can determine the degree of successful innovation implementation within organizations. ⁵

Same Passage in Plain Language

Before

The capacity of a decision unit to induce innovation implementation within an adoption unit is crucial to organizational success. Risk and complexity are characteristics of innovations that can lead to resistance within organizational adoption units. Communication costs, types of power, and communication channels are structural characteristics that can be used by a decision unit to overcome this resistance. The interaction of these factors can determine the degree of successful innovation implementation within organizations.

After

Organizations thrive on change; however, many employees resist new ideas that they perceive as too risky or complex. Successful managers break down such resistance by communicating with staff clearly and strategically. 6
Use the old-new information pattern.

✓ Most election models assume a rational voter who makes carefully considered decisions. Since the election of Donald Trump, this view has been severely challenged.

✓ As the world’s population grows, the demands for freshwater have been increasing. Along with this increase is growing pressure to protect this precious resource.  

✓ Although in third world countries species are declining, in wealthier countries this trend is reversing. This development has occurred because people from richer countries now largely accept the responsibility to protect the world’s vulnerable species.
Seven Ways to Write Plainly

1. Keep abstractions as subjects short. Characterize the abstractions.
2. Pair abstract subjects with strong verbs.
3. Keep subjects and verbs close together.
4. Avoid piling on abstractions, zombie nouns and prepositions.
5. Use plain and simple language.
6. Reduce words, especially in long sentences.
7. Convert long single-clause sentences to sentences with two clauses joined by a connecting word.
1. Keep Abstractions as Subjects Short

*Which sentence has the shorter subject? Which is easier to understand?*

- The financial dependency of social economy enterprises on government requires that these organizations be accountable to government.  
- Because social economy enterprises depend on government for their financing, they must be accountable to government.
2. Pair Abstract Subjects with Strong Verbs

*Which sentence has the stronger main verb?*

- The evaluation of social economy enterprises by government usually takes place through the measurement of performance, specifically the determination of outputs, (the tasks performed) and the outcomes of these tasks (the results of these tasks). \(^{10}\)

- The government evaluates the performance of social economy enterprises by measuring their outputs and outcomes: outputs are the tasks performed; outcomes are the results of these tasks.
3. Keep Subjects and Verbs Close Together

*In which sentence are the subject and verb closer together?*

- The smallest of the URF's (URFA6L), a 207-nucleotide (nt) reading frame overlapping out of phase the NH2-terminal portion of the adenosinetriphosphatase (ATPase) subunit 6 gene, has been identified as the animal equivalent of the recently discovered yeast H+-ATPase subunit 8 gene. ¹¹

- The smallest of the URF's (URFA6L) is a 207-nucleotide (nt) reading frame overlapping out of phase the NH2-terminal portion of the adenosinetriphosphatase (ATPase) subunit 6 gene. URFA6L has been identified as the animal equivalent of the recently discovered yeast H+-ATPase subunit 8 gene.
4. Avoid Piling on Abstractions (Continued)

Which sentence includes the greater number of abstractions?

- By drawing upon an analysis of policy documents in combination with semi-structured interviews, this paper highlights barriers to knowledge integration induced by the design of supportive policy instruments of information and institution building, where traditional knowledge is de-prioritized in relation to scientific knowledge and notions of rationality and practicality.  

- By analyzing policy documents and semi-structured interviews, this paper suggests that efforts to integrate traditional knowledge into government policy have not displaced the primacy of scientific knowledge in resource management.
## 5. Use Plain and Simple Language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Avoid</th>
<th>Use Instead</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a considerable amount of; a great deal of</td>
<td>much</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a great many</td>
<td>many; numerous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as the case may be</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>at this point in time</td>
<td>now; currently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>based on the fact that</td>
<td>because</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>basically</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>by the presence of</td>
<td>by</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>due to the fact that</td>
<td>because; due to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for the purpose of</td>
<td>to; for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>has the ability/capacity to</td>
<td>can</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>has the potential to</td>
<td>could</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in the course of</td>
<td>in; during</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in the near future</td>
<td>soon</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. Use Plain and Simple Language *(Continued)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Avoid</th>
<th>Use Instead</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>in recent years</td>
<td>recently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in the vicinity of</td>
<td>near</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in order to</td>
<td>to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in view of the fact that</td>
<td>because; since</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is interesting to note that; it is</td>
<td>....</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>significant that</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in regards to, regarding, pertaining to</td>
<td>about, on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in connection with</td>
<td>about</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>owing to the fact that</td>
<td>because</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>taking into account</td>
<td>considering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the fact that</td>
<td>that; .....</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>there is no doubt that</td>
<td>no doubt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>utilize</td>
<td>use</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6. Reduce Words

- Avoid *redundant words*

  ✗ Vibration measurements made in the course of the missile’s flight test program were complicated by the presence of intense high-frequency excitation of the vehicle’s shell structure during the re-entry phase of the flight.

  ✓ Vibration measurements made during the missile’s flight were complicated by intense high-frequency excitation of the vehicle shells during re-entry. 13
6. Reduce Words (Continued)

- Avoid starting sentences with “there is/there are”
  
  \textbf{✗} There are several studies that have focused on the effects of pesticides on bees.
  
  \textbf{✓} Several studies have focused on the effects of pesticides on bees.

- Avoid starting sentences with “what”
  
  \textbf{✗} What this proposal will focus on is the role that obesity plays in self-esteem.
  
  \textbf{✓} This proposal will focus on the role of obesity in self-esteem.
6. Reduce Words *(Continued)*

- *Avoid starting sentences with the empty “it.”*
  
  ❌ *It should be pointed out that* a more equitable compensation program would provide more employment stability.
  
  ✓ A more equitable compensation program would provide more employment stability.
  
  ❌ *It is believed that* a more equitable compensation program would provide more employment stability.
  
  ✓ Researchers suggest that a more equitable compensation program would help stabilize employment.
6. Reduce Words (Continued)

- Minimize adjectives and adverbs: Avoid “important” and “significant.” Use “critical” and “key” instead. Avoid “very.”

  ✗ The prevalence of eating disorders among adolescent girls is significantly higher than it is among their male counterparts.

  ✓ The prevalence of eating disorders is twice as high among adolescent girls as it is among their male counterparts.

  ✗ The very important findings are summarized in Table 5.

  ✓ The key findings are summarized in Table 5.
7. Convert Long Single-Clause Sentences to Two-clause Sentences

Two clauses require two verbs; a sentence with two clauses has more actions.

Join two clauses with these connecting words: “if,” “unless,” “because,” “although,” “since,” “when,” “then,” “but,” “and” or “so.”

Which sentence has a single clause? Which has two clauses?

- Government intervention in fast-changing technologies has led to the distortion of market evolution and interference in new product development.

- When they intervene in fast-changing technologies, governments distort the market’s evolution and interfere with new product development.
Diagnose Your Wordy Sentences in Seven Steps

1. Look for your subjects. Are they abstractions? Are they too long?
2. What are your main characters? Can you make your characters subjects?
3. Now look for your verbs? Are they action words?
4. Are there actions hiding in zombie nouns? Can you change the nouns to verbs?
5. Are there too many words in between your subjects and verbs?
6. Can you reduce your words or simplify your writing in other ways?
7. If a long sentence has many phrases, can you convert the phrases to clauses?
Which sentence is written in plain language?

1. In spite of the fact that it has been suggested that the nitrification process is the dominant process in which nitrous oxide is largely produced, it still remains to be elucidated how large amounts of nitrous oxide are produced despite the existence of very low bioavailable nitrogen sources in the High Arctic Polar desert.  

2. Although researchers believe that nitrous oxide is mainly produced by nitrification, they do not know how large amounts of nitrous oxide are produced in the High Arctic Polar Desert, where bioavailable nitrogen sources are low.
Which sentence is written in plain language?

1. The utilization of picture books occurs in a variety of different ways within the classrooms and homes of today’s educational environment, involving a significant number of personal and social purposes, with the ultimate goal for parents and teachers of using these tools to make an important contribution to the language and social development of the children in their charge.¹⁶

2. Picture books are used by teachers and parents to develop children’s language and social skills.
Summary

- Plain language is clear and precise writing, which avoids jargon and zombie nouns.
- Zombie nouns (nominalizations) deaden your writing.
- Learn how to avoid zombie nouns by using strong characters and active verbs and by adopting other strategies such as replacing phrases with clauses.
- Keep your subjects short and avoid including too many words between subject and verb.
- Seek other ways to reduce words.
Endnotes


Endnotes


8, 9 Courtesy of former students


Endnotes


15, 16 Courtesy of former students