

We don't focus on rules of grammar, such as those about pronoun case or verb mood, nor do we stress subtleties of punctuation. We touch on these matters, but when issues of mechanics arise, here and elsewhere, we advise you to consult a quality reference book. Besides, we want to keep our volume short and readable.

Remember, too, that you may disagree with some of our suggestions. Virtually all edicts about writing have exceptions, and the ultimate measure of your prose is whether it succeeds with your audience.

Perhaps most important, in offering these tips, we don't want you to lose your individual tone. Every writer has a voice, and our goal is that yours will resound with clarity of thought and felicity of style.

We conclude with two samples of our own individual work. After reading so much of our counsel, you deserve to see how we apply it when the material belongs entirely to us.

[PART I]

## STRATEGIES

If we were asked to select the one fault common to most bad writing, our answer would surely be verbosity. Everyone has experienced the frustration of trying to read an article or book in which the author's concepts are stated so wordily or ostentatiously as to blunt their impact. The reality is that fewer and simpler words both create energy and elucidate meaning. Therefore our first three suggestions all concern ways to eliminate prolixity.

### I. USE CONCRETE SUBJECTS AND VERBS

Here's a familiar sentence opening:

There is a simple reason for Susan's decision . . .

At once the author is overwriting. Whenever possible, avoid "there is," a flabby construction. Instead we could begin:

A simple reason for Susan's decision is . . .

Here's another example:

There is a book on the table.

Try instead:

A book rests on the table.

The same principle applies to "It is." For instance:

It is often thought that . . .

That convolution may suit Jane Austen (as in the opening line of *Pride and Prejudice*: "It is a truth universally acknowledged . . ."). For our purposes, however, try:

Many readers think that . . .

Or:

Many voters believe that . . .

The tight subject and active verb are more spirited.

Here's another problematic usage:

The fact that he appeared made all the difference.

Ninety-five percent of the time when you write "the fact that," you can cut "the fact." Thus you could offer instead:

That he appeared made all the difference.

Technically, you're taking "that he appeared" and turning it from an adjectival clause modifying "fact" into a noun clause that becomes the subject of the sentence.

Here are other empty constructions that invite tightening:

WEAK	BETTER
for the reason that	because
at that point in time	then
any and all	any <i>or</i> all
give consideration to	consider
of the opinion that	think <i>or</i> believe
few in number	few
all too often	often
oftentimes	often
serves to inform	informs

ask the question	ask <i>or</i> question
at a time when	when
whether or not	whether
may sometimes	may <i>or</i> sometimes
give encouragement to	encourage
regardless of the fact that	although
in the event that	if
disappear from view	disappear
encircle around	encircle

The list of such usages is endless, as are the opportunities to eliminate them.

#### *Samples for Correction:*

- Oftentimes he reported on and exposed the fact that in the world of today, stars, celebrities, and other well-known famous people may on certain rare occasions sometimes demand extra special attention and consideration.
- At that moment in the sequence of events that had occurred in the game thus far, no one could have accurately foreshadowed what was about to happen.
- No matter how energetic the conclusion of his argument turned out to be in the end, in the final analysis that the Senator reached, his reasoning completely lacked power to convince us with real force of any kind.
- There is no doubt that those of us who read that kind of book are seeking above all to come across entertainment that in its very core is lighthearted, rather than to find stimulation of the sort that inspires us to think deeply.
- According to the opinion of many of those who have stated their beliefs, whether or not an opera relates a story that serves to create dramatic tension in the plot is a matter of more than a little but less than a lot of concern.