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Two Rules for Better Writing

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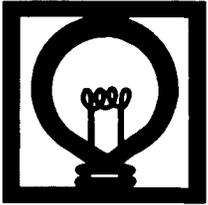
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P R A C T I C E T I P S

Two Rules for Better Writing

Writing about writing is a lot like writing about weight loss. With both subjects, the concepts are simple to explain; the hard part is putting those concepts into practice. If you want to slim down and firm up your physique, eat less and exercise more. Easier said than done, right? Similarly, if you want to slim down and firm up your writing, use fewer words and make your sentences more active. Although I don't have any quick answers for weight loss, I can offer two simple suggestions to help you achieve your writing goals: (1) get rid of "it" and (2) beware of a verb in noun's clothing.

Following these suggestions will improve your writing overnight. They will shorten your sentences by getting rid of unnecessary words. Shorter sentences are easier for readers to understand. Thus, getting rid of unnecessary words can make your writing clearer. They will also make your writing more active. Active writing engages readers in the text. If you follow these suggestions, you will use more active verbs – "doing" verbs as opposed to "being" verbs – in your writing. You will also make the actor the subject of the sentence, which will cause the action come alive for the reader.

Get Rid of "It"

"It" is a wonderful word. It's so versa-

tile. "It," of course, is a pronoun. A pronoun is a word that takes the place of another word, a noun called the antecedent. Without pronouns, our writing would be repetitive because we would have to repeat each noun each time we referred to it, and that would be cumbersome and awkward. When the antecedent for "it" is clear, "it" serves the purpose of acting as a shorthand reference to the antecedent very well. When the antecedent is unclear, however, "it" is not as effective. Two suspect uses of "it" with an unclear antecedent are in a "drum roll" (or "throat clearing") phrase and as a stand-in for the real actor.

Here is an example:

It was established that the landlord refused to rent to the plaintiffs.

This sentence is grammatically correct, but it is not as effective as it could be. What is "it" referring to? The antecedent is unclear. In fact, the "it-is" phrase at the beginning of the sentence (It was established that), which comprises a third of the sentence, is unnecessary. All it does is provide a drum roll leading up to the real content of the sentence: the landlord refused to rent to the plaintiffs. The phrase also takes attention from the true actor in the sentence, the landlord. The way the sentence is written, "it" is the subject, not "landlord." Further, the phrase uses "was," past tense of "to be," as the verb, instead of "refused," the word

that should convey the action. Getting rid of the "it-is" phrase creates a more effective sentence:

The landlord refused to rent to the plaintiffs.

This rewrite makes one assumption that may not be correct. It assumes that "established" served no purpose in the original sentence. If you wanted to emphasize the fact that the landlord's refusal to rent was established, the rewritten sentence above might not convey precisely the right meaning. In that case, the true action in the sentence is establishing, not refusing. The sentence can still be written more effectively, however, by asking who or what did the establishing. The sentence as originally written does not provide this information. "It" acts as a stand-in for the true actor. We could say that the plaintiffs established the important fact or that the evidence did. Either way, the sentence is more effective when the actor is the subject and the verb "establish" carries the action:

The plaintiffs established that the landlord refused to rent to them.

or

The evidence established that the landlord refused to rent to the plaintiffs.

We can look at another example to illustrate the problem and the solution:

There are four elements that must be established to obtain a prelimi-

nary injunction.

“There-are” is the plural form of “it-is,” and the analysis for revising the sentence is the same as that for an “it-is” sentence. Ask yourself whether the “there-are” phrase adds any meaning or is simply a drum roll leading up to the true content of the sentence. Ask also who the real actor in this sentence is. Who must do the establishing? The sentence as originally written doesn’t provide this information. We can make it more effective with the following revision:

The moving party must establish four elements to obtain a preliminary injunction.

To sum up: Get rid of the word “it” unless you’re using it to refer to a clear antecedent. This will eliminate unnecessary words (“it-is” drum roll phrases) from your writing. It will also make your writing more engaging because you will use more active verbs and make the actor the subject of the sentence. The easiest way to implement this suggestion is to use the “find” command in your word processor to search through a document for the words “it” and “there.” Each time you find one of these words, evaluate the way you’re using it and edit your writing accordingly.

Beware of a Verb in Noun’s Clothing

A second easy way to improve your writing is to avoid using so-called “derivative nouns” (also called “nom a noun that is derived from a verb, or in other words, a verb in noun’s clothing. For example, the noun “disclosure” comes from the verb “to disclose,” and the noun “requirement” comes from the verb “to require.” Derivative nouns are versatile and useful words. But when overused, they become sluggish, co-dependent words that make your writing lethargic.

Derivative nouns bog down your

writing in three ways. First, they require you to use more words. Derivative nouns are nouns, not verbs. They require you to add verbs to your sentences to convey the action the derivative nouns would convey if they were in their verb forms. They also often also require prepositional phrases and other linking words to make all the pieces of the sentence stick together properly. Second, the verbs that most often accompany derivative nouns are forms of “to be,” which are simply not as dynamic or engaging as active verbs. Third, if a derivative noun is the subject of the sentence, it keeps the true actor from being the subject. Any time you can return a derivative noun to its original verb form, therefore, your writing will become more active.

How do you know which nouns are derivative nouns? The easiest way to identify them is by their endings. Derivative nouns often have these endings:

- tion
- sion
- ance(ancy)
- ence(ency)
- ment
- al
- able
- ant
- ity

Here is an example of a sentence containing several derivative nouns:

A decision was made for the cancellation of the contract based on the suspicion that the contractor was in the process of asset liquidation.

In this sentence, we find four derivative nouns: decision (from decide), cancellation (from cancel), suspicion (from suspect), and liquidation (from liquidate). We had to use a weak verb (was made) and had to add words (for the, of the, based on the, in the process of) to join all of the derivative nouns together in a grammatically correct sentence. Further, we don’t

have any idea who the real actor is. “Decision” is the subject of the sentence, but who did the deciding? This is a flabby sentence, one we can firm up easily by changing the derivative nouns into verbs:

The homeowners decided to cancel the contract because they suspected that the contractor was liquidating its assets.

Returning the derivative nouns to their verb forms (decided, cancel, suspected, liquidating) allows these words to carry the action of the sentence and eliminates the weaker “to be” verb (was) from the sentence. It also allows us to eliminate the extra linking words that we needed to make the original sentence hang together; the total number of words fell from 24 to 17, a drop of almost 30%. Finally, using the verbs as verbs instead of nouns brings the actors into the picture – the homeowners, who weren’t even present in the first iteration of the sentence.

Eliminating derivative nouns is more challenging than getting rid of it because searching for telltale word endings is not as easy as executing a “find” command to locate “it” and “there.” It requires more careful proofreading. Still, the payoff is high enough to make finding and eliminating derivative nouns whenever possible worth the effort.

Conclusion

Getting rid of “it” and being wary of a verb in noun’s clothing are two simple, sentence-level editing techniques that are easy to put into practice. They may not get you in shape for bathing suit season, but they will put your writing in better shape anytime.

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