

Avoiding Fancy Words

Or

How Not To Succumb to Acute Prolivity

Almost every writing handbook on the market urges you to write in simple, natural language. In *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, Joseph M. Williams identifies five simple sources of wordiness: redundant pairs, redundant modifiers, redundant categories, meaningless modifiers, and pompous diction. Here, from Williams and other sources, are examples in each category.

Redundant Pairs

As Williams explains:

English has a long tradition of doubling words, a habit that we acquired shortly after we began to borrow from Latin and French the thousands of words that we have since incorporated into English. Because the borrowed word usually sounded a bit more learned than the familiar native one, early writers would use both.

Examples of commonly used redundant pairs are:

at or about
one and only
first and foremost
full and complete
true and accurate
hopes and desires
hope and trust
each and every

any and all
various and sundry
basic and fundamental
questions and problems
precious and few
few and far between
and so on and so forth

Redundant Modifiers

In the following examples (except for “consensus of opinion”), the first word not only modifies but implies the meaning of the second. Only the second word is necessary to convey the meaning. Try deleting the first word in each pair.

completely finish
past memories
various different
each individual

personal beliefs
consensus of opinion
sudden crisis
terrible tragedy

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basic fundamentals
true facts
important essentials
future plans

end result
final outcome
initial preparation
free gift

Redundant Categories

Because certain words imply categories, it isn't necessary to state both the specific word and its general category.

period of time
period in time
shiny in appearance
accurate manner
government systems
large in size
pink in color
of a bright color
heavy in weight
round in shape
at an early time

odd in appearance
of a cheap quality
honest in character
of an uncertain condition
in a confused state
unusual in nature
extreme in degree
of a strange type
economics field
area of mathematics
criminal problem

educational process [for education]
athletic activities [for athletics]

Meaningless Modifiers

Williams describes some modifiers as “verbal tics that we use almost as unconsciously as we clear our throats.” Often, they can be deleted with no loss in meaning or clarity.

sort of
basically
practically
virtually
certainly
totally
individual
various
very

really
definitely
actually
generally
particular
effectively
given
different
specific

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Closely related to meaningless modifiers are **unnecessary modifiers**. Here is a list of examples and suggested alternatives compiled by Suzanne Bardouche, who points out: “Extra modifiers can sap your writing of its strength. Notice how the edited versions are shorter, clearer, and stronger.”

Edit This

pretty good
very useful
absolutely necessary
quite unique
altogether fitting

completely useless
entirely possible
totally finished
totally exhausted
entirely destroyed

most pleased
somewhat disappointed
somewhat concerned
virtually unknown
rather interesting
fairly loud
general consensus

To This

good, excellent
helpful, useful, crucial
necessary, crucial, critical, vital
unique
fitting, appropriate

useless
possible, feasible
finished, completed
exhausted
devastated

pleased
disappointed
concerned
minor, obscure
interesting
loud
consensus

Pompous Diction

“There is a common word for almost every fancy borrowed one,” according to Williams. “When we pick the ordinary word we rarely lose anything important.”

Here are some examples of how pompous diction can be replaced with simpler, stronger language.

Edit This

attempt [as a verb]
endeavor [as a verb]

facilitate
perform
procure
render

initiate

To This

try
try

help
do
get, buy
make, give, give back

begin

Edit This

commence
implement

employ
utilize
utilization

finalize
finalization
terminate
termination

eventuate
transpire

ascertain
cognizant of
desirous of
contingent upon

deem
envisage

avert to
advise
apprise

furnish
transmit

demonstrate
evidence [as a verb]
manifest [as a verb]

impact [as a verb]
parameters
prioritize
quantify

To This

begin, start
begin, start, create, carry out

use
use
use

end, settle, agree
end, conclusion
end, stop
end

happen
happen

learn, find out
aware of, aware that
want
dependent on

think
think, regard, see

mention
tell
inform

provide, give
send

show
show
show

affect
variables, conditions
rank
measure

Keep in mind, however, that in some circumstances the fancy word is more appropriate than the simple word. The choice depends on context.