

William Zinsser

"But the secret of good writing is to strip every sentence to its cleanest components. Every word that serves no function, every long word that could be a short word, every adverb that carries the same meaning that's already in the verb, every passive construction that leaves the reader unsure of who is doing what—these are the thousand and one adulterants that weaken the strength of a sentence. And they usually occur in proportion to the education and rank."

--William Zinsser in On Writing Well, 30th Anniversary Edition, 2006.

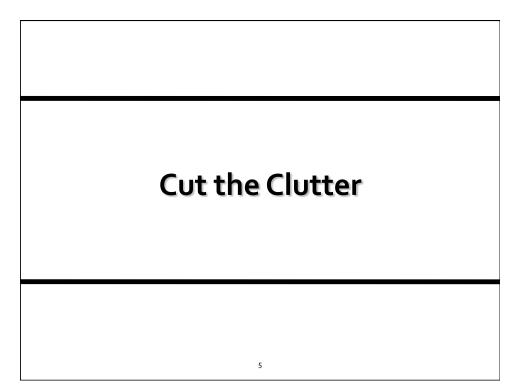
Blaise Pascal

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"I have only made this letter rather long because I have not had time to make it shorter." (In the original French: "Je n'aifait celle-ciplus longue queparcequeje n'aipas eule loisirde la faire plus courte.")

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-- Blaise Pascal in Lettres provinciales, 16, Dec. 14, 1656



Small Tricks to Cut Clutter

- 1. Eliminate negatives
- 2. Eliminate superfluous uses of "there are" and "there is"
- 3. Omit needless prepositions

Trick 1: Elminate negatives

- He was <u>not</u> often right
 → He was usually wrong
- She did <u>not</u> want to code the algorithm incorrectly
 → She wanted to code the algorithm correctly
- They did not remember to test the database access procedure
 - ightarrow They forgot to test the database access procedure

Eliminate negatives

not right	wrong	
does not want	want	
does not remember	forgot	
not honest	dishonest	
not harmful	safe	
not important	unimportant	
not complete	incomplete	
does not have	lacks	
did not pay attention to	ignored	
did not succeed	failed	

Trick 2: Eliminate there are/is

- <u>There are</u> many different data structures we can use.
 → We can use many different data structures.
- <u>There was</u> a long line of students in the hall outside the professor's office on the day the assignment was due.
 - → Students lined the hall outside the professor's office on the day the assignment was due.

Eliminate there are/is

- <u>There are many computer scientists who like to write</u>.
 → Many computer scientists like to write.
- The data confirm that <u>there is</u> an association between network load and operating system crashes.
 - → The data confirm an association between network load and operating systems crashes.



Example: "that" and "on" are often superfluous

- The design meeting happened <u>on</u> Friday.
 - → The design meeting happened Friday.
- The developers agreed that it was true.
 - → The developers agreed it was true.

Practice: Cutting the Clutter

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Original:

Anti-inflammatory drugs may be protective for the occurrence of Alzheimer's Disease.

Original:

• Anti-inflammatory drugs may be protective for the occurrence of Alzheimer's Disease.

Rewrite:

 Anti-inflammatory drugs may protect against Alzheimer's Disease

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Practice: Cutting the Clutter

Original:

• Clinical seizures have been estimated to occur in 0.5% to 2.3% of the neonatal population.

Original:

• Clinical seizures have been estimated to occur in 0.5% to 2.3% of the neonatal population.

Rewrite:

• Clinical seizures occur in 0.5% to 2.3% of newborns.

Practice: Cutting the Clutter

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Original:

 Injuries to the brain and spinal cord have long been known to be among the most devastating and expensive of all injuries to treat medically.

Original:

 Injuries to the brain and spinal cord have long been known to be among the most devastating and expensive of all injuries to treat medically.

Rewrite:

 Injuries to the brain and spinal cord are among the most devastating and expensive.

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Practice: Cutting the Clutter

Original:

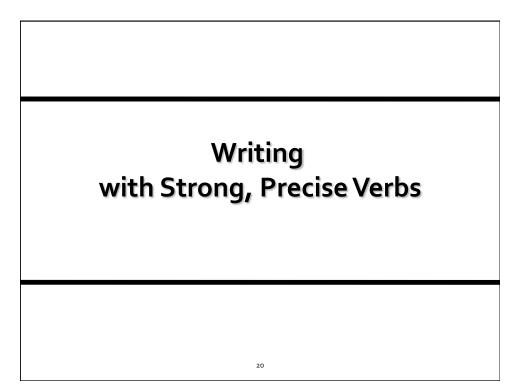
 An IQ test measures an individual's abilities to perform functions that usually fall in the domains of verbal communication, reasoning, and performance on tasks that represent motor and spatial capabilities.

Original:

 An IQ test measures an individual's abilities to perform functions that usually fall in the domains of verbal communication, reasoning, and performance on tasks that represent motor and spatial capabilities.

Rewrite:

 An IQ test measures an individual's verbal, reasoning, or motor and spatial abilities.



Verbs make sentences go!

Consider:

Loud music came from speakers embedded in the walls, and the entire arena moved as the hungry crowd got to its feet.

Writing with Strong, Precise Verbs

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Verbs make sentences go!

Compare:

Loud music came from speakers embedded in the walls, and the entire arena moved as the hungry crowd got to its feet.

With:

Loud music exploded from speakers embedded in the walls, and the entire arena shook as the hungry crowd leaped to its feet.

Latter from the novel *Bringing Down the House* by Ben Mezrich.

Writing with Strong Verbs

Pick the right verb!

Consider:

The WHO <u>reports</u> that <u>approximately</u> two-third of the world's diabetics are found in developing countries, and <u>estimates</u> that the number of diabetics will double in the next 25 years.

Writing with Strong, Precise Verbs

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Pick the right verb!

Compare:

The WHO <u>reports</u> that <u>approximately</u> two-third of the world's diabetics are found in developing countries, and <u>estimates</u> that the number of diabetics will double in the next 25 years.

With:

The WHO <u>estimates</u> that two-thirds of the world's diabetics are found in developing countries, and <u>projects</u> that the number of diabetics will double in the next 25 years.

Use "to be" verbs purposely and sparingly

Is, are, was, were, be, been, am, become, became

Writing with Strong, Precise Verbs

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Replace "to be" verbs with stronger verbs

Consider:

Whether you <u>are competing</u> for a job, a client, or the attention of a busy audience, one of the best ways of grabbing and keeping a reader <u>is</u> to use strong, descriptive verbs.

Replace "to be" verbs with stronger verbs

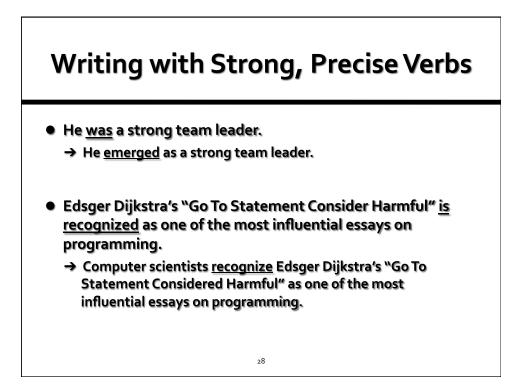
Compare:

Whether you <u>are competing for a job</u>, a client, or the attention of a busy audience, one of the best ways of grabbing and keeping a reader <u>is</u> to use strong, descriptive verbs.

With:

To <u>compete</u> for a job, client, or any busy audience, <u>use</u> active verbs to <u>grab</u> and <u>keep</u> the readers' attention.

Adapted from University of Houston-Clear Lake Writing Center Tip Sheet on Using Strong Verbs (<u>http://prtl.uhcl.edu/portal/page/portal/WC/TIPSHEETS</u>)





- She <u>was</u> the teacher for two sections of an Office Applications course.
 - → She <u>taught</u> two sections of an Office Applications class.
- He <u>was responsible</u> for managing the testing team for a one-million line software development project.
 - → He managed the testing team for a one-million line software development project.



- A modified version of the conference paper became Chapter 3 of his dissertation.
 - → He <u>modified</u> the conference paper and <u>incorporated</u> it into Chapter 3 of his dissertation.
- The common aspects of the set of programs were identified and stored in the software reuse library.
 - → The software reuse team <u>extracted</u> the common aspects from the set of programs and <u>archived</u> them for use in later projects.

Choose Active, Precise Verbs at Rice University:

http://www.owlnet.rice.edu/~cainproj/writingtips/preciseverbs.html

Practice

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