

## **“ASK THE PROFESSOR” about ... SHAPING UP YOUR SENTENCES**

**Pātai:** (Question)

*How do I write strong, engaging sentences rather than weak, flabby ones?*

**Dr Helen Sword replies:**

Imagine yourself recruiting a long-distance runner to deliver an important message. What kind of person will you choose: a lean, strong athlete with well-toned muscles and powerful lungs, or a podgy, unfit couch potato who will wheeze and pant up the first few hills before collapsing in exhaustion? The answer is obvious. Yet far too many academic writers send their best ideas out into the world on brittle-boned sentences weighted down with rhetorical flab.

To energise your writing, boost your verbal fitness levels and strip unnecessary padding from your prose, try following these five simple rules:

### **1. Use active verbs as much as possible.**

- Favour strong, specific, robust action verbs (*scrutinise, dissect, recount, capture*) over weak, vague, lazy ones (*have, do, show*).
- Limit forms of *be*.

Verbs power our sentences as surely as muscles propel our bodies. In fact, a sentence is not technically a sentence unless it contains a verb. Not all verbs pack the same punch, however. **Active verbs** such as *grow, fling* and *exhale* infuse your writing with vigour and metaphorical zing; they put legs on your prose. By contrast, **forms of *be*** such as *is, was* or *might have been* do their duty, but they carry you nowhere new. Think of them as the gluteus maximus of your grammatical anatomy.

It is much easier to write a sentence that is dominated by forms of *be* and passive verb constructions – such as the one you are reading right now – than to summon the energy to construct active, lively prose. After all, why waste time ferreting through your brain in search of varied, vivid verbs if that good old standby *is* will serve your sentences just as well? Active verbs merit effort and attention for at least three reasons. First, they supply a sense of agency and urgency to your writing by telling you who did what to whom. Second, active verbs demand economy and precision, whereas forms of *be* tend to generate wasted words (e.g., ‘What **is** interesting about viruses **is** that their genetic stock **is** very meagre’). Third, active verbs add force and complexity to otherwise static sentences.

Accomplished authors do not avoid forms of *be* altogether. Instead, they employ them strategically and in careful moderation.

## 2. Favour concrete nouns over abstract nouns.

- Anchor abstract ideas in concrete language and imagery.
- Limit your use of abstract nouns, especially nouns formed from verbs or adjectives.
- Illustrate abstract concepts using real-life examples. ('Show, don't just tell'.)

If verbs function as the muscles of language, nouns form our writing's bones. Sentences with 'strong bones' convey meaning through **concrete nouns**: they speak directly to the human senses. Those with 'weak bones' rely mostly on **abstract nouns**, which carry only limited physical and emotional weight.

To build up the bone density of your body, doctors advise that you engage in regular weight-bearing exercise and consume plenty of calcium. Likewise, to build up the noun density of your prose, you need to construct sentences rich in concrete language. Concrete nouns represent any object or substance that you can see, hear, touch, taste or smell, such as *water*, *hands* or *moon*. Abstract nouns, by contrast, invoke intangible objects or ideas, such as *independence*, *toughness* or *security*. Writing steeped in abstractions remains remote from our physical sensibilities and thus from our emotions. Concrete nouns carry your ideas to solid ground.

## 3. Avoid long strings of prepositional phrases.

- Avoid using more than three prepositional phrases in a row (e.g. '*in* a letter *to* the author *of* a book *about* birds') unless you do so to achieve a specific effect.
- Vary your prepositions.
- As a general rule, do not allow a noun and its accompanying verb to become separated by more than about twelve words.

Nouns and verbs form the building blocks of our sentences; but where would we be without **prepositions**? If we had none of those little linking words like *in* or *on* to help us position ourselves in the world, we would lose our sense of place. Try writing a preposition-free sentence, like this one, and you will feel handcuffed, shackled, frustrated. Why? Because prepositions expand the horizons of our sentences; they lasso new nouns and fuel our verbs with directional thrust.

Too many prepositions, however, can weigh a sentence down. Dr. Barry Sears, author of *The Zone Diet*, notes that 'you fatten cattle [for market] by feeding them lots and lots of low-fat grain. How do you fatten humans? Same way'. Like pasta and rice in your diet, prepositions supply your writing with necessary fuel and flavour. But when overused, they can bulk up your prose and jam your sentences full of extraneous verbal fodder.

## 4. Employ adjectives and adverbs only when they contribute something new to the meaning of a sentence.

- Let concrete nouns and active verbs do most of your descriptive work.
- Avoid clichés (the *sly* fox, the *rustic* cottage).

Primary school teachers often encourage their pupils to jazz up their writing with 'sizzle words': that is, with lots of **adjectives** and **adverbs**. Thus a cat inevitably becomes 'a *creeping* cat' or 'a *mysterious* cat' or 'a *fluffy* cat'. No one would deny the impact of a well-placed adjective.

However, a sentence crammed with too many artificial additives can function in your prose like a creamy sauce or a sugary cake in your diet: despite its seductive taste, it supplies no real nutrition.

If nouns and verbs form the bricks and mortar of language, adjectives and adverbs provide its decorative flourishes: curtains in the windows, flowers on the windowsill. *Ad*-words cannot stand on their own; an adjective always modifies a noun or a pronoun (a *beautiful* day; I was *happy*), while an adverb modifies either a verb (to play *gently*), an adjective (*painfully* shy) or another adverb (*blissfully* slowly). *Ad*-words lend colour and flavour to our writing; they help us express emotions, describe appearances and define character. Just make sure you're not using them to jack up weak sentences that lack active verbs and concrete nouns.

#### 5. Reduce your dependence on four pernicious 'waste words': *it*, *this*, *that*, and *there*.

- Use *it* and *this* only when you can state exactly what noun each word refers to. For example, avoid phrases such as 'This proves that...' unless you have clearly defined *this* in the previous sentence.
- As a general rule, avoid using *that* more than once in a single sentence or three times in a paragraph, except for stylistic emphasis.
- Beware of sweeping generalisations that begin with '*There*' (e.g., 'There are many reasons why....')

Certain words function in our language like 'bad fat' in our diet. Not only do they supply little verbal nutrition of their own, but their mere presence in a sentence often signals the proximity of weak verbs, abstract nouns and strings of prepositions. The four 'waste words' identified here – *it*, *this*, *that* and *there* – may appear innocuous enough individually; but any one of them can transform smoothly flowing prose into slow-moving sludge.

### Measuring your Wasteline

To find out whether your own writing is 'fit' or 'flabby', visit the Writer's Diet website (<http://www.writersdiet.ac.nz>) and follow links to the Wasteline Test, a diagnostic instrument designed to help you identify potential weaknesses in your sentences. The Wasteline Test offers the verbal equivalent of an appointment with a nutritionist or personal trainer. Some writers use the test to pinpoint problems in a specific piece of writing; others use it to identify overall patterns and make adjustments accordingly.

To find out your verbal fitness rating, simply paste a sample of your own prose into the blank text box and click the 'Run the test' button. For each of the test's five sections – verbs, nouns, prepositions, *ad*-words and 'waste words' – your writing will be rated according to the following Verbal Fitness scale:

Lean	Fat-free
Fit and trim	In excellent condition
Needs toning	Would benefit from a light workout
Flabby	Judicious editing required
Heart attack territory	May call for editorial liposuction!

Keep in mind that the Wasteline Test offers a diagnosis, not a prescription; a heuristic, not a rigid set of rules. Sentences, like people, come in all shapes and sizes, and the world would become a very boring place indeed if we all wrote – or looked – exactly the same way.

For best results, use the online Wasteline Test in conjunction with *The Writer's Diet*, a pocket-sized book (available via the Writer's Diet website) that offers detailed advice on interpreting and improving your results.

Good luck shaping up your sentences!

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