

“Improving Academic Writing”

by Jonathan Bennett and Samuel Gorovitz¹

Writing well matters—morally, prudentially, and philosophically. It matters morally because in writing well one is being kind to one’s readers. It matters prudentially because in writing well one increases the chance of having readers—and career success and personal gratification may depend on that. And it matters philosophically. Often when wrestling with a stylistic problem—how to avoid a bothersome repetition, clarify a change in terminology, or simplify a long and boring paragraph, for example—one finds that the source of trouble was some specific failure in philosophical thinking. This seems just magical, but it is real.

Many small improvements in a text are possible with relatively little effort, well worth investing for the sake of more polished prose. Even serious writing problems are not just important and difficult; they are largely soluble with careful work. Jonathan Bennett observes:

“My first drafts tend to be dreadful, but my published work is much better. In between, I do surgery on my prose. I am increasingly impressed by how much improvement I can make just by applying straightforward rules or procedures that can be stated, taught and learned. Years of practice help one make better use of the rules, but their core—and much of the good they can do—is immediately accessible.”

Revisions that improve writing typically also shorten it. Although clarity is our principal concern here, we also discuss the virtues of brevity below. In most of our illustrations, the suggested revisions both clarify and shorten; word lengths are indicated in brackets in some of the examples to make the effect explicit. The ‘Bennett Rules’ are these:

1. Verbs are better than nouns.

Compare:

There is a difference between x and y.
x differs from y.

2. Adverbs are better than adjectives.

Compare:

He is a clear writer.
He writes clearly.

¹ Excerpt with minor alterations, from <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/fb/bengor.pdf>

In both examples the structurally necessary but overused verb 'to be' drops out; it often does when prose is improved. Minimizing its use has the additional advantage of eliminating passive constructions, each instance of which should be challenged, and which are almost always lamentable because of their imprecision.

Compare:

The patient was observed to be agitated.

Dr. Notewell observed that the patient was agitated.

Verbs can also eliminate the kind of nominalization that bloats writing. Compare:

We are in agreement that. . .

We agree that. . .

And:

He adduced an argument for the proposition that . . .

He argued that. . .

3. Favor the Anglo-Saxon.

English has Teutonic as well as Latin roots; for reasons having to do with the social structures in England after the Norman conquest, the Latin-French side of the language is prominent in learned and abstract discourse, while the simpler Anglo-Saxon side has survived for more down to earth matters. It is a great merit in English prose to have a good mix of the two, but philosophers have to work for this because they are subject to a magnetic pull from the Latin-French side. Some potent examples:

(a) 'possible', 'impossible', 'necessary', etc. can often give place to 'can', 'cannot', 'must', etc.

Compare:

Is it possible for him to...?

Can he . . .?

(b) replace 'at a subsequent time' by 'later', 'at every time' by 'always', and so on.

Compare:

She wrote it a century prior to the present time.

She wrote it a century ago.

(c) 'condition' especially when combined with 'necessary' or 'sufficient', does work that can be nicely done with 'if', 'only if', 'unless', 'not unless', and so on.

(d) Compare:

He has an obligation to pay the bill.

He ought to pay the bill.

4. Banish 'very' and its ilk.

Find each occurrence of 'very', 'extremely', 'really', 'quite' and so on; remove almost all of them. This greatly strengthens the work.

Guide to Good Writing

In this part of the Writer's Handbook, we're going to give you some excellent advice, as well as some opportunities to practice what we're preaching. If you pay attention to these lessons, you will have a better idea of what constitutes good writing—writing that is smooth, clear, concise, powerful, and precise.

Writing Smoothly 1 – Awkward Sentences

Students have found so many ways to compose awkward sentences that it would be foolish to try to anticipate all of them. However, if you want to make your reader cringe with horror, one highly effective method is to interrupt the natural flow of a sentence by sticking a phrase or clause between the subject and the verb. The sentences below all illustrate this terrible practice; they simply need to be rearranged to sound smooth and lovely:

1. Macbeth while on his rampage of killing does not get close to many people.
2. Peter along with his friend had left to catch the bus downtown.
3. Edward, trying to be a person of high status, hurts his wife tremendously.
4. No other piece out of all my portfolio writings throughout the year made me feel as confident about my writing as this one.
5. Frank, although dreaming of the job, did not have the required degree in engineering.
6. Clarissa, after running away from unsure love, finds wealth and family.
7. Jane Eyre in her youth is abused by her guardian family, the Reeds.
8. The man even with his girlfriend there feels he can gaze at other girls without fear of retaliation.
9. In Act 1 Macbeth, although he is a warrior, acts like a wimp.
10. Macbeth, after killing Duncan, is on a killing spree.
11. Clemens, when asked what he would most remember about Friday, paused for a moment and mentioned the crowd.
12. Clemens, after each inning, went into the clubhouse and put on a new jersey.
13. Jim in the beginning of the novel is a slave.

Writing Concisely 2

Be especially alert for forms of the verb *to be*, such as *is*, *are*, *was*, and *were*. Not only is it the most boring verb in English, because it is so common and because it conveys no action, but it also frequently indicates that you have a flabby sentence. Certainly a sentence that uses a form of *to be* more than once needs to be scrutinized very closely.

Please make these sentences shorter, eliminating and rearranging words as necessary.

1. It was at that moment that I realized that I would probably never want to ski again.
2. My thesis was unfocused because I had mixed two topics, which were her commercialism and my opinion of her music.
3. The way I resolved my problem was the best way I knew how.
4. Feeling lonely and nervous about fitting in is what drives most people to become so superficial.
5. Understanding one's self-worth is what builds a person inside.
6. All my friends who were in other grades were busy at their orientation.
7. Writing is something that is always being emphasized in English class because it helps in college and in one's future career.
8. It was for these purposes that I set out to write what I consider my greatest poem.
9. The realization that Paul comes to is one that makes him question his past and future.
10. Discussions with slight acquaintances about deep inner pain are what define an "emo" kid.
11. Macbeth is a character who lets his ambition overtake his loyalty.

Writing Smoothly 3 – Variety

Another way to make your writing sound terrible is to overuse certain words or endings. For instance, *of* is a fairly innocuous word, but if it shows up two or three times in one sentence, it can make your writing seem clumsy. Similarly, if you include several words that end with *-ing* or *-ly*, your sentences will turn into tongue-twisters.

1. Throughout the year my writing has progressed considerably grammatically and organizationally.
2. My writing is a reflection of my feelings about something happening to me at a specific time.
3. My friends, wanting to help me out and finding it amusing to see me singing, shouted encouragement.
4. A few vulgar words can simply be a temporary moment of being of a disrespectful nature.
5. Teens are living in a period of wanting to break away and trying not to upset their parents at the same time.
6. Holden certainly feels extremely strongly about intently protecting the innocence of people younger than he.
7. I also try to be as descriptive as possible in writing the feelings brewing within the characters during the story.
8. A girl under eighteen needs a parent to go with her, making getting an abortion a daunting task.
9. Respect and courtesy should be the basis of human interaction, but right now we are suffering from a lack of use of them.
10. Most of the dreams of success of the various characters do not come true.
11. Holden does several foolish things, including punching Stradlater in their dorm room.
12. My mother spoke to me concerning choosing boxing as a career.