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Clear Writing for Public Administrators: A Refresher Workshop

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CLEAR WRITING FOR PUBLIC ADMINISTRATORS:
A REFRESHER WORKSHOP

by

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I. Whys and Hows

A. Boon or Boondoggle?

Since you have been writing for years and since you have had many hours of classroom instruction in writing, you have a right to be skeptical about a writing workshop. What can be accomplished in a few hours that could not be accomplished in the preceding hundreds?

That question has been the guiding principle behind this material. The most promising approach seemed to lie in comparing the work of professional writers with amateurs. To this end, the writing of a dozen public administrators was compared to the writing of authors published in such works as *Harper's, Smithsonian, INC, Nation's Business,* and *Psychology Today.*

When various writing characteristics were analyzed and charted, the professional writers tended to occupy one place while the amateur writers lumped together at another. In this workshop you will be asked to chart your writing, and then you will attempt to improve it by applying the points to be discussed in subsequent pages.

In the comparison of amateur and professional writers, the significant differences were these:

— The amateur writers *consistently* wrote longer sentences, averaging almost 24 words, compared to 20 for the professionals.

— The amateur writers *consistently* used more long words. In their writing, 19 percent of the words had three or more syllables. That compares to only 13 percent for the professionals.

— The amateur writers *consistently* created sentences that ran uninterrupted, starting with a subject and verb and followed by a collection of prepositional and verbal phrases. Professionals, on the other hand, consistently broke their sentences into smaller *units,* subordinating one idea to another, and so indicating through the use of commas, dashes, colons, and parentheses. The average length of such a unit among the professionals was 11 words; among the amateurs, 14.

— Amateur writers *consistently* stated less and elaborated more than the professionals. Statements are made by the interaction of a noun and a verb: dog/barked, men/worked, she/wrote. All other words merely elaborate on the *statement,* which is the expression of an idea. In short, we pass on ideas through statements, and we make statements with verbs and their subjects. Amateur writers made one statement every 13 words; the professionals, one every 10 words.

— Amateur writers *consistently* used far more words than necessary. Such wordiness cannot be shown on a chart, but amateur writing can often be shortened by as much as a third.

— Amateur writers tended to use abstract words as the subjects of the sentences; professional writers tended to use concrete ones.

All these practices add up to the difference between tentative, unfocused writing and assured, clear communication. If you apply the standards to your own work, you will find you write better—and as the standards become more firmly embedded in your mind, you will write more easily, too.

B. English vs. *Engfish*

If you will think differently about your writing, you will write differently. Among people in the professions, those differences likely will be for the better. That is because writing is as much a product of environment as you are, and the writing environment of the schools and the professions is a slum.

From grade school on, you are forced to write dishonestly. You must address your writing to experts on topics about which you know all too little. You learn to appear to have something to say through inflated language and pretended expertise.

1

For another thing, your ears are subjected daily to what one student of language called "Engfish"—the pretentious language of the textbook and the formal report. Engfish avoids the simple and direct in favor of the high-flown and vague. In the workaday world, you need to communicate your ideas rather than try to impress someone.

In this workshop the *ear is the enemy*. It needs deprogramming. To help it, you need to learn to choose words for their meanings, not their sounds. This is not an easy task. When done successfully, the writing has a new sound, one that the ear can come to admire as much as it used to admire Engfish. The new sound is vigorous and sure. Above all it is direct and clear.

C. Short is Sweet

Letters form syllables, syllables form words, and words, sentences. Through sentences, information is communicated. Unless someone can show differently, you can assume that you should strive to deliver information in the fewest possible sentences, words, syllables, and letters. This assumption (with reservations) can be made for several reasons.

First, the reader should not have to spend more time than necessary in receiving the message.

Second, the fewer the words, the better they are absorbed by the reader. Speed readers are said to have high comprehension rates because they absorb information so quickly their memory is not strained. The same principle holds true from the writing end, too. If you can say the same thing in 100 words as in 125, the reader's comprehension will benefit.

Third, in seeking to be concise, you gain a good organizational tool. To get someplace in the shortest distance, you have to know where you're going. Once you know where you're going, you know where *not* to go. Your sentences will not meander. Each will deal with an aspect of the central point.

Fourth, such writing reflects well on the writer because it is vigorous, assured, and clear. That has nothing to do with the actual delivery of a message—the point of this workshop—but as careerists you might prefer the image of person of decision over that of pompous ass.

To be direct—to deliver a message in the fewest possible syllables—adopt two writing rules suggested by George Orwell:
1. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
2. If you can possibly cut a word out, cut it out.

These rules are easier to state than to follow.

> "Except ye write by the tongue words easy to understand, how shall it be known what is spoken? For ye shall speak into the air."
> —*I Corinthians 14:9*

II. Compendious Vocable

This title comes from a thesaurus. Roughly translated, it means "the short word." Using such words as "compendious vocable" is an extreme example of what some call "dictionary writing." It infects all writers. A blank piece of paper brings out the pomposity in everyone.

Of course, word choice should match subject matter. At some point along the prestige ladder, saying that someone "resigned his position" may be more appropriate than saying he "quit his job." Writers, however, are more likely to be too lofty than too lowly.

The research of one writing specialist bears this out. Surveying the work of a group of engineers, Robert Gunning found that they chose the long word over the short by a ratio of 10 to 1 in these pairings:

utilization/use
modification/change
initial/first
optimum/best
encounter/meet
demonstrate/show
objective/aim

To put it another way, the engineers used 25 syllables where seven would do.

Some argue that the long word is the *precise word*, but that is often not true. In fact, the long word often is imprecise. Study the list of long words and short substitutes and find an important difference in meaning between "demonstrate" and "show." The *ear*, not the *mind*, preferred the long to the short. What is the difference between an *industrial plant* and a *factory*? Or between *repair* and *renovate*? (Answer: People "repair" their homes; government agencies "renovate" them).

When amateurs write (rather than speak) they don't *make* changes, they *effect* them. They don't *fit* things into their schedules, they *integrate* them. They don't live in *houses*, but rather *residences*. They don't *help*, they *assist*. They most certainly do not *get*, they *obtain*.

Why are these choices made so consistently? Not in the name of better communication. Perhaps people think loftiness befits them and their jobs (positions) and their fields (areas of interest).

If writers apply the golden rule—write as you would be written to—they will not make their readers wade through five syllables when one will do. They will not trust their *ears*, but instead they will trust to *meaning*.

EXERCISE 1

The following sentences are marred by high-flown words and other hindrances to easy communication. Try rewriting them in the simplest language you can. Compare your versions with those on the following page.

1. He said the reason that the band is traveling by bus, not plane, is because buses are more economical.

2. This has negative consequences for the individual.

3. Krivosha said most journalists lack adequate legal knowledge.

4. The advocate introduces himself to the juvenile, assesses the situation, obtains the necessary intake material and contacts his or her parents or legal guardian.

5. It should be noted that the culturally deprived and financially disadvantaged tend to live in depressed areas.

6. The first five to six weeks of a student's stay is spent in an intensive orientation program to help the student prepare for a language proficiency test.

7. A main component of St. Monica's treatment program is to help clients maximize their community productivity through job placement or school enrollment.

8. The development corporation's original objective was to provide financial assistance for revitalization and rehabilitation to older homes in the Near South Neighborhood.

1. He said the band is traveling by bus, not plane, because buses are cheaper.

2. This hurts the individual.

3. Krivosha said most reporters don't know enough about the law.

4. The social worker talks to the youth, learns what he can, and contacts the parents.

5. The uneducated and the poor often live in slums.
   (more about the construction, "It should be noted that. . ." later)

6. The first five or six weeks, the students study for a language test.

7. As part of its treatment, St. Monica's tries to help the client find a job or enroll in school.

8. The development corporation's original goal was to help finance the repair of older homes in the Near South Neighborhood.

III. Waste Not

The chief flaw in amateur writing represents a violation of Orwell's second rule: "If you can cut a word out, cut it out." Three main causes for the excess are:

Writers over-qualify their statements. In attempting to be precise, they merely sound timid and vague.

Writers like pairs of things and sometimes go out of their way to create a second unit to go with a first.

Writers tend to state the obvious and the immaterial.

A. Over-qualifying

Precision is a virtue, but it comes from specifics, not from the addition of qualifying words. For instance, in writing about Fremont, one person cited its "relatively close proximity" to Omaha. The writer apparently felt compelled to add "relatively close" because he or she didn't know how far away one thing could be from another and still be in proximity. Does adding "relatively close" extend the distance or narrow it? Relative to what? The synonym for "proximate" is "close," so the phrase translates as "relatively close-close."

You, as report writers, can say at this juncture that you are not writing great literature; you are writing reports. You cannot stop to ponder all possible implications of every word you set on paper. Exactly. The more hedging and qualifying you do, the more problems you create for yourself. Being simple is easier.

In addition, hedging makes for timid, tentative writing. Compare the sounds of these two versions:

— Because of its relatively close proximity to Omaha, . . .

— Because it is near Omaha, . . .

Whether measured by the number of words, syllables, or letters, the first version is twice as long, and the second is twice as assured in tone.

B. Pairing

Pairing results from the writer pleasing his ear, rather than paying attention to meaning. People like the full, rounded-off effect of pairing words or, better still, matching them in sets of three. In pleasing the ear they either repeat themselves, or else they over-qualify by making unnecessary distinctions.

Here is an example:

"A city administrator must guard himself against the *isolation and insulation* from the people."

Another:

"Such a program calls for greater citizen *involvement and participation.*"

A third:

"A good program will communicate the *needs and desires* of the public."

While repetition, as in the first two cases, should be avoided, perhaps the greatest reader disservice comes in the third example where the two words do, indeed, have different meanings. The problem is that the distinction between *needs* and *desires* has nothing to do with the point of the sentence. The reader can get the main point if the writer uses one word or the other. When meaningless distinctions are made, the main point becomes slightly diffused. If the writer persists in such distinctions, the entire piece becomes fuzzy.

C. The Obvious and Immaterial

Writers are inclined to throw in adjectives and adverbs which, while they may express truth, add nothing to the world's knowledge. The point

you wish your reader to get is just as clear without the additions.

For example, one amateur wrote about a clinical team that included *"trained* psychiatric social workers."

Another discussed the demands on "an engineer's *technical* expertise."

A third said that the Warren Court had made something *"abundantly* clear."

When such single instances are multiplied by three or four and then added to unneeded pairing and cases of over-qualification, the effect can be deadening.

D. Wrapping It Up

In this matter of wordiness, writers have to do three things. First, they must abandon the ear and concentrate on meaning. Second, they must concentrate on their own meaning and not touch on items that lie outside it. Third, they must realize that the reader will not demand that every possibility be taken into account.

An infamous example of the flaw of over-qualifying, cited by Dr. Janice C. Redish in an article titled "How to Write Regulations in Clear English," is this by the National Park Service:

50.10 Trees, shrubs, plants, grass and other vegetation.

(a) General injury. No person shall prune, cut, carry away, pull up, dig, fell, bore, chop, saw, chip, pick, move, sever, climb, molest, take, break, deface, destroy, set fire to, burn, scorch, carve, paint, mark, or in any manner interfere with, tamper, mutilate, misuse, disturb or damage any tree, shrub, plant, grass, flower, or part thereof, . . .

Redish summed it all up: "Don't harm the plants."

Final questions: What is the difference between a rule and a regulation? Or a policy and a procedure? And who cares?

EXERCISE 2

Here are some examples of wordiness gleaned from amateur writing. How would you write them? Compare with the examples on the next page.

1. . . . as is generally well known.

2. . . . for tax purposes and other related reasons.

3. . . . the right of citizens to be protected from the abusive practices and questionable procedures utilized by police.

4. . . . broach the reasonable and acceptable standards of conduct.

5. These cases effectively stripped the state of. . .

6. A realistic and practical solution. . .

7. . . . is the understanding and acceptance of the program.

8. . . . determining the real value of any assessment program.

9. There is no single, all-purpose style of behavior that is effective in all managerial situations.

1. . . . as is well known.
    (Generally is unnecessary. If it's well known, it's certainly generally so.)

2. . . . for tax purposes and other reasons.
    (Other implies a relationship. Omit related as unnecessary.)

3. . . . the right of citizens to be protected from the obusive practices of the police.
    (Practices and procedures is an example of pairing. They're the same thing. You could have omitted
    "abusive practices" and left in "questionable procedures.")

4. . . . broach the reasonable standards of conduct.
    (If it's reasonable, it's acceptable, isn't it? Maybe you'd prefer to say acceptable and omit reasonable.)

5. These cases stripped the state of. . .
    (Stripping is pretty effective all right.)

6. A practical solution. . .
    (Or "A realistic solution. . . "—not both.)

7. (Here your choice is more difficult because understanding doesn't necessarily mean acceptance. What
    was the main point?)

8. . . . determining the value of any assessment program. . .
    (Real is an unnecessary word.)

9. No single style of behavior is effective in all managerial situations.
    (More about "there is" later, but single and all-purpose imply the same thing.)
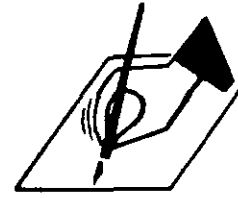
IV. The Virtues of the Period

The more complex a subject, the more likely amateurs are to write in long involved sentences. Yet research has shown that the longer the sentences, the lower the reader's understanding of them. The American Press Institute reported that in its tests, 97 percent of all readers could understand a "typical" 12-word sentence, but only 9 percent could understand one with 44 words. Most writers do not believe that readers find a *good* long sentence hard to understand. However, most writers are convinced, from bitter experience, that writing a good sentence on a first try or even a second is almost impossible. Since long sentences are (a) suspect commodities and (b) are very hard to write well, you would be wise to avoid them. When professional writers start a sentence, they intend to come shortly to the end. They look upon the period as the reader's friend and as their friend, too. After a bit of practice, writing in short sentences is easier than in long. The long ones tend to get out of control and disintegrate into strings of prepositional phrases and verbals.

Perhaps more importantly, writing in short sentences helps to sort out ideas, to break down a lump of vaguely related thoughts into parts. Look at how many ideas are crowded into the following sentence:

First Federal of Lincoln also is helping stimulate the real estate market by allowing buyers to assume a mortgage First Federal holds at the same rate the owner is paying and the bank will finance the balance of the loan at one-half percent more than the rate of the first mortgage.

That 51-word sentence is difficult to understand. One at a time, let's look at the ideas it contains.
- First Federal Lincoln has a program.
- The program is meant to stimulate the real estate market.
- The program applies to homes on which First Federal holds mortgages.
- The potential buyer of such a home would be allowed to assume the old mortgage.
- Payments and interest on that mortgage would be the same for the new buyer as for the old owner.
- If an additional loan would be needed, First Federal would make it.
- The interest rate on that loan would only be a half a percent higher than the rate on the existing mortgage.

When the ideas are presented singly, a lot of words are used and an annoying staccato pattern is created. The information, however, comes through clearly.

Breaking ideas out of a sentence is not hard. Combining some of them again is no harder. Perhaps the version below represents a happy medium between the too long and the too short.

To help the housing market, First Federal of Lincoln has a new program. Under it, buyers can assume the payments on an existing mortgage, just as though the house had not changed hands. More importantly, buyers can finance any additional loan at an interest rate only a half-percent above that of the existing mortgage.

As you strive to create short and simple sentences by breaking down your thoughts, you often will find that some ideas are extraneous—a fact you might not notice in a longer sentence. In other words, the process of writing becomes a key process in *thinking*. You can think of it in terms of the cliche of "casting light on a subject." As long as you leave your subject only generally defined, you will have to throw a wide, unfocused beam. The more precisely you define, the more intense the beam becomes. This focusing process should apply to your overall plan and to each sentence.

The problem caused by a too general approach may be demonstrated by citing the opening sentence in *Organisation and Bureaucracy*, a textbook in public administration by Nicos P. Mouzelis.

Despite the variety of sources from which the classical writings on bureaucracy have sprung, it is possible to identify in all of them a common and recurrent preoccupation around which one can organise all the early literature on the subject: this was to enquire into the impact of the growth of large-scale organisations on the power-structure of society.

Before getting into the ideas contained in that sentence, quickly note the wordiness. He says "all of them" and then says "common." He says "recurrent. Then he says "preoccupation," which state is, of course, recurrent.

Mouzelis apparently is trying to say three things. One is that early literature comes from many sources. Another is that the literature can be "organized." A third is that the literature has a common theme. The last point seems to be the main idea. The variety of sources seems a good counterpoint to the idea of sameness. However, one's ability to organize doesn't seem to enter into anything. If that idea is left out, the sentence would be much easier to understand.

Although early writers on bureaucracy came from many backgrounds, all were preoccupied with the effect that the growth of bureaucracy had on the power structure of society.

If the idea of cataloguing has any importance to the reader, add it as a second sentence:

Thus early works are easy to catalogue.

This process of clarifying thoughts by breaking them into single units can be postulated as a writer's law:

> The more complex the subject, the more the writer should think simply—and write simply.

Robert Gunning, a specialist on measuring the readability of writing, had an important word on that subject from the reader's point of view:

> "Almost any writer will write less simply than readers prefer."

Gunning created a mathematical formula for "measuring" simplicity. That formula is the topic for the next chapter.

V. The Fog Index

If you grant that, all other things being equal, short words are easier to understand than long ones and short sentences are easier to understand than long ones, then you have agreed to the principles used by Gunning in his attempts to measure readability.

Even if you don't believe that readability is measurable, Gunning's formula is a useful writing tool. It helps writers concentrate on their natural tendency to be wordy, to choose high-flown words, and to let sentences get out of control and snake their way down the pages, word after word.

Stated briefly, Gunning's method takes a writer's average sentence length and percentage of "long" words (defined as words of three syllables or more), adds them together, multiplies by a factor, and comes out with a number representing a grade in school. That number is called the fog index. A fog index of six indicates that someone in the sixth grade would be able to understand the material. A fog index of 12 would set the reading level at 12th grade.

Gunning argued that writers seeking large audiences soon learn to write simply. Novels with sales above five million—such as *Gone with the Wind, Lady Chatterly's Lover, Exodus,* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*—all have fog indexes of six or under.

Even in serious magazines such as *Harper's* and *Atlantic Monthly,* the writers (to use Gunning's words) "have the good sense to use simple language and thus conserve the energy of the reader so he will be able to grapple with the complex ideas involved."

According to Gunning, the fog index of *Harper's* is 12. In a sampling of 2,227 words by amateur writers the fog index was 17. That's high. As we'll see later, efforts to reduce that index add up to more than an exercise in mathematics. In reducing the index, the product is improved.

The specifics of the formulas are:

1. Count out a sample of your writing. For example, count the first 100 words in something you have written, then continue until you reach the end of a sentence. You end up, perhaps, with a sample of 107 words.   **107 word sample.**

2. Count the number of sentences in your sample and divide the total number of words by the total number of sentences. That will give you the average sentence length. Let's say you had six sentences.   **107 divided by 6 equals 18—the average length of sentences.**

3. Now count the number of words having three or more syllables, with these exceptions:
   —Do not count proper nouns.
   —Do not count verbs that become three syllable words because of "es" or "ed" (such as translated).
   —Do not count words made up of two very simple words, such as butterfly.
   Let's say your sample had 13 words of three or more syllables.   **13 (number of "long" words) divided by 107 equals .12 (the percentage of long words in the sample).**

4. Add the two answers together (drop the decimal point from your percentage answer).

   12 (percentage of long words)
   18 (average length)
   30

5. Multiply the last answer by a factor of .4. The answer is the fog index and represents the readability by grade in school.   **30 times .4 equals 12.0. The writing in the sample could be easily understood by readers in the 12th grade.**

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Figure the fog index for the following passage, which contains 81 words. When finished, check your work with the sample on the next page.

 Public relations is often viewed as a one-way street, with government providing information to the public in matters of the policy, plans, and achievements of a department, and the regulations and other matters that affect their daily lives. However, of equal importance is the effect of public relations on communicating the needs and desires of the "public" to the administrator. Public relations activities may be used to advise senior officials of the reaction and potential reaction to actual and proposed policies.

Number of words in sample   _ 81 _

Number of sentences   _____

Average sentence length   ____

Number of long words   ____

Percent of long words   ____

Fog index   ====

EXERCISE 3
(completed sample)

Words counted as "long" words have been italicized.

     Public *relations* is often viewed as a one-way street, with *government providing information* to the public in matters of the *policy,* plans, and *achievements* of a *department,* and the *regulations* and other matters that affect their daily lives. However, of equal *importance* is the effect of public *relations* on *communicating* the needs an desires of the "public" to the *administrator.* Public *relations activities* may be used to advise senior *officials* of the *reaction* and *potential reaction* to actual and proposed *policies.*

Number of words in sample	81	
Number of sentences	3	
Average sentence length		27
Number of long words	19	
Percent of long words		23
Fog index		20.0

NOTES: *However* was not counted as a three-syllable word because it is made up of two simple words.

       You may or may not count short words, such as *actual* which has three syllables that, when spoken, are slurred.

EXERCISE 3A

Now that you have figured the fog index for the passage, rewrite it with the aim of lowering the index by at least 6.

Number of words   ____

Number of sentences   ____

Average sentence length   ____

Number of long words   ____

 Percent of long words   ____

Fog index   ____

(sample rewrite)

Public relations often is viewed as a one-way street, with the government informing the public about its regulations, plans, and achievements. However, officials also need to know what the public desires. Only then can they rightly gauge reaction to policies and proposals.

Number of words in sample   42

Number of sentences   3

Average sentence length   14

Number of long words   10

Percent of long words   22

Fog index   14.4

Figure the fog index for the following passage which contains 243 words. When finished, check your work with the sample on the next page. The passage is from a pamphlet titled "A Guide to Preparing Environmental Assessments for Community Development."

The Local Assessment Process

Content: This section describes the basic process by which local governments, applying for community development block grants, shall assume all responsibilities for environmental reviews and assessments of actions taken locally. Local officials are strongly encouraged to enhance or modify selected elements of the process for their own particular local needs and purposes, and to clearly relate elements of the process presented here to Federal, state, and local requirements and procedures.

Purpose: In the wake of the greatly increased public awareness and concern for the protection of the environment, the U.S. Congress and some state governments have, in recent years, passed legislation designed to maintain a high quality environment, now and in the future, and to require governmental agencies at all levels to develop standards and procedures necessary to protect the environment. The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) requires all Federal agencies to prepare an environmental impact statement (EIS) on any proposed action that would significantly affect the environment before the action is taken. With the passage of the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974, the "review and decision-making" responsibilities for projects undertaken locally have been delegated to community development applicants as if it would apply to the HUD Secretary were he to undertake such projects as Federal projects. Ideally, the review and assessment process becomes an extremely useful local planning tool to enable constraints and opportunities to be considered before project plans are finalized and a request for HUD funds is sought.

Number of words	243
Number of sentences	_____
Average sentence length	_____
Number of long words	_____
Percent of long words	_____
Fog index	══════

The Local Assessment Process

    Content: This section describes the basic process by which local *governments, applying* for *community development* block grants, shall assume all *responsibilities* for *environmental* reviews and *assessments* of actions taken *locally*. Local *officials* are strongly *encouraged* to enhance or *modify* selected *elements* of the process for their own *particular* local needs and purposes, and to clearly relate *elements* of the process presented here to Federal, state, and local *requirements* and *procedures*.

    Purpose: In the wake of the greatly increased public *awareness* and concern for the *protection* of the *environment,* the U.S. Congress and some state *governments* have, in recent years, passed *legislation* designed to maintain a high *quality environment,* now and in the future, and to require *governmental agencies* at all levels to *develop* standards and *procedures necessary* to protect the *environment.* The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) requires all Federal *agenices* to prepare an *environmental* impact statement (EIS) on any proposed action that would *significantly* affect the *environment* before the action is taken. With the passage of the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974, the "review and *decision-making" responsibilities* for projects undertaken *locally* have been *delegated* to *community development applicants* as if it would apply to the HUD Secretary were he to undertake such projects as Federal projects. *Ideally,* the review and *assessment* process becomes an *extremely* useful local planning tool to *enable* constraints and *opportunities* to be *considered* before project plans are *finalized* and a request for HUD funds is sought.

Number of words	243	
Number of sentences	6	
Average sentence length		40.5
Number of long words	47	
Percent of long words		19.3
Fog index		23.9

Now that you have figured the fog index for the passage, rewrite it with the aim of lowering the index by at least 5.

Number of words   ____

Number of sentences   ____

Average sentence length   ____

Number of long words   ____

Percent of long words   ____

Fog index   ____

EXERCISE 4A
(sample rewrite)

The Local Assessment Process

   Content: When local governments apply for community development block grants, they assume responsibility for holding environmental reviews and for assessing their own actions. This section describes how those things are to be done. However, local officials may make changes to fit local situations. They also must make sure the process meshes with other Federal, state, and local requirements.

   Purpose: Responding to increased interest in protecting the environment, the Federal government has adopted laws requiring agencies to follow certain steps to protect it. Under the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, Federal agencies must prepare impact statements for projects that would affect the environment. Under the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974, local grant applicants have been given the job of reviewing the impact of their actions, just as the HUD Secretary must review Federal projects. The aim is to make the review a good planning tool, through which applicants consider the pros and cons of proposals before seeking HUD funding.

Number of words in sample	159	
Number of sentences	8	
Average sentence length		20
Number of long words	23	
Percent of long words		14.5
Total		34.5
		x .4
Fog index		13.8

VI. The Unit Rule

The unit rule describes how successful writers organize sentences. The rule preaches short, uncluttered main clauses and encourages subordination and parallel structure. In observing the unit rule, the writer does not throw a group of ideas on the page in a single, unpunctuated sentence. Instead, the writer packages the ideas, using punctuation as the packaging material. The writer thinks not of sentences but of smaller information units. The ideas contained in a sentence, then, are parceled out to the reader unit by unit. The writer following this rule uses many signal or transition words, such as *but, and, after, therefore,* and *also.*

When sentences are tailored in units, they tend to be clear because the ideas are pre-sorted, and the relationships between them are marked by signal words. In addition, the *main* idea stands out from all the elaborative ones, because the main clauses tend to be short.

Note the structure of the following sentence (the main clause is italicized and the other units are separated by slashes):

/Black and heavy,/rolling over the plain,/ *the clouds came,*/threatening the farms and villages in their path.
—George R. Bramer

That sentence contains four units. Two precede the main clause and one follows it. The main clauses are *major units.* Those clauses and phrases used to elaborate on the main clause, when set off by punctuation, are *minor units.* Minor units can only go in one of three places: in front of the main clause, after it, or within it—set off by punctuation marks (John Doe,/an analyst in the finance department,/was. . .). Writers do not create units by sticking commas here and there in their sentences. They create units that *call* for punctuation.

NOT THIS: Twenty-two, of the 87 employees polled, said. . .

BUT THIS: Of the 87 employees polled, 22 said. . .

In the first instance, sticking commas around a prepositional phrase defies the rules of grammar and logic. In the second, those rules are satisfied because introductory material should be set off from the main clause by commas.

Of course, everyone uses the unit rule to one extent or another, but the more experienced the writer, the more it is used. The sampling of amateur writing, for instance, contained 164 units, compared to 211 units in the same sized sampling of professional writing. The average unit length in amateur writing was 14 words, compared to 11 for the professionals.

Here is a demonstration of a professional writer making use of the unit rule—whether consciously or unconsciously. The article is from *Psychology Today.* The main units are italicized and the minor units are set off by slashes.

A major part of the control system for light-mediation of biorhythms in animals lies in a tiny gland in the brain,/the pineal,/which secretes the hormone melatonin./ (one main unit, two minor ones) /In reptiles and some birds,/*the gland is a third "eye" on the top of the head,*/which can distinguish between light and dark./ (one main unit, two minor ones) /In these animals,/*there is a clear connection between light and hormonal activity./* As the sun rises,/*melatonin secretion goes down,*/ and vice versa. (two main units, three minor ones) /Given experimentally to animals,/ *melatonin induces sleep and inhibits ovulation./* (one major unit, one minor one)

In those 85 words, the writer used only four sentences but broke them into 13 distinct information units—five major and eight minor. The average length per unit: 6½ words.

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By way of contrast, consider this sentence:

The most critical form of analysis of determining the real value of any assessment program is the comparison between information generated by the program and the judgments formed over time with regard to the success of individuals being assessed.

That 39-word sentence is all one unit. When writers create such snakes they should look for segments that can be pulled out and set off. In this instance the writer could create an opening unit, as follows:

"In determining the real value of any assessment program, the most critical form. . ."

That editing yields a second benefit. The subject (form) and verb (is) in the original were separated by 11 words. As a general rule, that is not good. Because the subject and verb together make a statement, you want to make that statement crisply. Professional writers tend to be less prone than amateur writers to separate subject and verb. In a sampling of professional writing, only about 9 percent of the subject-verb combinations were interrupted by groups of three or more words.

Such interruptions occurred in amateur writing in 15 percent of the subject-verb combinations.

The proper spotlighting of subject and verb is a key to clear, crisp writing. When other material is allowed to blend into the major statement, a certain tentativeness and fuzziness ensues.

However, there is a difference between allowing elaborating material to ooze between subject and verb and deliberately plunking it down between them. Many careful writers rather like the latter technique and set the intruding material off by punctuation marks. Here is an example from an article in *Psychology Today*:

. . . all aspects of our health—mental and emotional as well as physical—are indeed affected by the intensity of light to which we are exposed.

In that sample the writer had a bit of ooze (of our health) and a good deal of deliberate interruption.

Once you are convinced that, all things being equal, short units are to be preferred over long ones, you will find it rather easy to construct your sentences by the unit rule—or to apply the rule when you edit your work.

THIS: Subject . Verb

NOT THIS: Subject . . . . Verb

Count the number of major units and minor units in the following passage and figure the average unit length. When you have finished, compare your answer to the sample on the next page. The passage has 99 words.

The unit rule describes how successful writers organize sentences. The rule preaches short, uncluttered main clauses and encourages subordination and parallel structure. In observing the unit rule, the writer does not throw a group of ideas on the page in a single, unpunctuated sentence. Instead, the writer packages the ideas, using punctuation as the packaging material. The writer thinks not of sentences, but of smaller information units. The ideas contained in a sentence, then, are parceled out to the reader unit by unit. The writer following this rule uses many signal words, such as but, and, after, therefore, and also.

Number of minor units   _____

Number of major units   _____

Average unit length   _____

EXERCISE 5
(completed sample)

The major units are numbered and italicized. The minor units are lettered and marked by slashes.

                       1   2

The unit rule describes how successful writers organize sentences. The rule preaches short, uncluttered
                                                         A

main clauses and encourages subordination and parallel structure. / In observing the unit rule,/*the writer*
                 3   B

does not throw a group of ideas on the page in a single, unpunctuated sentence. / Instead,/*the writer*
  4   C   5

packages the ideas,/using punctuation as the packaging material./ *The writer thinks not of sentences,*/but
      D   6   E   6

of smaller information units./ *The ideas contained in a sentence,*/then,/*are parceled out to the reader unit*
                     7   F

by unit. The writer following this rule uses many signal words,/such as but, and, after, therefore, and also./

Number of minor units   6

Number of major units   7

Average unit length   7

NOTES: Short introductory phrases, such as *instead,* may or may not be set off from the main clause by commas.

         The last unit in this passage is a series, wherein each word is set off from the others by a comma. Do *not* count each word as a unit. However you may have instances where you create a series of long clauses or phrases, each set off from the other by commas. At some point between the very short and the very long, you start counting them as separate units.

EXERCISE 6

The following sentences could use application of the unit rule. In rewriting, you should also try to eliminate words. Write your versions on a separate sheet of paper; then compare them with the rewritten sentences on the following page.

1. The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 requires all Federal agencies to prepare an environmental impact statement on any proposed action that would significantly affect the environment before the action is taken.

2. A more thorough decision and policy making process would occur in this phase of plan development which would identify priority areas of concern that clearly relate to community development activities on a short and long term basis.

3. The Warren Court made it abundantly clear in the cases of Mapp v. Ohio and Miranda v. Arizona that police officers acting under the authority of the State had breached the reasonable and acceptable standards of conduct.

4. Residents of both the close-knit and cosmopolitan neighborhoods expressed confidence in the ability of their respective neighborhood organizations to carry out projects.

EXERCISE 6
(sample rewrite)

1. Under the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, when a Federal agency seeks an action that would affect the environment, it must first prepare an environmental impact statement.

2. In this phase of plan development, which represents a more thorough look at decisions and policies, planners would identify priority areas of concern, ones that clearly relate to community development activities on a short and long term basis.

3. In the cases of Mapp v. Ohio and Miranda v. Arizona, the Warren Court made it clear that police officers, even though acting under the authority of the state, had breached acceptable standards of conduct.

4. In both the close-knit and cosmopolitan neighborhoods, residents expressed confidence that their neighborhood organizations could carry out projects.

VII. Say it with Verbs

People communicate by making statements, and statements are made by a verb and its subject. As a rule, only two or three words are necessary to make a statement. All the rest of the words are mere elaboration. You can't *say* anything with adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, and verbals; those words merely embellish.

To attack this matter of statement making, you probably need to relearn a few terms. So we will pause here for a short grammar lesson.

A. Grammar in Two Parts

1. Types of sentences

a. Sentences that have but one subject-verb combination are called SIMPLE sentences.

Example: Mary sang.

Simple sentences are not necessarily short.

Example: In trying to anticipate the effects of the survey on individual officers, *I asked* many of them on a personal basis of their feeling about the service and of their ideas for improvement.

That sentence shows what happens when we try to communicate with elaboration rather than statement. Out of all those words there is only one subject (I) and one verb (asked). Hence, it is a SIMPLE sentence.

Some sentences contain a compound verb, but they are still simple sentences. They have only one subject-verb combination.

Example: Mary *sang* and *danced.*

Some sentences have a compound subject, but are still simple sentences. Again, they have only one subject-verb combination.

Example: *Mary* and her *teacher* sang a duet.

b. Sentences that have one main statement and one or more minor statements that elaborate on the main one are called COMPLEX sentences.

Example: When Mary sang, I left.

The main statement is *I left.* The subject-verb *Mary sang* tells when (or maybe why) I left. In (a.), *Mary sang* was the main statement. It became a minor one in (b.) because the word *when* was added. Such words, which turn major statements into minor ones, are called *subordinate conjunctions.* They tell the reader that the statement to follow is not the main one but an elaborative one.

c. Sentences with two or more main statements are called COMPOUND sentences.

Example: Mary sang and I left.

Words such as *and,* which join two equal parts, are called *coordinate conjunctions.* If you separate the parts of a compound sentence, you get simple sentences.

2. Six Ways to Make Statements

In the English language you can made a statement in one of six ways, each appropriate to certain needs. As we concentrate on statement making, we must be aware of the available forms.

All sentences have two parts—the *subject* and the *predicate.* The subject is what the sentence is about. The predicate is the verb plus any modifiers. In these examples a vertical line divides the subject and the predicate.

Subj.	Pred.
Mary	sang.
Mary	sang a song.
A beautiful song	was sung by Mary.

a. Subject-verb—the subject is the *doer,* and the verb is what the subject is *doing.*

Example: Mary sang well.

Note that Mary is the person *doing* the singing; the subject is the *doer.*

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b. **Subject-verb-object**—a third element is added to the *doer-doing* construction. The subject is still the *doer*, the verb is what the subject is *doing*, and the object is the *done-to.*

           s   v   o
Example: Mary sang a song.

What was being sung? A song. Who was doing the singing? Mary. Note that both subject and object rely on the verb for meaning.

When the *doer* is the subject, the sentence is said to be in *active voice.*

c. **Passive voice**—the *done-to* is the subject.

           s   v
Example: The song was sung by Mary.

Notice that in passive voice the *doer* winds up at the end of the sentence in a prepositional phrase. In passive voice, in fact, the *doer* often is not stated at all.

d. **Predicate noun**—an "is" or "linking" type of verb connects a subject and another word that means about the same thing as the subject—or restates the subject in some other way.

          s   v   pn
Example: Mary was the singer.

e. **Predicate adjective**—an "is" or "linking" type verb connects a subject and an adjective that describes the subject.

          s   v   pa
Example: Mary's song was sweet.

f. **There is/it is**—the "there" and "it" serve as mere filler words that have no meaning or grammatical definition.

            v   n
Examples: There was a singer named Mary
          on the program.
          It is a good idea to learn how to
          write well.

The last four types listed have certain weaknesses.

Type (f.), the "there is/it is," may be appropriate in instances such as "There are six types of statements." To eliminate the "there" would be to create an odd sounding sentence: "Six types of statements exist."

Often "there" is simply an unnecessary word. That is the case with the previously given example: "There was a singer named Mary on the program." That can be more concisely written: "A singer named Mary was on the program."

The *it is* construction is even worse. The example, "It is a good idea to learn how to write well," can be better written, "Learning to write well is a good idea."

Another example: It should be recognized that all participants in this workshop need to be here.

Write instead, "All participants in this workshop need to be here."

Types (d.) and (e.,) share a common weakness. The verbs are given very little to do—they simply "link" one side of the sentence to the other, so not much of a "statement" is made. Often, a predicate adjective can be turned into a simple adjective, as in this example.

INSTEAD OF: Mary's song was sweet.

IT COULD BE: Mary's sweet song brought
                tears to my eyes.

Predicate nouns may be stated as appositives. An appositive explains or defines or elaborates on the subject. It immediately follows its subject and is set off by commas.

INSTEAD OF: Mary was a singer.

                  appositive
IT COULD BE: Mary, the singer, held the
                audience spellbound.

In summary, when practical, give your verbs something to do other than simply link.

Type (c.), passive voice, often is wordy or vague. Active voice is usually preferred.

Wordy: The song was sung by Mary. (passive)
          Mary sang the song. (active)

Vague: With a hand slicer, 100 pounds of potatoes were processed in a day in 1932. (passive)
          In 1932, using a hand slicer, one person could process 100 pounds of potatoes a day. (active)

Although types (c.) through (f.) may have valid uses, types (a.) and (b.) are the heroes of the story. For simplicity, clarity, and force, the subject-verb (doer-doing) and subject-verb-object (doer-doing-done-to) outclass the field.

So ends the grammar lesson.

EXERCISE 7

SIMPLE, COMPOUND, AND COMPLEX SENTENCES

In the space provided, identify the following sentences as simple, compound, or complex. Answers and commentary are on the next page.

_____ 1. While the data have not been fully reviewed, we did note that 84 percent of the customers reported being satisfied with the service.

_____ 2. Participants heard about a wide range of municipal problems including community and economic development, water resources, and affordable housing.

_____ 3. The Diamond Jubilee will give us the opportunity to focus on past accomplishments and to examine future directions and contributions to our communities.

_____ 4. Personnel wishing to bring issues of concern to the committee should contact the appropriate representative, and this person will then bring the matter to the attention of the group.

_____ 5. Although he excelled in football and track in high school and was offered athletic scholarships to Michigan State and Purdue, he was more concerned with academic achievements.

_____ 6. This experience later led to his employment as the director of community development, but he didn't remain in this position very long.

_____ 7. Margaret worked as an intern in the office of the mayor while she was attending the university.

EXERCISE 7
(answers and explanations)

1. __complex__   *While* is a subordinate conjunction introducing a subordinate clause. The subject of the subordinate clause is *data*, and the verb is *have been reviewed.* The subordinate clause is dependent on the rest of the sentence for its meaning. It is not a sentence by itself. The subject of the main clause is *we*, and the verb is *did note.* Notice that a comma follows an introductory subordinate clause.

2. __simple__   This sentence has only one subject (*participants*) and one verb (*heard*).

3. __simple__   Don't let the fact that this sentence contains several *ands* throw you. Only one subject (*Diamond Jubilee*) and one verb (*will give*) are present. What about *focus* and *examine*, you say? Those are infinitives, not main verbs.

4. __compound__   Here two complete sentences are joined by a conjunction, *and.* The subject of the first sentence is *personnel* and the verb is *should contact.* This sentence is complete in itself. The subject of the second sentence is *person* and the verb is *will bring.* Again, the sentence is complete and does not depend upon the rest of the sentence for its meaning.

5. __complex__   *Although* is the subordinate conjunction. The subject of the subordinate clause is *he*, and the verbs are *excelled* and *was offered.* When you come to the comma, you get a feeling that something more must be coming, and you're right. The subordinate clause needs the rest of the sentence to complete the meaning. The subject in the main clause is *he* and the verb is *was concerned.*

6. __compound__   The conjunction is *but*, and it joins two complete sentences. The subject of the first is *experience*, and the verb is *led.* The subject of the second sentence is *he* and the verb is *did remain.*

7. __complex__   Tricky, huh? The subordinate clause is after the main clause this time. The subordinate conjunction is *while*, the subject of the subordinate clause is *she*, and the verb is *was attending.* In the main clause, the subject is *Margaret* and the verb is *worked.*

EXERCISE 8

IDENTIFYING STATEMENTS

In the following sentences, label the subjects (s) and the verbs (v). Underline the subjects and verbs in main clauses. In the blank at the right, try to identify the construction or sentence type—(subject-verb, subject-verb-object, passive, predicate noun, predicate adjective, there is/it is). For answers, see next page.

1. In the United States, the concept of citizen participation is not new. _____

2. The country has its political foundation in the town hall meeting concept. _____

3. This type of participation began in New England and still exists in some

    areas of the country. _____

4. Political parties and civic leagues were strong advocates of participation. _____

5. If indigenous members of urban areas lack organizational skills, resources

    should be made available to them through federal programs under the Office

    of Equal Opportunity. _____

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(answers and explanations)

The words you should have underlined are italicized.

                            s   v

1.   In the United States, the *concept* of citizen participation *is* not new.   Pred. Adj.

Explanation: In looking at the grammar of the sentence, throw out the
"not's" and, in looking for subject and verb, throw out prepositional phrases
(such as "of citizen participation"). The statement, then, is: concept is new.
In this instance, *new* is a predicate adjective, describing concept.

2.   The *country has* its political foundation in the town hall meeting concept.   S-V-O

Explanation: To see if a verb has a direct object, use the word "something"
after it. If it makes sense, then probably the noun following the verb is a
direct object. In this instance, the subject is *country* and the verb is *has.*
County has (something)/country has foundation.

3.   This *type* of participation *began* in New England and still *exists* in some
    areas of the country.   S-V

Explanation: This sentence has one subject (type) and two verbs (began and
exists). Almost all the other words in the sentence are prepositional phrases.

4.   Political *parties* and civic *leagues were* strong advocates of participation.   Pred. Noun

Explanation: In this case, the sentence has two subjects, *parties* and *leagues,*
and one verb, *were. Advocates* is a predicate noun. A linking verb cannot
take a direct object. To differentiate between an active voice verb (one
that takes an object) and a linking verb, try substituting the word *seems*
or *seem to be* for the verb. If the sentence still makes sense, then the verb
is linking, not active. In this instance, you could say, "The leagues *seem* to
be advocates" and make sense.

5.   If indigenous members of urban areas lack organizational skills, *resources*
    should be made available to them through federal programs under the
    Office of Equal Opportunity.   Passive

Explanation: *If* is a subordinate conjunction introducing the minor or
subordinate clause. The subject of this clause is *members,* the verb is *lack,*
and the object is *skills.* In the main clause, the subject is *resources,* and
the passive voice verb is *should be made.*

B. Putting Verbs To Work

In this section you will be given five targets to aim at as you write. In each target, the bullseye is the *verb*.

1. Writers need to create a plentiful supply of statements, to concentrate on saying things with subjects and verbs rather than adjectives and adverbs. Professional writers use more statements than amateur writers.
2. Writers need to see that the main thoughts are in main clauses, not minor ones.
3. They need to select hard working verbs—ones that carry an action or idea. In seeking such verbs, they also will seek chances to change certain nouns to verbs.
4. Writers need to be precise in their subject-verb statements.
5. They need to seek concrete *doers,* as opposed to abstract ones. Whether a word is concrete or abstract may be debatable, yet a comparison of amateur and professional writers indicated that the professionals used a markedly higher percentage of concrete subjects.

1. Creating More Statements

One writing expert likened a writer's ideas to the cargo and verbs to an engine. To move a lot of cargo, you need a lot of engine. Professional writers know this. In the sampling taken for this project, professional writers used a subject-verb combination every 10 words, compared to a 1-in-13 ratio for inexperienced writers.

Earlier, a sentence containing 33 words was used as an example of a simple sentence. Here is that sentence's central portion again:

I asked many of them of their feelings about the service and of their ideas for improvement.

If you want to create more statements, you might change that to:

I asked many of them how *they felt* about the service and how *it could be improved.*

A writer can carry statement-creating to extremes, of course. For example, you don't want to create statements at the expense of brevity, as in:

Sentences *that have two main statements. . .*

That have statements is a subject-verb-object construction—the construction heralded as the hero of this segment—but it also is wordy. It can be edited to:

Sentences *with two main statements. . .*

But given the exception of wordiness, you can make this your rule:

Whenever you can put something in the form of a statement, do so.

2. Using Main Clauses for Main Ideas

This is not a hard and fast rule, but it has logic on its side. Here is a sentence where the main idea is in a subordinate position:

The University of Nebraska at Omaha Television Department has had a varied history through which it has reacted to changes in its operating environment with little regard to mission or a long-range plan for future involvements.

Note that the main statement is that the department has had a varied history. Not only is that not the key thought, but it is vague and predictable. Everything has a history, and everything's history has included changes. Meanwhile, the main idea—that the station has reacted rather than planned—sort of tags along, and that 21-word segment contains only one subject and verb.

Application of the unit rule will allow you to subordinate the former main clause. While you're rewriting, add some more subject-verb statements:

Throughout its varied history, the Television Department at the University of Nebraska at Omaha has never had a well-defined mission or long-range plan. Instead, it has merely reacted to change.

That opening phrase really doesn't add anything, so it can be killed. If that is done, then what was the main clause has melted clean away.

Note that statements say things not only more clearly but more directly. As rewritten, the charge against the television department is more starkly stated. When statements are used, clarity sometimes takes precedence over tact. You may at times seek to equivocate, but in most cases you will wish to be clear and direct.

3. Choosing Hard Working Verbs

If you think of the verb as the centerpiece of your sentence, you will not settle for listless,

nondescript varieties. While the linking verb has its uses, inexperienced writers tend to overuse it.

Inexperienced writers also tend to take what could be a good verb and use it in its noun form. When that is done, the verby-noun tends to rob the actual verb of its job, as in this example.:

The government said the article was in violation of the Atomic Energy Act.

Note the use of the linking verb *was*. Note, too, that a good potential verb, *violates*, is being used as a noun (object of a preposition). If you throw out the "nothing" verb and introduce the better one, the sentence reads:

The government said the article violated the Atomic Energy Act.

Robert Gunning, a writing specialist, points out that the tendency to use what he calls "smothered verbs" can be charted by the number of certain word endings.

Often words with the following suffixes can be changed to verbs:

—ion and tion

—ing

—ment

Other telltale suffixes are:

—ant and ent

—ance and ence

—ancy and ency

Words with such suffixes are not "bad"—unless they rob the sentence of a meaningful verb.

One more example to set the principle firmly:

Clients are now more demanding in terms of their expectations.

Instead of using *are* as the verb, the writer had two better ones to choose from:

Clients now *demand* more.

Clients now *expect* more.

4. Seeking Precision

Writers often are imprecise because they do not actively seek out precise verbs. Instead, they start sentences with some word that comes to mind—probably a noun suggested from the preceding sentence. They then tack more words onto it until they have *approximated* the general thought they had to begin with. If the proximation between idea-in-head and idea-on-paper is too loose, or if the sentence reads awkwardly, they will putter about among the prepositions, changing a word here and there. What they should be doing is looking at the verb and its subject to see if they indeed are expressing the central thought.

By way of example—a journalistic one—a reporter is writing a story about a car accident in which a Lincoln man was killed. If the reporter happens to begin the sentence with the phrase "two cars," he or she is licked. Regardless of how much tinkering is done, the result is going to be a sentence much like:

Two cars were involved in a fatal crash at Highway 2 and 27th Street Tuesday afternoon.

The verb *were involved* says little, and the adjective *fatal* is a roundabout way of letting the reader know someone died. The central idea of that sentence-to-be is, of course, death. Turn death into a verb: died.

Now write the sentence:

"A Lincoln man died today in a two-car crash. . ."

In putting down the first word that comes to mind, writers often create difficulties for themselves through a sense of orderliness. They write with transition foremost in mind:

—Another reason for this is. . .

—Another case which Douglas said he found interesting was. . .

—One problem his department has had is. . .

Such sign-posting is necessary to the reader, but you can see that such sentences often pivot on small, meaningless verbs, sandwiched between many-worded clauses and phrases. This is a difficult problem. To avoid the awkwardness of such sentences you sometimes must sacrifice some of the emphasis on transition. You must take smaller bites—that is, you mustn't try to get everything said in one sentence. As an example, look at the following sentence:

The second major factor contributing to the increase in tort actions against police officers has been the landmark decisions of the Warren Court which reinforced the citizen's right to be protected from abusive practices and questionable procedures utilized by police.

Sacrificing some of the transitional focus, write that as:

Decisions of the Warren Court also have contributed to the increase in tort actions against police officers. Those decisions reinforced the citizen's right to be protected from improper police procedures.

5. Being Concrete

Contrary to what might be expected, amateurs are as likely as professionals to choose subject-verb or subject-verb-object structures. Yet their sentences are less assured and less clear than those of the professionals. The reason is that the amateurs choose abstract things for subjects while the professionals tend to use concrete things. In the sample of professional writing, taken for this project two out of three subjects were concrete things, while in the amateur writing, only one in two was.

In part that is because professionals are more precise. For instance, an amateur might write:

Meyer's *research uses* computers to imitate plant growth.

The more precise professional would not say that an abstraction such as *research* "used" anything. Instead:

In his research, Meyer used computers to...

Abstractions are so... well, so abstract that writers and readers have difficulty abstracting meaning, as in this example from a piece on neighborhood organizations:

Residents of cosmopolitan neighborhoods, on the other hand, do not need or desire friendships among their neighbors. *Functioning* solely for the business reasons, i.e., resolving a community problem, *can be done* quite easily.

The second sentence is the problem—the writer picked an abstract subject (functioning) out of the air and then had nothing to say about it: *Doing* and *functioning* are much the same thing.

This sentence, in fact, epitomizes a basic weakness in the writing of many people. It satisfactorily meets most of the criteria set forth in this workshop. The sentence is grammatical, it is not overly long, it is divided into two units, and it has a respectable subject-verb structure. However, to read it is to have the urge to improve it.

The problem is that its subject is too abstract and its verb is too imprecise. Teachers, editors, and secretaries can correct writing errors for you and can even improve your copy by eliminating needless words, creating more units, or cutting sentence length. The heart of your writing—meaning—is hard for others to operate on. Meaning is up to the writer, and meaning is best conveyed by concrete subjects performing the action of precise verbs.

Perhaps that is the central fact of writing. All the approaches suggested here are aimed at increasing the clarity of your writing, of letting subject-verb statements stand forth clearly in your sentences. In this sense then, "style" is not merely fancy packaging for meaning. Meaning and style are in the same box, a part of the same whole.

The following passage is meant to be a warm-up for you, prior to rewriting your own work. Please attack this passage sentence by sentence, looking first for the central meaning, then thinking of how to state that meaning most precisely. As you rewrite each sentence try to:

> —create more statements (subject-verb combinations)
> —cut down on the number of words with -ing, -ion, and other suspect endings
> —keep your subject and verb close together
> —choose concrete over abstract doers
> —eliminate words
> —create more units
> —cut down on sentence length
> —decrease the percentage of long words.

When you have completed your effort, fill out the chart on the next page. If you have failed to achieve differences in any categories, examine your work again to see if you can do so. You can compare your effort with the rewritten version printed on the following pages. In rewriting, don't just patch up segments. Take the ideas and start all over. Subjects and verbs are marked for you.

1. This section is simply a more formal listing of the city's assets and problems—physical, economic, institutional, and social—based on the background materials compiled in Section I.

2. Writing Section II should be a well thought out process of pulling together and summarizing the various assets and problems which are partly defined in Section I but which should also include other criteria relating to the overall city condition.

3. Ideally, it would be helpful to consult with various community leaders as well to obtain their assessments and opinions.

4. Once a listing of the city assets and problems has been made, the next step would be to formulate the goals and objectives statement which would include many of the factors listed as key city conditions both positive and negative.

5. A more thorough decision and policy making process would occur in this plan of development which would identify priority areas of concern that clearly relate to community development activities on a short and long term basis.

6. In addition, summarizing the city's pluses and minuses in the same section is useful because often the connection between certain city assets and possible solutions to existing problems can be readily seen, and key opportunity areas for the city improvement and development can be identified.

WRITING PROFILE

Factor	Original Copy	Rewritten Copy	Change
Number of words	207		
Number of long words	38		
% of long words	18.3%		
Number of sentences	6		
Average sentence length	34.5 words		
Fog index	21		
Number of units	10		
Average unit length	20.7 words		
Number of pairs of subjects & verbs*	14		
Subject-verb pairs per 100 words**	6.8		
Number of suspect suffixes	16		
% of suffixes	7.7%		
Number of concrete subjects	2		
Number of abstract subjects	13		
% concrete	13%		

*In cases of compound verbs, count each verb separately.

**To figure subject-verb pairs per 100 words: Take total number of words (500). Insert decimal point two places to left (5.00). Divide total number of subject-verb pairs by that figure (50 ÷ 5.00 equals 10). The answer is the number of subject-verb pairs.

1. Drawing from the materials compiled in Section I, this section lists more formally the city's strengths and weaknesses.

2. However, in writing section II, planners should add still other information better to picture the city's physical, economic, institutional and social strengths and weaknesses.

3. The opinions of community leaders should be included.

4. Once the city's strengths and weaknesses have been listed, the planners should set goals based on that list.

5. In this phase, planners should identify priority concerns, both long term and short, for community development and should decide on policy based on those priorities.

6. Putting strengths and weaknesses in one section has an added advantage; an item listed as a strength may well offer a solution to one listed as a weakness.

Note: The relationship of the idea in sentence 6 to the ideas preceding it was not clear. Hence, in this edited version, sentence 6 is just a stray thought with no central idea to call its home.

WRITING PROFILE

Factor	Original Copy	Rewritten Copy	Change
Number of words	207	122	
Number of long words	38	20	
% of long words	18.3%	16.4%	
Number of sentences	6	7	
Average sentence length	34.5 words	17.4 words	
Fog index	21	13.5	
Number of units	10	13	
Average unit length	20.7 words	9.4 words	
Number of pairs of subjects & verbs	14	9	
Subject-verb pairs per 100 words	6.8	7.4	
Number of suspect suffixes	16	7	
% of suffixes	7.7%	5.8%	
Number of concrete subjects	2	5	
Number of abstract subjects	13	5	
% concrete	13%	50%	

EXERCISE 10

Sentence by sentence, rewrite the three-page sample of your own work that you brought to this workshop. Follow the suggestions made in Exercise 8.

For this one exercise, check each sentence for each of the eight points. You cannot, of course, always take such pains with your writing. If you will try to apply these principles in this sample, you can gauge how good a writer you *could* be, and you can start to build a subconscious check list to use during the act of writing.

When you have finished, fill out the chart to compare the before and after versions.

If you succeed in making substantial changes, and if those changes do indeed make your writing clearer and more concise, then you have "passed" this workshop. If you cannot make substantial changes—or if the changes you made are so forced as to damage the readability—then either this workshop has passed you by or else you already are a world-class writer.

WRITING PROFILE

Factor	Original Copy	Rewritten Copy	Change
Number of words			
Number of long words			
% of long words			
Number of sentences			
Average sentence length			
Fog index			
Number of units			
Average unit length			
Number of pairs of subjects & verbs*			
Subject-verb pairs per 100 words**			
Number of suspect suffixes			
% of suffixes			
Number of concrete subjects			
Number of abstract subjects			
% concrete			

*In cases of compound verbs, count each verb separately.

**To figure subject-verb pairs per 100 words: Take total number of words (500). Insert decimal point two places to left (5.00). Divide total number of subject-verb pairs by that figure (50 ÷ 5.00 equals 10). The answer is the number of subject-verb pairs.

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