

Yuba College Writing & Language Development Center

Simple Language

A speech writer for President Franklin Roosevelt wrote the sentence below:

We are endeavoring to construct a more inclusive society.

Nothing wrong with that, right? Then why did Roosevelt himself revise it?

We're going to make a country in which no one is left out.

Roosevelt's sentence is better. Surprised? Bigger words are not necessarily clearer or more convincing. Sometimes simpler words are stronger.

The thesaurus

Some student writers like to use a thesaurus to revise their writing, choosing from lists of similar, but unfamiliar, words. *Endeavor* might replace *try*, *lamentation* replaces *regret*, *relates* replaces *says*, and *at the present time* replaces *now*. But four words are not necessarily better than one word, and a four-syllable word is not necessarily better than a two-syllable word. Worse, thesaurus words may be similar or related, but not identical to the words they replace. The unfamiliar word may carry the wrong connotation or be unsuitable for the intended audience.

Don't choose a word out of a thesaurus for novelty's sake. And don't choose a fancy word to cover up the fact that you don't really have much to say—no word will stretch that far! Choose a word because it seems suitable for your message, audience, and purpose.

Jargon

Jargon is specialized language known only to people in a certain interest group. Jargon can interfere with clarity. If you can't avoid technical or specialized expressions—and you sometimes can't—you should define them the first time you use them and try sometimes to substitute a plainer word. The trick is to cut the unnecessary or unclear words without sacrificing meaning, because even when jargon *is* understandable, it is still more difficult to read than plain English. It slows down comprehension:

The biota exhibited a one hundred percent mortality response.

If all you mean to say is *All the animals died*, just say that.

Nouns vs. adjectives

Choosing a precise noun is usually better than layering on adjectives, adverbs, and clauses that lengthen reading and comprehension time. Writing that is concise packs maximum meaning into the fewest possible words—think of how you would pack a suitcase for an extended tour of Europe.

One good noun can do the work of two or three adjectives. Snow White lives in a *cottage* in the woods. A cottage is small, cozy, and charming—and you don't have to explain that. Shrek, on the other hand, lives in a *shack* in a swamp. A shack is small, rustic, shoddy, and untidy—and you don't have to explain that, either. It's a *mob* that comes to Frankenstein's castle, not a *committee*. Mobs are noisy, unruly, and possibly angry or violent; committees are orderly, well groomed, and computer-literate.

Prepositional phrases

There is nothing wrong with stacking up a few prepositional phrases, but if we stack too many, we risk slowing down reading comprehension. If we eliminate even one, the sentence may improve:

He lived for a year in a shack in the mountains of Idaho [four prepositional phrases, thirteen words].

Revised: *He lived for a year in an alpine shack in Idaho* [three prepositional phrases, eleven words].

Alpine replaces *in the mountains* in sentence two, above, saving a prepositional phrase and a couple of words in the process. A couple of words doesn't sound like much, but the impact of concise expression over an entire paper is noticeable.

Sometimes the prepositional phrases don't add much meaning, so stay alert and eliminate any that don't:

It is a matter of greatest importance to the health of anyone with a medical history of diseases of the heart that he or she avoids the kinds of foods with a high percentage of calories from saturated fats [ten prepositional phrases, thirty-nine words].

Revised: *Anyone with a history of heart disease should avoid saturated fats* [two prepositional phrases, eleven words].

English language learners often use a phrase like *of the owner* instead of the shorter possessive form. Revise, using a possessive:

The opinion of the owner differed from the opinion of the employees.

The owner's opinion differed from the employees' opinion.

While wordy language is not necessarily wrong, simpler language is usually better.

Contributed by Rosemary McKeever



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