

Avoiding Pointless Repetition of Meaning

Pointless repetition of meaning is a special kind of deadwood. Aside from adding useless words, such repetition reflects writers' lack of confidence in themselves—their fear that their point will not be clear unless they make it twice. Unfortunately, this overemphasis usually suggests sloppy thinking to the reader rather than a desire for accuracy.

POINTLESS REPETITION

Our streams are filthy and dirty.
This approach could end in a catastrophic conclusion.
The author gives examples of different and varied criticisms of the novel.
Some early critics of Jonathan Swift called him an insane madman suffering from the symptoms of mental disease.
There is no question about the worth and value of an education.
He has no emotional feelings.
Each and every person ought to read a newspaper.

IMPROVED

Our streams are filthy.
This approach could end catastrophically.
The author gives examples of different criticisms of the novel.
Some early critics of Jonathan Swift called him insane.
There is no question about the value of an education.
He has no feelings.
Everyone ought to read a newspaper.

EXERCISE

Point out any instances of deadwood and pointless repetition in the following sentences.

1. At this point in time, we have no travel plans.
2. In my opinion, I think depression is a terrible kind of illness.
3. We have ignored and neglected the basic fundamental essentials for too long a period of time.
4. Men and women of both sexes must join the combat to fight for a better world.
5. Sleepy and tired, he looked drained and exhausted.

Cutting Wordy Clauses

One of the most effective ways of reducing wordiness is to cut a cumbersome clause into a shorter phrase or, if possible, a single word. This **clause cutting** can result in a tighter, more economical structure, with the phrase or word more firmly incorporated into the sentence than the original clause ever was.

WORDY CLAUSE

Some of the students who were more enthusiastic wrote an extra paper.

The story was very exciting. It was all about ghosts.

Alexander the Great was a man who tried to conquer the world.

The applause, which sounded like a thunderclap, shook the auditorium.

IMPROVED

Some of the more enthusiastic students wrote an extra paper.

The ghost story was very exciting.

Alexander the Great tried to conquer the world.

The applause shook the auditorium like a thunderclap.

Avoiding Delay of Subject

The phrases *there is*, *there has*, *it is*, and *it has*—in all tenses—are frequent causes of wordiness. Nothing is wrong with these phrases in themselves; they are necessary parts of the language, and some thoughts might be inexpressible without them. Too often, however, they are used carelessly and delay a sentence or clause from getting down to business. In the following examples, the original sentences begin with words that have no more purpose than the throat-clearing noises made by a speaker before a talk. The revised sentences begin with important words, words that communicate the central concern of each sentence.

WORDY DELAY

There are too many people who care only for themselves.

It has often been commented on by great philosophers that philosophy solves nothing.

There have been a number of conflicting studies made of urban problems.

It was on December 7, 1941, that the Japanese attacked the U.S. fleet at Pearl Harbor.

IMPROVED

Too many people care only for themselves.

Great philosophers have often commented that philosophy solves nothing.

A number of conflicting studies have been made of urban problems.

On December 7, 1941, the Japanese attacked the U.S. fleet at Pearl Harbor.

EXERCISE

Rewrite these sentences to make them more economical, cutting clauses and eliminating wordy delay of subject wherever possible.

1. There have been many complicated plans that have been proposed to reduce the number of nuclear weapons that are stationed in Europe.

2. Many people who frequently travel by plane may experience some delays, which are caused by new airport security measures recently put in place.
3. The idea of a guaranteed annual wage is a notion that conflicts with many traditional middle-class values.
4. Another time, when he was shown the list of the names of the officers who had been appointed to serve under him at the Battle of Waterloo, the Duke commented, "I don't know if they will frighten the French, but, by Gad, they terrify me!"
5. It was an agonizingly difficult decision to make.

Recognizing Passive and Active Verbs

In most English sentences, the subject performs an action.

John likes this poem.

The critic saw the movie.

The senator is going to vote for the bill.

The verb in such sentences is said to be in the **active voice**. The active voice is direct, clear, and concise; in most sentences, it is what we expect.

Too often, however, instead of using the active voice, writers substitute the more stilted **passive voice**. A verb in the passive voice combines a form of *to be* with the past participle of the verb: *is given*, *has been delivered*, *was mailed*, and so on. Thus, instead of *acting*, the subject of the sentence is *acted upon*.

This poem is liked by John.

The movie was seen by the critic.

The bill is going to be voted for by the senator.

Compared to the active voice, the passive is generally awkward, exceedingly formal, and wordy. It is better to write "This paper will analyze the story" than "The story will be analyzed in this paper." It is better to write "My sociology teacher offered some challenging insights into contemporary problems" than "Some challenging insights into contemporary problems were offered by my sociology teacher."

On occasion, the passive voice doesn't sound bad, of course. Such occasions may arise when the actor is unknown, insignificant, or nonexistent, or when a deliberately impersonal tone is required. Don't be afraid of the passive when it seems normal and unforced—as in the last part of the preceding sentence—but always be alert to its dangers. When you use the passive voice, you should always have a reason for choosing it over the active voice.

Here are a few examples of perfectly acceptable passives:

The game was delayed because of rain.

The eighteenth century has been called the Age of Enlightenment.

Your prompt attention to this request for payment will be appreciated.

EXERCISE

Change the passive voice to the active voice wherever appropriate in the following sentences.

1. Fewer novels are being read by teenagers these days.
2. At the corner restaurant, all of the tacos are freshly made each day.
3. The director was convicted of embezzling funds and using the money for herself.
4. The doctor was advised to get malpractice insurance by his lawyer.
5. The victim was pronounced dead on arrival by the coroner.

Correcting Faulty Parallelism

What Is Parallelism?

Essentially, **parallelism** means expressing ideas and facts of equal (or coordinate or "parallel") importance in the same grammatical form. We do it all the time, almost unconsciously.

The store was filled with *chairs, tables, sofas,* (a group of four nouns)
and *lamps*.

He *came home, ate dinner, and went to bed.* (three verb phrases)

You can get there by *car, bus, or plane.* (three nouns)

I thought the climactic episode in the story (three adjectives)
was *shocking, offbeat, and amusing.*

Parallel grammatical structure reinforces a writer's thoughts by stressing the parallel importance of the various sentence elements, and so makes life easier for the reader. Many of the most famous phrases in our language draw strength in part from effective use of parallelism:

... *life, liberty, and the pursuit* of happiness. (group of three nouns)

... *of the people, by the people, and for the* people. (three prepositional phrases)

Love me or leave me. (two imperatives)

Early *to bed* and early *to rise*/Makes a man (two infinitives/three
healthy, and wealthy, and wise. adjectives)

I come *to bury Caesar, not to praise him.* (two infinitives with objects)

I came, I saw, I conquered. (three independent clauses)

Better be *safe* than *sorry.* (two adjectives)

Avoiding Faulty Parallelism

Now notice how faulty parallelism or lack of parallelism can sabotage a sentence.

INCORRECT



CORRECT

You can get there by *car, bus, or fly*. (noun, noun, verb)

You can get there by *car, bus, or plane*. (noun, noun, noun)

I thought the climactic episode in the story was *shocking, offbeat, and I found it very amusing*. (adjective, adjective, independent clause)

I thought the climactic episode in the story was *shocking, offbeat, and very amusing*. (adjective, adjective, adjective)

She *liked* people and *was liked* by people. (active voice, passive voice)

She *liked* people and people *liked* her. (active voice, active voice)

The teacher told us *to work* fast and *that we should write on only one side of the paper*. (infinitive, clause)

The teacher told us *to work* fast and *to write* on only one side of the paper. (infinitive, infinitive)

Descriptive words added to some of the parallel elements do not break the basic parallelism and can be valuable in avoiding monotony.

Judith had *brains, talent, and an extremely charming personality*.

(still parallel: a group of three nouns, even though one is modified by an adjective, and the adjective is modified by an adverb)

The man owned a *mansion* and a fine *collection* of modern etchings.

(still parallel: two nouns, even though one of them is modified by an adjective and followed by a prepositional phrase)

The baby has now learned how to *whimper, shriek, yell* loudly, and *cry* its head off.

(still parallel: four infinitives, even though one is modified by an adverb and one is followed by an object)

Parallelism, then, is an indispensable aid to style and meaning, but keep in mind that its value is limited to cases in which the various elements are of equal