

That passage now “hangs together” not for just one reason, but for three:

- Its topics consistently focus on physicians and diagnosis.
- Running through it are strings of words that focus on the themes of (1) tests, (2) mental conditions, and (3) a new problem.
- *And no less important, the opening sentence helps us notice those themes by emphasizing them at its end.*

This principle applies to sentences that introduce fairly long paragraphs (two or three-sentence introductory, transitional, and other kinds of paragraphs follow different patterns). It also applies to sentences that introduce passages of any length, even to a whole document.

Here's the point: We depend on concepts running through a passage to create a sense of its coherence. You help readers identify those concepts in two ways:

- Repeat some of them as topics of sentences, usually as subjects.
- Repeat others as themes elsewhere in a passage, in nouns, verbs, and adjectives.

Readers are more likely to notice those themes if you emphasize them at the end of the sentence that introduces that passage.

There is an old German proverb that captures this principle quite nicely:

Beginning and end shake hands with one another.

Lesson

7

Concision

To a Snail: If "compression is the first grace of style,"
you have it.

—MARIANNE MOORE

CLARITY, GRACE, AND CONCISION

You get close to clarity when you match your character and actions to your subjects and verbs, and closer yet when you get the right characters into topics and the right words under stress. But readers may still think your prose is a long way from graceful if it's anything like this:

In my personal opinion, it is necessary that we should not ignore the opportunity to think over each and every suggestion offered.

That writer matched characters with subjects, and actions with verbs, but in too many words: opinion is always personal, so we don't need *personal*, and since this statement is opinion, we don't need *in my opinion*. *Think over* and *not ignore* both mean *consider*. *Each and every* is redundant. A suggestion is by definition offered. In fewer words:

✓ We should consider each suggestion.

Though not elegant, that sentence at least has style's first grace—compression, or as we'll call it, *concision*. Concision, though, is only a start. You must still make your sentences shapely. In this lesson, I focus on concision; in the next, on shape.

DIAGNOSIS AND REVISION

Six Principles of Concision

When I edited that sentence about suggestions, I followed six principles:

1. Delete words that mean little or nothing.
2. Delete words that repeat the meaning of other words.
3. Delete words implied by other words.
4. Replace a phrase with a word.
5. Change negatives to affirmatives.
6. Delete useless adjectives and adverbs

Those principles are easy to state but hard to follow, because you have to inch your way through every sentence you write, cutting here, compressing there, and that's labor intensive. Those six principles, though, can guide you in that work.

1. Delete Meaningless Words Some words are verbal tics that we use as unconsciously as we clear our throats:

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

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

✓ Productivity depends on psychology more than on technology.

2. Delete Doubled Words Early in the history of English, writers got into the habit pairing a French or Latin word with a native English one, because foreign words sounded more learned. Most paired words today are just redundant. Among the common ones:

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

3. Delete What Readers Can Infer This redundancy is common but hard to identify, because it comes in so many forms.

Redundant Modifiers Often, the meaning of a word implies its modifier:

- Do not try to *predict* those **future** events that will **completely** *revolutionize* society, because **past** *history* shows that it is the **final** *outcome* of minor events that **unexpectedly** *surprises* us more.
- ✓ Do not try to predict revolutionary events, because history shows that the outcome of minor events surprises us more.

Some common redundancies:

terrible tragedy	various different	free gift
basic fundamentals	future plans	each individual
final outcome	true facts	consensus of opinion

Redundant Categories Every word implies its general category, so you can usually cut a word that names it. Compare (the category is boldfaced):

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

- ✓ During that *period*, the *membrane* became *pink* and *shiny*.

In doing that, you may have to change an adjective into an adverb:

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

- ✓ The holes must be aligned *accurately*.

Sometimes you change an adjective into a noun:

The county manages the *educational* **system** and *public recreational* **activities**.

- ✓ The county manages *education* and *public recreation*.

Here are some general nouns (boldfaced) often used redundantly:

large in size	round in shape	honest in character
unusual in nature	of a strange type	area of mathematics
of a bright color	at an early time	in a confused state

Do not translate a negative into an affirmative if you want to emphasize the negative. (Is that such a sentence? I could have written, *Keep a negative sentence when . . .*)

Some verbs, prepositions, and conjunctions are implicitly negative:

Verbs

preclude, prevent, lack, fail, doubt, reject, avoid, deny, refuse, exclude, contradict, prohibit, bar

Prepositions

without, against, lacking, but for, except

Conjunctions

unless, except when

You can baffle readers if you combine *not* with these negative words. Compare these:

Except when you have **failed** to submit applications **without** documentation, benefits will **not** be **denied**.

- ✓ You will receive benefits only if you submit your documents.
- ✓ To receive benefits, submit your documents.

And you baffle readers completely when you combine explicitly and implicitly negative words with passives and nominalizations:

There should be **no** submission of payments **without** notification of this office, **unless** the payment does **not** exceed \$100.

Do not **submit** payments if you have not **notified** this office, unless you are **paying** less than \$100.

Now revise the negatives into affirmatives:

- ✓ If you pay more than \$100, notify this office first.

6. Delete Adjectives and Adverbs Many writers can't resist adding useless adjectives and adverbs. Try deleting every adverb and every adjective before a noun, then restore *only* those that readers need to understand the passage. In this passage, which ones should be restored?

At the heart of the argument culture is our habit of seeing issues and ideas as ~~absolute and irreconcilable~~ principles ~~continually~~ at

war. To move beyond this ~~static and limiting~~ view, we can remember the Chinese approach to yin and yang. They are ~~two~~ principles, yes, but they are conceived not as ~~irreconcilable polar~~ opposites but as elements that coexist and should be brought into balance ~~as much as possible~~. As sociolinguist Suzanne Wong Scollon notes, "Yin is always present in and changing into yang and vice versa." How can we translate this ~~abstract~~ idea into ~~daily~~ practice?

—Deborah Tannen, *The Argument Culture*

Here's the point: Readers think you write concisely when you use only enough words to say what you mean.

1. Delete words that mean little or nothing.
2. Delete words that repeat the meaning of other words.
3. Delete words implied by other words.
4. Replace a phrase with a word.
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A PARTICULAR KIND OF REDUNDANCY: METADISOURSE

Lesson 4 described metadiscourse as language that refers to the following:

- the writer's intentions: *to sum up, candidly, I believe*
- directions to the reader: *note that, consider now, as you see*
- the structure of the text: *first, second, finally, therefore, however*

Everything you write needs metadiscourse, but too much buries your 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 occurred in how they work together.

Only nine of those thirty-four words address men-women relationships:

men-women relationships . . . greatest changes . . . how they work together.

The rest is metadiscourse:

The last point I would like to make is that in regard to . . . it is important to keep in mind that . . .

When we prune the metadiscourse, we tighten the sentence:

The greatest changes in men-women relationships have occurred in how they work together.

Now that we see what the sentence says, we can make it still more direct:

- ✓ Men and women have changed their relationships most in how they work together.

Some teachers and editors urge us to cut all metadiscourse, but everything we write needs some. You have to read with an eye to how good writers in your field use it, then do likewise.

There are, however, some types that you can usually cut.

Metadiscourse That Attributes Your Ideas to a Source

Don't announce that something has been *observed*, *noticed*, *noted*, and so on; just state the fact:

High divorce rates **have been observed** to occur in areas that **have been determined to have** low population density.

- ✓ High divorce rates occur in areas with low population density.

Metadiscourse That Announces Your Topic

The boldface phrases tell your reader what your sentence is "about":

This section introduces another problem, that of noise pollution. **The first thing to say about it is** that noise pollution exists not only . . .

Readers catch the topic more easily if you reduce the metadiscourse:

✓ **Another** problem is noise pollution. **First**, it exists not only . . .

Two other constructions call attention to a topic, usually one already mentioned in the text:

In regard to a vigorous style, the most important feature is a short, concrete subject followed by a forceful verb.

So far as China's industrial development **is concerned**, it will take only a few years to equal that of Japan.

But you can usually work those topics into a subject:

✓ **The most important feature of a vigorous style** is a short, concrete subject followed by a forceful verb.

✓ **China** will take only a few years to equal Japan's industrial development.

Look hard at a sentence opening with a metadiscourse subject and verb that merely announce a topic:

In this essay, **I will discuss** the role of metaphor in style.

I write that kind of sentence when I have no idea where I am going, saying in effect, *I have this topic and hope I eventually think of something to say about it*. On the other hand, that kind of sentence in a professional journal promises to develop what it names.

Metadiscourse That Hedges and Intensifies Another kind of metadiscourse reflects the writer's certainty about what she is claiming. This kind of metadiscourse comes in two flavors, *hedges* and *intensifiers*. Hedges qualify your certainty; intensifiers increase it. Both can not only be redundant, but influence how readers judge your character, because they signal how well you balance caution and confidence.

Hedges These are common hedges:

Adverbs *usually, often, sometimes, almost, virtually, possibly, allegedly, arguably, perhaps, apparently, in some ways, to a certain extent, somewhat, in some/certain respects*

Adjectives	<i>most, many, some, a certain number of</i>
Verbs	<i>may, might, can, could, seem, tend, appear, suggest, indicate</i>

Some readers think all hedging is not just redundant, but mealy-mouthed:

There **seems to be some** evidence to **suggest** that **certain** differences between Japanese and Western rhetoric **could** derive from historical influences **possibly** traceable to Japan's cultural isolation and Europe's history of cross-cultural contacts.

On the other hand, only a fool or someone with vast historical evidence would make a claim as confident as this:

This evidence **proves** that Japanese and Western rhetorics differ because of Japan's cultural isolation and Europe's history of cross-cultural contacts.

In most academic writing, we more often state claims closer to this (and look at that for my own hedging; compare the more assertive, *In academic writing, we state claims like this*):

- ✓ This evidence **suggests** that **aspects** of Japanese and Western rhetoric differ because of Japan's cultural isolation and Europe's history of cross-cultural contacts.

The verbs *suggest* and *indicate* let you state a claim about which you are less than 100 percent certain, but confident enough to propose:

- ✓ The evidence **indicates** that some of these questions remain unresolved.
- ✓ These data **suggest** that further studies are necessary.

Even confident scientists hedge. This next paragraph introduced the most significant breakthrough in the history of genetics, the discovery of the double helix of DNA. If anyone was entitled to be assertive, it was Crick and Watson. But they chose to be diffident (note, too, the first-person *we*; hedges are boldfaced):

We **wish to suggest a** [not *the*] structure for the salt of deoxyribose nucleic acid (D.N.A.) . . . A structure for nucleic acid has already been proposed by Pauling and Corey . . . **In our opinion**, this structure is unsatisfactory for two reasons: (1) **We believe** that the material which gives the X-ray diagrams is the salt, not the free acid . . . (2) **Some** of the van der Waals distances **appear** to be too small.

—J. D. Watson and F. H. C. Crick.
"Molecular Structure of Nucleic Acids"

Without the hedges, their claim would be more concise but more aggressive. Compare this (I boldface my stronger words, but most of the more aggressive tone comes from the absence of hedges):

We ~~wish to suggest~~ **state here a** the structure for the salt of deoxyribose nucleic acid (D.N.A.) . . . A structure for nucleic acid has already been proposed by Pauling and Corey . . . **In our opinion**, [T]his structure is unsatisfactory for two reasons: (1) **We believe** ~~that~~ [T]he material which gives the X-ray diagrams is the salt, not the free acid . . . (2) **Some of** [T]he van der Waals distances **appear to be** are too small.

Intensifiers These are common intensifiers:

Adverbs	<i>very, pretty, quite, rather, clearly, obviously, undoubtedly, certainly, of course, indeed, inevitably, invariably, always</i>
Adjectives	<i>key, central, crucial, basic, fundamental, major, principal, essential</i>
Verbs	<i>show, prove, establish, as you/we/everyone knows/can see, it is clear/obvious that</i>

The most common intensifier is the absence of a hedge. In this case, less is more. The first sentence below has no intensifiers at the blanks, but neither does it have any hedges, and so it seems like a strong claim:

_____ Americans believe that the federal government is _____ intrusive and _____ authoritarian.

- ✓ **Many** Americans believe that the federal government is **often** intrusive and **increasingly** authoritarian.

Confident writers use intensifiers less often than they use hedges because they want to avoid sounding as assertive as this:

For a century now, **all** liberals have argued against **any** censorship of art, and **every** court has found their arguments so **completely** persuasive that **not a person any** longer remembers how they were countered. As a result, today, censorship is **totally** a thing of the past.

Some writers think that kind of aggressive style is persuasive. Quite the opposite: if you state a claim moderately, readers are more likely to consider it thoughtfully:

For **about** a century now, **many** liberals have argued against censorship of art, and **most** courts have found their arguments persuasive **enough** that **few** people **may** remember **exactly** how they were countered. As a result, today, censorship is **virtually** a thing of the past.

Some claim that a passage hedged that much is wordy and weak. Perhaps. But it does not come on like a bulldozer. It leaves room for a reasoned and equally moderate response.

Here's the point: You need some metadiscourse in everything you write, especially metadiscourse that guides readers through your text, words such as *first*, *second*, *therefore*, *on the other hand*, and so on. You also need some metadiscourse that hedges your certainty, words such as *perhaps*, *seems*, *could*, and so on. The risk is in using too many.

For the best writers, a concern with style always begins by thinking about readers. That's what motivated the founder of the Methodist church, John Wesley:

I write for those who judge of books, not by the quantity, but by the quality of them: who ask not how long, but how good they are? I spare both my reader's time and my own, by couching my sense in as few words as I can.

Shape

Sentences in their variety run from simplicity to complexity, a progression not necessarily reflected in length: a long sentence may be extremely simple in construction—indeed must be simple if it is to convey its sense easily.

—SIR HERBERT READ

UNDERSTANDING THE SHAPE OF SENTENCES

If you can write clear and concise sentences, you have achieved a good deal, and more if you can assemble them into coherent passages. But if you couldn't write a clear sentence longer than twenty words or so, you'd be like a composer who could write only jingles. Some advise against long sentences, but you cannot communicate every complex idea in a short one: you have to know how to write a sentence that is both long and clear.

Consider, for example, this sentence:

In addition to differences in religion that have for centuries plagued Sunnis and Shiites, explanations of the causes of their distrust must include all of the other social, economic, and cultural conflicts that have plagued them that are rooted in a troubled history that extends 1,300 years into the past.

Even if that idea needed all those words (it doesn't), they could be arranged into a more shapely sentence.