

## Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace: Lesson 7

### Delete Meaningless Words

Some modifiers add little or no meaning to the sentences we write:

kind of	really	basically	practically
actually	virtually	generally	certain
particular	individual	given	various

Productivity **actually** depends on **certain** factors that **basically** involve psychology more than any **particular** technology.

Delete the meaningless modifiers and we produce a more concise (and clearer) sentence.

Productivity depends on factors that involve psychology more than any technology.

### Delete Doubled Words

English has a long tradition of doubling words, a habit which formerly demonstrated the learning of the writer, but which now often produces meaningless redundancies. Here are some of the more common doubled words:

full and complete	true and accurate	hopes and desires
hope and trust	each and every	first and foremost
any and all	basic and fundamental	various and sundry

Whenever you double adjectives (or verbs), consider whether your readers need both.

### Delete What Readers Infer

This is the most common redundancy, because readers infer meaning in many ways. Here are a few:

### Redundant Modifiers

In some cases, the meaning of the main word implies the modifier. Here are some common examples, with the unnecessary modifier shown in bold type.

<b>completely</b> finish	<b>true</b> facts	<b>important</b> essentials
<b>future</b> plans	<b>sudden</b> crisis	<b>consensus of</b> opinion
<b>personal</b> beliefs	<b>terrible</b> tragedy	<b>end</b> result
<b>past</b> history	<b>each</b> individual	<b>various</b> differences
<b>final</b> outcome	<b>free</b> gift	<b>initial</b> preparation

In every case, delete the modifier. The example below shows some other redundant modifiers in bold type with the main word in italic type.

Do not try to *anticipate* **in advance** those events that will **completely** *revolutionize* our society because **past** *history* shows that it is the **eventual** *outcome* of seemingly minor events that has **unexpectedly** *surprised* us most.

Do not try to *anticipate* *revolutionary* events because *history* shows that the *outcome* of seemingly minor events *surprises* us most.

### Redundant Categories

Every word implies the name of its category, so if a word is attached to the word for its category, you can usually cut the category word. We know time is a period, a membrane is an area, pink is a color, shiny is an appearance, so we don't have to write,

During that **period** of *time*, the *membrane* **area** became *pink* in **color** and *shiny* in **appearance**.

We need only, "During that time, the membrane became pink and shiny."

In some cases, when we eliminate the category, we have to change an adjective into an adverb:

The holes must be aligned in an *accurate* **manner**.

The holes must be aligned *accurately*.

Sometimes, we can drop the name of the category, if we change an adjective modifying the category into a noun:

The *educational* **process** and *athletic* **activities** are the responsibility of the *county* **government**.

*The county* is responsible for *education* and *athletics*.

Here are some general nouns (in bold type) often used redundantly:

<i>large</i> in <b>size</b>	of a <i>bright</i> <b>color</b>
<i>round</i> in <b>shape</b>	at an <i>early</i> <b>time</b>
<i>honest</i> in <b>character</b>	in a <i>confused</i> <b>state</b>
<i>unusual</i> in <b>nature</b>	<i>extreme</i> in <b>degree</b>
of a <i>strange</i> <b>type</b>	<i>curative</i> <b>process</b>
<i>area</i> of <b>mathematics</b>	<i>field</i> of <b>economics</b>

### Replace a Phrase with a Word

This kind of redundancy is the most difficult to solve, because we need a large vocabulary and the intelligence to use it. For example,

As you carefully read what you have written to improve your wording and catch small errors of spelling, punctuation, and so on, the thing to do before anything else is to try to see where sequences of subjects and verbs could replace the same ideas expressed in nouns rather than verbs.

That is,

As you edit, first replace nominalizations with clauses.

This edit was achieved by compressing five phrases into five words:

carefully read what you have written	=> edit
the thing to do before anything else	=> first
try to see where	=> find
sequences of subjects and verbs	=> clauses
ideas expressed in nouns rather than verbs	=> nominalizations

There is no general principle that will help you recognize phrases that you can revise into a word. Nonetheless, you must try. Listed below, to get you started, are some common phrases you can watch for:

the reason for for the reason that due to the fact that owing to the fact that in light of the fact that considering the fact that on the grounds that	because since why
despite the fact that regardless of the fact that notwithstanding the fact that	although even though
in the event that if it should transpire/happen that under circumstances in which	if
on the occasion of in a situation in which under circumstances in which	when
as regards in reference to with regard to concerning the matter of where . . . is concerned	about
it is crucial that it is necessary that there is a need/necessity for it is important that it is incumbent upon cannot be avoided	must should
is able to is in a position to has the opportunity to has the capacity for has the ability to	can
it is possible that there is a chance that it could happen that the possibility exists for	may might can could
prior to in anticipation of subsequent to following on at the same time as simultaneously with	before when as after

increase in decrease in	more less/fewer better worse
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### **Change Negatives to Affirmatives**

These two sentences mean about the same thing:

Don't write in the negative. Write in the affirmative.

To be direct choose "Write in the affirmative." While sometimes you want to emphasize the negative, usually you can rewrite negatives, some almost formulaically:

not different	=> similar	not the same	=> different
not many	=> few	not often	=> rarely
not remember	=> forget	not old enough	=> too young
not have	=> lack	not allow	=> prevent
not include	=> omit	not admit	=> deny
not consider	=> ignore	not accept	=> reject

### **Delete Metadiscourse**

Metadiscourse is the language we use to refer to our own writing or to the act of reading that our writing occasions. In other words, metadiscourse refers

- to what we do as writers: *to sum up, candidly, I believe, therefore, however*
- to what we want our readers to do: *note that, consider now, as you see*
- to what we intend our text to do: *first, second, finally*

We need some metadiscourse in almost everything we write, but some writers use so much that it buries their ideas:

**The last point I would like to make is that in regard to** men-women relationships, **it is important to keep in mind that** the greatest changes have **probably** occurred in the way men and women are working next to one another.

Most of this sentence is metadiscourse. Eliminating the metadiscourse and rewriting the rest leaves us with the much clearer sentence:

Men and women have changed relationships most in the way they work together.

In cutting metadiscourse remember not to go too far. Some is necessary, but certain types can usually be safely eliminated. For example, metadiscourse that announces your topic, such as *this section introduces, the first thing to say, in this essay I will discuss*, or describes structure, such as *in conclusion, first, second, finally*, can be deleted without any loss of meaning.