

CHAPTER 5

SMART SENTENCING

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A carefully crafted sentence welcomes its reader like a comfortable rocking chair, bears its reader across chasms like a suspension bridge, and helps its reader navigate tricky terrain like a well-hewn walking stick. A poorly crafted or uncrafted sentence, on the other hand, functions more like a shapeless log tossed into a river: it might or might not help you get to the other side, depending on how strong the current is and how hard you are willing to kick. And sometimes the reader of an academic text has to kick very hard indeed:

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These deconstructive and theorising inputs to the conversation are less about finding out how to better (i.e. more effectively) succumb to neo-liberal or economic rationalist discourses of effectiveness and completion, and more about critically exploring, for example, how those discourses may be operative and regulatory, what they make possible and impossible, and how they compete with other available discourses about the course and purpose of postgraduate research and supervision. [Higher Education]

So what's wrong with this sentence, as bumpy a log as one is likely to find floating in the waters of academe? For a start, the sentence has no clearly defined agent or action; its grammatical subject is an abstract noun (*inputs*) modified by a weak, spineless

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verb (*are*). When we pose Richard Lanham's classic question, "Who's kicking whom?" we can deduce, with difficulty, that the sentence describes how academics in higher education use language.¹ Yet human beings remain mysteriously absent; the "neo-liberal or economic rationalist discourses" that "compete with other available discourses" undertake their battle in a kind of agentless void. The many nouns scattered throughout the sentence (*inputs, conversation, discourses, effectiveness, completion, course, purpose, research, supervision*) are all relentlessly abstract, lumbered with equally abstract adjectives (*deconstructive, theorizing, neo-liberal, economic rationalist*) and strung together by prepositions (*to, about, to, of, about, for, with, about, of*) that send the reader's attention scudding off in one direction after the next. Thankfully, the sentence contains a few active verbs (*compete, find out, succumb, explore*); however, the author neglects to tell us *who* will be doing the succumbing and exploring. Can such a waterlogged sentence be salvaged? Probably not. The author would be better off starting over again from scratch and building a stronger, leaner sentence with real people (postgraduate supervisors, discourse analysts) rather than "deconstructive and theorising inputs" at its core.

Academics identified by their peers as stylish writers for other reasons—their intelligence, humor, personal voice, or descriptive power—are invariably sticklers for well-crafted prose. Their sentences may vary in length, subject matter, and style; however, their writing is nearly always governed by three key principles that any writer can learn. First, they employ plenty of concrete nouns and vivid verbs, especially when discussing abstract concepts. Second, they keep nouns and verbs close together, so that readers can easily identify "who's kicking whom." Third, they avoid weighing down their sentences with extraneous words and phrases, or "clutter." Far from eschewing theoretical intricacy or syntactical nuance, stylish academic writers deploy these three core principles in the service of eloquent expression and complex ideas.

SPOTLIGHT ON STYLE

GILLIAN BEER

Most major scientific theories rebuff common sense. They call on evidence beyond the reach of our senses and overturn the observable world. They disturb assumed relationships and shift what has been substantial into metaphor. The earth now only *seems* immovable. Such major theories tax, affront, and exhilarate those who first encounter them, although in fifty years or so they will be taken for granted, part of the apparently common-sense set of beliefs which instructs us that the earth revolves around the sun whatever our eyes may suggest.

Academic writers often assume that abstract thought demands abstract language. Literary historian Gillian Beer lays that misconception firmly to rest. In the opening paragraph of *Darwin's Plots*, a study of the relationship between nineteenth-century science and literature, she describes how scientific theories *rebuff*, *call on*, *overturn*, *disturb*, and *shift* other forms of thinking; they *tax*, *affront*, and *exhilarate* the people who encounter them. Beer packs plenty of abstract nouns into this paragraph—*theories*, *common sense*, *evidence*, *reach*, *relationships*, *metaphor*, *beliefs*—but takes care to balance them with appeals to sensory experience: *senses*, *world*, *earth*, *sun*, *eyes*. Her writing helps us see how ideas and theories can take on energy and agency, a life of their own.

Beer's attention to style is evident also in the structure and pace of her prose. She starts off the paragraph with a short, compact sentence (seven words) followed by two slightly longer ones (fifteen and twelve words) and another very short one (six words). Then, just as we are getting used to her almost staccato rhythm, she tosses in a long, sinuous sentence (forty-seven words) that requires us to concentrate in quite a different way.

Only occasionally does Beer lose her touch and lapse into standard academese: "In this study I shall explore some of the ways in which evolutionary theory has been assimilated and resisted by novelists who, with the subtle enregisterment of narrative, have assayed its powers." Even the most stylish writers can sometimes have a bad sentence day.

Concrete language is arguably the single most valuable tool in the stylish writer's toolbox. When readers encounter a sentence composed largely of concrete nouns, they can immediately visualize its objects, actions, and relationships, as when philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah illuminates the universality of the human condition by describing a time-traveling baby:

If a normal baby girl born forty thousand years ago were kidnapped by a time traveler and raised in a normal family in New York, she would be ready for college in eighteen years. She would learn English (along with—who knows?—Spanish or Chinese), understand trigonometry, follow baseball and pop music; she would probably want a pierced tongue and a couple of tattoos.²

A sentence composed mostly of abstract nouns, by contrast, offers us nothing tangible to hang on to, no person or thing that we can mentally situate in physical space:

Replicating the post-Mendel application of Lamarck's apparently superseded scientific theory by non-empirical social scientists, Vernon Lee's fervent and intellectually original use of scientific paradigms across different fields in order to further a specific literary and creative heuristic offers an exemplary narrative trace, replete with hybridized methodologies and the rhetorical deployment of scientific language in non-scientific discourses. [Literary Studies]

This sentence suffers from other ailments as well, including a paralyzing glut of adjectives and adverbs (*fervent, intellectually original, scientific, different, specific, literary, creative, exemplary, hybridized, rhetorical, scientific, non-scientific*) and a shocking case of jargonitis (*paradigms, heuristic, trace, hybridized*). But even with its adjectives eliminated and its vocabulary toned down, so many abstract nouns compete here for the reader's attention—*application, theory, use, paradigms, fields, heuristic, trace, methodologies, deployment, language, discourses*—that we lose sight of the sentence's fundamental message: Vernon Lee's writing deserves

scholarly attention because she applied scientific thinking to her literary endeavors in original and interesting ways.

Stylish writers sometimes bring intangible concepts to life by pairing abstract nouns with animating verbs:

Substantive differences also lurk in this confusion.³

Play, like sleep and dreaming, puzzles and fascinates biologists.⁴

In these lively sentences by philosopher Daniel Dennett and literary scholar Brian Boyd, respectively, *differences* and *play* function almost like living characters; they have physical presence (*lurk*) and affective agency (*puzzles* and *fascinates*). Many academics, however, give little thought to their verbs, favoring forms of *be* (*is, am, are, was, were, been*) and predictable scholarly verbs such as *analyze, show, examine, and consider*:

Although standard statistical methods *are* available for incorporating measurement error and other sources of variation, they are not commonly applied, and they have rarely been *considered* in the context of phylogenetic statistics in which trait values are *correlated* among related species. [Evolutionary Biology]

The authors of this evolutionary biology article, for example, have combined three abstract verbs (*apply, consider, correlate*) with a series of *be* verbs (*are, are, been, are*) to produce a passively phrased sentence in which we never actually discover who is doing (or failing to do) all that applying, considering, and correlating. Compare their lackluster effort with another article from the same journal:

Insects suck, chew, parasitize, bore, store, and even cultivate their foods to a highly sophisticated degree of specialization. [Evolutionary Biology]

These authors hook us in straightaway with a concrete noun (*insects*) and a series of equally concrete verbs (*suck, chew, parasitize, bore, store, cultivate*) that leave us in absolutely no doubt as to “who’s kicking whom.”

Abstract nouns weigh down the prose of researchers in nearly every academic discipline, from medicine to literary theory. All scholarly endeavor involves abstract thinking, of course, which we naturally express via abstract language. The problems occur when we allow abstract nouns to take over and multiply, even in sentences that describe the actions and attributes of concrete entities such as people, places, and things:

According to de Man, the robustness of this incoherence, the failure of the sublime to secure an exit from skepticism through philosophical argument, indicates that Kant's analysis relies on rhetorical sleight of hand. [Literary Studies]

The original objective of the sanitation project, known as Bahia Azul or Blue Bay, was the control of marine pollution, which was largely caused by the discharge of domestic waste water. [Medicine]

As readers, we have to struggle unacceptably hard to locate the agents and actions in these sentences, even though each contains two proper nouns (*de Man, Kant; Bahia Azul, Blue Bay*) and one concrete noun (*hand, water*). In both sentences, the grammatical subject is an abstract noun that sits miles away from its accompanying verb: “*the objective* [eleven words] *was*”; “*the robustness* [seventeen words] *indicates*.” What are the authors really trying to say here? “*We designed* the sanitation project to control marine pollution”; “*De Man argues* that *Kant relies* on rhetorical sleight of hand.”

Clutter, the sworn enemy of the stylish academic writer, denotes all those extraneous words and phrases that get in the way of a sentence's meaning, whether by driving nouns and verbs apart or by tripping up readers in other ways. Among the most persistent contributors to clutter are *prepositions*: little linking words such as *of, by, to, and through*. In a well-calibrated sentence, prepositions supply energy and directional thrust:

The backbone of this system was a chain of command which ran from the monarch; to the department of government which drafted the instructions which guided the voyage, selected the ship and

SPOTLIGHT ON STYLE

ANNE SALMOND

When the *Dolphin* arrived at Tahiti, the island was “discovered” and the islanders entered European history. Equally, however, the Europeans entered Tahitian history, tangling these histories together. Wallis was searching for Terra Australis Incognita, hoping to inscribe its coastlines on the maps of the world, while the Tahitians thought that the *Dolphin* was a floating island, or perhaps a craft from Te Po, the realm of ancestors.

In an article whose very title expresses equipoise—“Their Body Is Different, Our Body Is Different: European and Tahitian Navigators in the 18th Century”—anthropologist Anne Salmond moves gracefully back and forth between European and Tahitian perspectives on the European “discovery” of Tahiti. Through carefully balanced parallel sentences, she grants equal agency to both parties—“the islanders entered,” “the Europeans entered”—and equal weight to their beliefs and perceptions: “Wallis was searching,” “the Tahitians thought.”

Salmond’s sentences are concise, verb driven, and chock-full of concrete detail:

In unfamiliar waters a skilled navigator could identify and name new swells by studying the sea hour after hour, and the sequence of stars, the wind and current patterns and numerous other items of navigational information were memorized for the return voyage. During such expeditions the navigator slept as little as possible, ceaselessly scanning the sea and the night sky and keeping watch for land clouds and homing birds. It was said that you could always recognize a star navigator by his blood-shot eyes.

In simple, economical language, she conveys the extraordinary complexity of the star navigator’s task, which involved apprehending numerous physical details (*waters, swells, sea, sequence of stars, wind, current patterns, night sky, land clouds, homing birds*) and interpreting them by calling upon a range of intellectual skills (*identify, name, study, memorize, scan*). Salmond’s account of European and Polynesian navigational expertise is evenhanded yet deeply felt, fueled by a self-professed ambition to “do justice to the complex, many-sided dynamics of these engagements.”

appointed its crews; to the captain, who had supreme command of the ship, within his orders and a strict set of naval conventions; to the officers and the petty officers; and down to the ordinary sailors.⁵

All too often, however, authors use prepositions to string together long sequences of abstract nouns:

This conceptual distinction between anticipatory and consummatory pleasure is supported by evidence from functional magnetic resonance imaging studies of healthy individuals, which has differentiated the relative role of brain regions involved in anticipation of a future reward (nucleus accumbens) in contrast with consumption of rewards (prefrontal cortex). [Psychology]

In the first of these two extracts, by anthropologist Anne Salmond, prepositions clarify relationships; in the second, they obscure them, leaving the reader to extract the author's meaning (who's kicking whom?) from a tangled skein of ideas.

Adjectives and *adverbs* add color and zest to stylish scholarly prose. Like prepositions, however, they can also contribute to clutter:

In the first part of this essay, I reexamine the trajectory of thinking from Lamarck to Mendel and beyond in the revivifying light of an additional premise: that scientific paradigms were used in creative ways by ostensibly empirical evolutionary scientists in the absence of clinching verifiable evidence—a process that would reach its apogee with the exposure of Paul Kammerer's Lamarckian toad hoax. [Literary Studies]

The author of this passage has flung one descriptive adjective after another (*revivifying*, *additional*, *scientific*, *creative*, *empirical*, *evolutionary*, *clinching*, *verifiable*, *Lamarckian*) into an already long and complex sentence that raises more questions than it answers. Can a light be *revivifying* (that is, capable of bringing dead things to life)? Can a trajectory be *revivified* (was the trajectory ever dead in the first place)? Did the creative misappropriation of scientific paradigms reach its apogee with the exposure of Kammerer's toad

hoax, or with the toad hoax itself? Does the word *evidence*—signifying something that helps us form a conclusion or judgment—really require the addition of both *clinching* and *verifiable* to make its meaning apparent? The harder we pull on the interlocking threads of this sentence, the more clearly we see that it exhibits all of the other familiar problems already outlined in this chapter: predictable academic verbs (*reexamine, use, reach*); a glut of abstract nouns (*trajectory, thinking, premise, paradigms, ways, absence, evidence, process, apogee, exposure, hoax*); and long sequences of prepositional phrases (“the trajectory of thinking from Lamarck to Mendel and beyond in the revivifying light of an additional premise”) that make us lose sight of its main idea.

Other contributors to clutter include *it, this, that, and there*. These four eminently useful little words have a place in every stylish writer’s repertoire. Used carelessly or excessively, however, they can muddy rather than clarify meaning:

It is now generally understood that constraints play an important role in commonsense moral thinking and generally accepted that they cannot be accommodated by ordinary, traditional consequentialism. [Philosophy]

The author of this article uses *it* to make sweeping, passively phrased claims about other people’s (or at least other philosophers’) alleged thought and beliefs: “*It* is now generally understood that” and “*It* is now generally accepted that.” In the very next sentence, the author stirs *this* into the mix:

Some have seen this as the most conclusive evidence that consequentialism is hopelessly wrong, while others have seen it as the most conclusive evidence that moral common sense is hopelessly paradoxical.

Some *who* have seen this *what*? A diligent reader can deduce that *this* and *it* serve as shorthand for something like “the fact that traditional consequentialism cannot accommodate the constraints involved in commonsense moral thinking.” But why

SPOTLIGHT ON STYLE

JAMES WEBSTER

The minor mode itself has a different tinta in each: wild and untamed in the Farewell, densely passionate in the quartet, grace in the trio. The three endings alone—ethereal, tragic, melancholy—would suffice to make the point. It bears repeating: Haydn never repeats himself.

Historian of music James Webster turns musical movements into dramatic narratives and symphonies into stories. In his classic full-length study of Haydn's "Farewell" Symphony, he lets his language soar to lyrical levels as he summons one adjective after another—*wild, untamed, passionate, ethereal, tragic, melancholy*—to illustrate the emotive power of Haydn's minor mode. Elsewhere his vocabulary becomes highly technical. Yet even when addressing a specialist audience, he continues to call on perfectly chosen adjectives (*deceptive, quickly*) and lively verbs (*leads, bursts, harmonized*) to convey drama and action:

The deceptive cadence in m. 182 leads quickly to vii [4 over 3] (yet another dominant; note the high e1 in the bass) and a fermata; then the Presto bursts in with the headmotive d, harmonized by a forte, root-position V-I cadence—the first and only such conjunction in the movement.

Alert to the power of a good story, Webster often frames his musical analyses with tales of human escapades and foibles:

Every music-lover knows the story of Haydn's "Farewell" Symphony. Each year, the Esterházy court spent the warm season at Prince Nicolaus's new and splendid, but remote, summer castle "Esterháza."

If Schubert was homosexual, as Maynard Solomon suggests in his now-famous essay, what difference does it make for his music?

Describing Haydn's sojourn at Esterházy, he lays on a series of adjectives (*warm, new, splendid, remote*); addressing Schubert's alleged homosexuality, he poses a blunt question. Exquisitely attentive to subtleties of musical style, Webster varies his own style to fit his purpose.

should we have to work so hard? Isn't it the author's job, not ours, to make the sentence's meaning clear?

There is a mostly unremarkable word that contributes to clutter by consorting with *it*, *this*, *that*, *be* verbs, and other bad company:

If the nomocentric principle is correct, then there are as many true backward counterfactual conditionals as there are forward counterfactual conditionals and, therefore, the thesis that an asymmetry of counterfactual dependence characterizes our world would turn out to be false. [Philosophy]

And what's wrong with *that*? When used as a determiner (“*that* girl,” “*that* hat”), nothing at all. However, in its grammatical function as a relative pronoun, *that* often encourages writers to overload their sentences with subordinate clauses, driving nouns and verbs apart in the process:

In a series of important papers, John Broome has argued that the only sense of “should” at work here is the one that we use in saying what there is most reason, or decisive reason, to do and that the apparent contradiction in the example is removed when we make appropriate distinctions of scope. [Philosophy]

Here, *that* occurs three times in a single sentence, twice as part of a parallel construction (“John Broome has argued *that* . . . and *that*”) and once as part of an intervening clause (“the one *that* we use”). An attentive stylist would reword or eliminate the latter, which gets in the way of the parallel *that* clauses on either side.

Note that all of the above examples were drawn from recent articles in philosophy journals. Philosophers are by no means the only academic writers whose sentences are awash in *it*, *this*, *that*, and *there*. On average, however, they use these four words much more frequently than academics in other disciplines—a statistic that helps to explain why many nonphilosophers find philosophical prose wordy, dense, and difficult to read. In my data sample of peer-reviewed publications from ten different disciplines, the

percentage of articles in which *it*, *this*, *that*, and *there* constitute forty or more of the first thousand words, excluding quotations and citations, ranged from 0 percent in medicine to 30 percent in psychology. For philosophy, the figure was 65 percent, more than double the density in the next-highest discipline (see Figure 2.1 in Chapter 2). So is there something special about philosophical discourse that makes it imperative for philosophers to write in this wooden, long-winded way? In a study of multidisciplinary peer review panels in the United States, sociologist Michèle Lamont found that philosophers tend to regard their own field as “uniquely demanding,” whereas their colleagues from other disciplines commented that “philosophers live in a world apart from other humanists” and “what philosophers do is irrelevant, sterile, and self-indulgent.”⁶ Philosophers who are content to live and write in “a world apart” need not be concerned by my survey statistics, which merely reaffirm their uniqueness. However, those who aspire to communicate with nonspecialists—students, colleagues, the general public, and the academics on those all-important multidisciplinary review panels that can make or break an academic career—might start by addressing their addiction to *it*, *this*, *that*, and *there*.

Any of the “smart sentencings” principles outlined in this chapter can, of course, be temporarily suspended for rhetorical effect. Obituary writers understand the dramatic value of widely separating a subject and its accompanying verb:

J. D. Salinger, who was thought at one time to be the most important American writer to emerge since World War II but who then turned his back on success and adulation, becoming the Garbo of letters, famous for not wanting to be famous, died on Wednesday at his home in Cornish, N.H., where he had lived in seclusion for more than 50 years.⁷

Stylish academic writers, likewise, often play around with language: they vary their vocabulary, mix up their syntax, and veer back and forth between short sentences and long. Passive verb

constructions may even be allowed into their prose from time to time. They follow no set formula or rule book; but nor do they throw grammar and coherence to the wind. Whatever their stylistic choices, they always make us feel that every word counts.

THINGS TO TRY

- For a playful insight into what ails a sagging paragraph, go to the Writer's Diet Web site (<http://www.writersdiet.com>) and paste a sample of your writing (one thousand words maximum) into the online WritersDiet test, a free diagnostic tool designed to tell you whether your sentences are “flabby or fit.”⁸ The test automatically highlights words in five grammatical categories commonly associated with stodgy academic prose—*be* verbs, nominalizations, prepositions, adjectives/adverbs, and *it, this, that, there*—and indicates whether those words occur in unusually high quantities. By the time you have tested three or four samples of your writing, you will have become aware of your signature usage patterns—for example, a predilection for abstraction (translation: too many spongy abstract nouns) or a tendency to begin every sentence with *this*.
- Replace at least a few *be* verbs in every paragraph with active, unusual verbs. A sentence powered by vivid verbs (*sway, shun, masquerade*) will speak to your readers more effectively than one that contains only forms of *be* (“The experiment *was*”) and predictable academic verbs (“This proposition *shows*”).
- Identify all your *passive verb constructions*, which are usually signaled by the presence of a *be* verb plus a past-tense verb (*are signaled, can be shown, is affected*). Passive constructions can be employed by stylish writers for a number of reasons; in the first part of this sentence, for example, the phrase “Passive constructions can be employed by stylish writers” places *passive constructions*

front and center, whereas an actively worded phrase such as “Stylish writers employ passive constructions” would have put more weight on the author’s role. A few passive phrases can provide welcome syntactical variety. Too many passive constructions in one paragraph, however, will add up to lifeless, agentless prose.

- If you are like most academic writers, your writing sample probably contains a high percentage of *nominalizations*, which are abstract nouns formed from verbs or adjectives through the addition of a suffix such as *-ance*, *-ence*, *-ity*, *-ness*, *-ion*, *-ment*, or *-ism*. To reduce their stultifying effect:
 - Make sure that at least one sentence per paragraph includes a concrete noun or a human entity as its subject, immediately followed by an active verb (“Merleau-Ponty argues,” “Students believe,” “International banks compete”).
 - Animate abstract nouns with active verbs (“Nominalizations *suck* the energy out of your sentences”).
 - Cut down on prepositional phrases, especially where they string together long sequences of abstract nouns (“the representation *of* female desire *in* an era characterized *by* the objectification *of* personal experience”). When in doubt, limit the number of prepositional phrases to no more than three in a row.
 - Where possible, explain abstract concepts using concrete examples.
- Measure the distance between nouns and their accompanying verbs. When agent and action become separated by more than about a dozen words, readers quickly lose the plot. (Example: “The *knowledge* that criminalization of marijuana use can lead to a wide variety of other social ills, including an increased risk of addiction to more dangerous and expensive drugs such as heroine and cocaine, *has not prevented* lawmakers. . . .”) Ideally, a noun and its accompanying verb should pack a quick, one-two punch: “Lawmakers know . . .”

- If your WritersDiet test results reveal a weakness for adjectives and adverbs, ask yourself whether you really need them all. Can you supply the same descriptive energy using concrete nouns and lively verbs?
- Is your prose overly dependent on *it*, *this*, *that*, and *there*? If so, try adhering to the following principles next time you write something new:
 - Use *this* only when accompanied by a modifying noun (“This *argument* shows” rather than merely “*This* shows”). Writers often slip *this* into their sentences to avoid stating their ideas clearly (“Some have seen *this* as conclusive evidence that . . .”).
 - Use *it* only when its referent—that is, the noun *it* refers to—is crystal clear. For example, in the sentence “The woman threw the lamp through the window and broke *it*,” what did the woman break, the lamp or the window?
 - Avoid using *that* more than once in a single sentence or about three times per paragraph, except in a parallel construction or for stylistic effect. Sentences that rely on subordinate clauses that in turn contain other clauses that introduce new ideas that distract from the main argument that the author is trying to make . . . well, you get the idea.
 - Use *there* sparingly. There is no reason why you should not employ *there* every now and then. But wherever *there* is, weak words such as *this*, *that*, *it*, and *is* tend to congregate nearby. Example: “*There are* a number of studies *that* show *that this is* a bad idea because *it . . .*”

Do you find all of this editorial polishing and tweaking laborious and slow? Remember, stylish academic writers spend time and energy on their sentences so their readers won't have to!