



# Center for Writing and Speaking

## A NO. 10 IN THE CENTER FOR WRITING AND SPEAKING HANDOUT SERIES

### Revising Prose

*You've finally written that huge research paper or that feature story for the newspaper, so now you want to go through and make sure that everything from sentence order to word choice is perfect. Here are some things to keep in mind when revising prose.*

#### **Strong verbs.**

Saying something powerfully proves much more effective than simply saying it. Replace as many “to be” verbs (it is, this is, she was, etc.) as possible with other more specific verbs, especially in introductory sentences.

*Example:* “Heathcliff exudes mystery,” not “Heathcliff is mysterious.”

#### **Action, action, action.**

Always read prose critically for the use of passive voice, where the object of an action is put in the position of the subject with the use of “was/were” and “by.” Active voice reduces wordiness and emphasizes key words.

*Example:* “The book was checked out by Ann” is less effective than “Ann checked out the book.”

#### **Variety.**

Do all your sentences follow the same form? Do they all begin in the same way? Vary your sentence lengths and word choices. If your paper repeats a certain word or phrase, search for other ways of conveying the same idea.

#### **Less is more.**

Long phrases and filler words that do not contribute to the overall meaning of your sentence should be kept to a minimum. Here are some specific things to avoid using in excess.

- Words that are redundant to argument (*truly, indeed, really, etc.*) or add nothing (*as it were, in other words, etc.*)
- Indirect beginning phrases (*it is important to note, we must consider, etc.*) or unnecessary connectors (*thus, however, etc.*)
- Phrases that can be replaced by one or two words (*in spite the fact that, the question as to whether, etc.*)

#### **Creating emphasis.**

You want your reader to easily recognize your strongest points of emphasis. Watch out for these mistakes:

- Sentences that merely list and noun-heavy sentences—verbs are the strongest words in a sentence, not nouns.
- Negatives—a point stated in the positive form is usually stronger.
- Clichés—overused phrases take away power because your audience is already familiar with them.

#### **Fine-tuning.**

Before you turn your paper in, read over it and evaluate each element of the writing. Is this word or phrase necessary? Could this idea be conveyed more expressively, or more directly? Does it flow with what comes before and after? Pay special attention to first and last sentences of paragraphs and first and last paragraphs of essays. Reading aloud is a great way to catch small errors and awkward wording in an essay you've read in your head ad nauseum.

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