The Writer's Diet

Based on the book *The Writer's Diet* by Helen Sword

Five common problems that plague unfit sentences and practical exercises to help us develop healthier writing habits

Why?

Why?

Research

Why?

Research

Advance the frontier of knowledge

Why?

Research

Advance the frontier of knowledge

Spread the work and present it to peers

Five common problems

Five common problems

Verb weakness

Five common problems

Verb weakness

Noun emptiness

Five common problems

Verb weakness

Noun emptiness

Prepositional abundance

Five common problems

Verb weakness

Noun emptiness

Prepositional abundance

Adverb and adjective overuse

Five common problems

Verb weakness

Noun emptiness

Prepositional abundance

Adverb and adjective overuse

Waste words' occlusion

Verbal verve: Principles

- Favor strong, specific, robust action verbs (*scrutinize, dissect, recount, capture*) over weak, vague, lazy ones (*have, do, show*);

- Limit your use of be-verbs (*is, am, are, was, were, be*, and the nominal forms *being, been*);

Verbal verve:
A note on passive voice

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The passengers **were asked** to return to their seats.

Verbal verve:
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The passengers **were asked** to return to their seats.

Who asked?

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The passengers **were asked** to return to their seats.

Who asked?

- The flight attendant **asked** the passengers to return to their seats.

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Who asked?

- The flight attendant **asked** the passengers to return to their seats.
- The captain **told** the passengers to return to their seats.

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A note on passive voice

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Who asked?

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- The captain **told** the passengers to return to their seats.
- The voice on the loudspeaker **ordered** the passengers to return to their seats.

Verbal verve: Examples

In this paper, the conjugate symmetry of linearly modulated signals has been investigated, and a unified mathematical model is derived to describe this property. Based on the model, the concept of phase-rotation matrix (PRM) is introduced to partition the constellation of MIMO signals into subsets. An efficient MIMO detection algorithm called WLSD is proposed among the subsets.

TSP, Dec. 2016

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TSP, Dec. 2016

We modelled the conjugate symmetry of linearly modulated signals and, as a byproduct, we put forward the concept of phase-rotation matrix to break the constellation of signals into subsets. We then ran our WLSD MIMO detection algorithm on each subset.

Verbal verve: Exercises

From passive to active voice

I was sent a letter (by my friend).

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WLSD is proposed in this subsection to jointly estimate **M** and **x**.

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Verbal verve: Exercises

From passive to active voice

Identify five sentences that employ the passive voice – either in your own writing or in someone else's work – and turn them into active sentences that contain no forms of *be*. In doing so, you might have to furnish new verbs or even rephrase entire sentences.

Verbal verve: Exercises

From lazy to lively

Many people in Portugal have no skills in Internet usage. Those people include the young as well as the older generations.

Verbal verve: Exercises

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Try lack, a verb that emphasizes absence and deficiency.

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Now combine the two sentences.

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Try lack, a verb that emphasizes absence and deficiency.

Many people in Portugal lack Internet skills. Those people include the young as well as the older generations.

Now combine the two sentences.

Many people in Portugal — the young as well as the older generations —lack Internet skills.

Verbal verve: Exercises

From lazy to lively

Select a short sample of your writing – a paragraph or a page – and identify all the verbs. Once you have eliminated the forms of *be*, what verbs remain? Many so-called 'active' verbs – words like *make*, *do* and *use* – convey no specific sense of action. Can you liven up your prose by replacing bland, predictable verbs with more precise, energetic alternatives?

Noun density: Principles

- Anchor abstract ideas in concrete language and images;

- Illustrate abstract concepts using real-life examples (Show, don't tell);

- Limit your use of abstract nouns, especially nominalizations (nouns that have been formed from verbs, adjectives or other nouns).

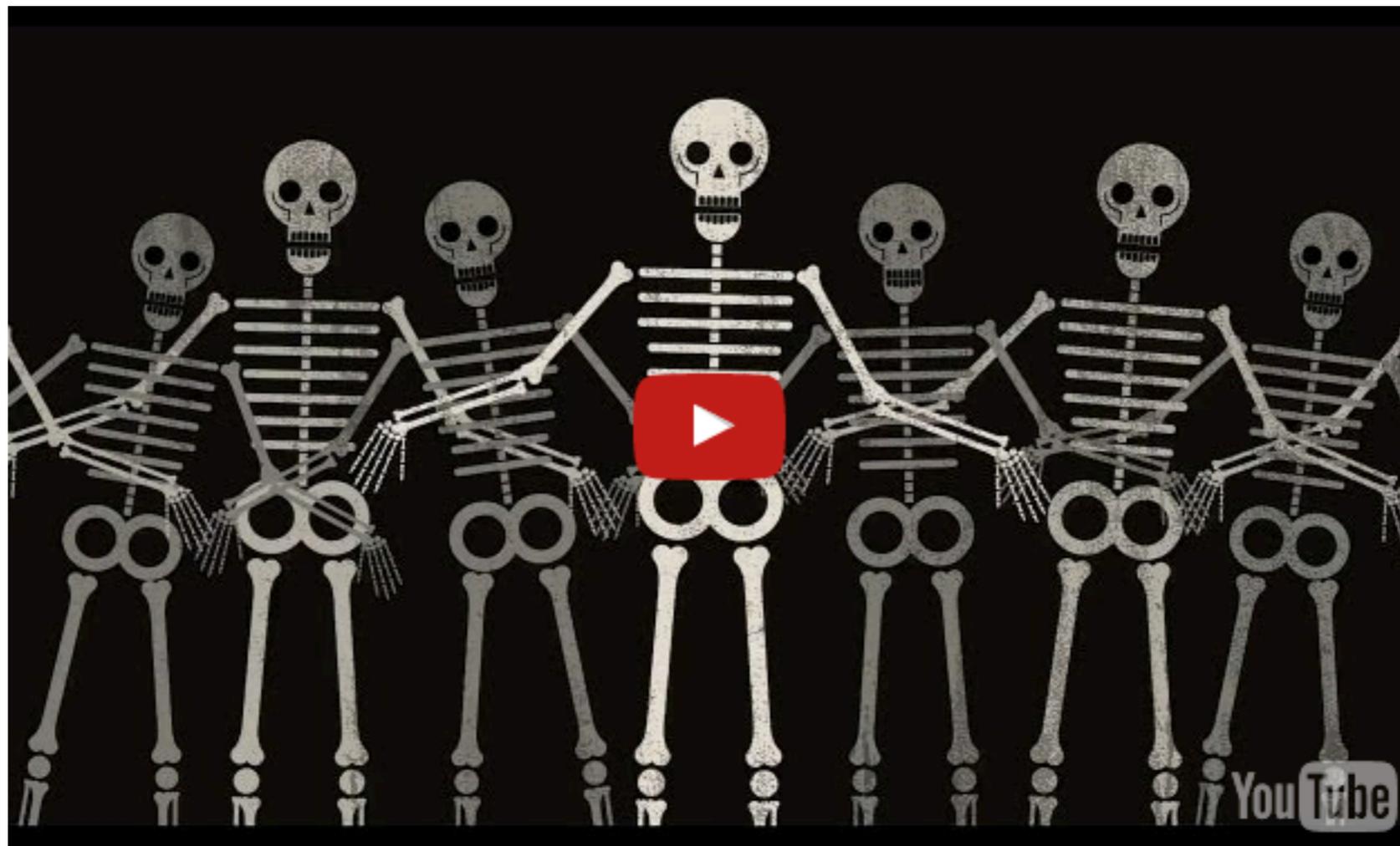Nouns ending in -ion, -ism, -ty, -ment, -ness, -ance, -ence

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Noun density:
A note on nominalizations

Nouns ending in -ion, -ism, -ty, -ment, -ness, -ance, -ence

Noun density: Examples

The capacity of a decision unit to induce innovation implementation within an adoption unit is crucial to organizational success. Risk and complexity are characteristics of innovations that can lead to resistance within organizational adoption units. Communication costs, types of power, and communication channels are structural characteristics that can be used by a decision unit to overcome this resistance. The interaction of these factors can determine the degree of successful innovation implementation within organizations.

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What?

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Organizations thrive on change; however, many employees resist new ideas that they perceive as too risky or complex. Successful managers break down such resistance by communicating with staff clearly and strategically.

Noun density: Examples

Distributed radar systems are capable of enhancing the detection performance by using multiple widely spaced distributed antennas. With prior statistic information of targets, resource allocation is of critical importance for further improving the system's achievable performance.

TSP, Dec. 2016

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Distributed radar with widely spread antennas cuts down the target detection error while saving power. However, the usual scheme of feeding every antenna with the same power does not take advantage of prior knowledge on targets.

Noun density: Exercises

The children demonstrated their engagement through their participation in a range of activities.

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Identify nominalizations

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Replace abstract language by concrete examples

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Identify nominalizations

The children demonstrated their engagement through their participation in a range of activities.

Convert nouns to verbs or adjectives

The children engaged in many different activities.

Replace abstract language by concrete examples

The children played games, sang songs and told stories.

Noun density: Exercises

List nominalizations – either from your own writing or from someone else's work – and identify the grammatical root stock on which each of these nouns grows.
Experiment with ways of communicating the same information more concretely, whether by converting some of the nouns to verbs or adjectives or by replacing abstract language with concrete examples.

Prepositional podge: Principles

- Avoid using more than three prepositional phrases in a row (e.g. '*in* a letter *to* the author *of* a book *about* birds');

- Vary your prepositions;

- As a general rule, do not allow a noun and its accompanying verb to become separated by more than about twelve words.

Prepositional podge: Examples

We study the problem of sensor collaboration for estimation of time-varying parameters in sensor networks. Based on prior knowledge about parameter correlations, the resulting sensor collaboration problem is solved for estimation of temporally uncorrelated and correlated parameters.

By exploiting problem structure, we solve the problem by using a convex-concave procedure, which renders a good locally optimal solution as evidenced by numerical results.

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We study collaborative estimation of time-varying parameters in sensor networks. We estimate temporally correlated and uncorrelated parameters, using prior knowledge on correlations between parameters.

From problem structure, we design a convex-concave procedure. Numerical results evidence the quality of the locally optimal solution.

Prepositional podge: Examples

Commuter marriage

The nub of the issue, which philosophers in earlier centuries tended to dismiss as irrelevant, but which recent thinkers have come to regard as the centrepiece of our awareness of ourselves as human beings, depends on whether or not we are willing to accept a world without God.

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Ad-dictions: Principles

- Let concrete nouns and active verbs do most of your descriptive work;

- Employ adjectives and adverbs only when they contribute new information to a sentence;

- Avoid overuse of 'academic ad-words', especially those with the suffixes *able, ac, al, ant, ary, ent, ful, ible, ic, ive, less, ous.*

Ad-dictions: Examples

Both these two methods are capable of converging to locally optimal solutions.

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Ad-dictions: Examples

Both these two methods are capable of converging to locally optimal solutions.

TSP, Dec. 2016

Both methods converge to local optima.

Ad-dictions: Examples

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In Section V we benchmark the proposed algorithms against the scheme of Garcia et al. [13].

Ad-dictions?
Not always…

There are two kinds of visual memory: one when you skillfully recreate an image in the laboratory of your mind, with your eyes open (and then I see Annabel in such general terms as: 'honey-colored skin,' 'thin arms,' 'brown bobbed hair,' 'long lashes,' 'big bright mouth'); and the other when you instantly evoke, with shut eyes, on the dark innerside of your eyelids, the objective, absolutely optical replica of a beloved face, a little ghost in natural colors.

Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*

Ad-dictions: Exercises

The first thing I saw of them was their motor car… It was a low-slung, scarred and battered black model with beige leather seats and a big spoked polished wood steering wheel.

John Banville, The Sea

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Highlight ad-words (including nouns and verbs used as ad-words)

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What happens when you replace some of the highlighted ad-words with new ones? Could any ad-words be eliminated?

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beige leather —> beautiful

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beige leather —> beautiful   polished —> bright

Ad-dictions: Exercises

The algorithm's complexity scales with the problem size.

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Compose sentences in which different adverbs modify the same verb.

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Replace each verb-plus-adverb combination with a new, more precise or vivid verb.

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The algorithm's complexity explodes with the problem size.
The algorithm's complexity is independent of the problem size.

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The algorithm's complexity is independent of the problem size.

The algorithm's complexity follows the problem size.

Waste words

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Pronoun

Adverb

Definite
Article

That

Conjunction

Adjective

Waste words

Pronoun

That

It

Noun

Waste words

That

It

Pronoun

Definite Article

This

Adverb

Adjective

Waste words

That

It

Adverb   Interjection

There

Pronoun

This

Noun

Adjective

Waste words

That

It

This

There

Waste words: Principles

- Use *it* and *this* only when you can state exactly which noun each word refers to;

- Avoid using *that* more than once in a single sentence or three times in a paragraph;

- Beware of sweeping generalizations that begin with *there*.

Waste words: *it*

Every time he threw the ball, she caught it.

Waste words: *it*

Every time he threw the ball, she caught it.

The girl threw the vase through the window and broke it.

Waste words: *it*

Every time he threw the ball, she caught it.

The girl threw the vase through the window and broke it.

What was broken??

Waste words: *it*

Waste words: *it*

It can be shown that…

Waste words: *it*

It can be shown that…

It is clear that…

Waste words: *it*

It can be shown that…

It is clear that…

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.

Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*

Waste words: *this (these, those, that)*

This is silver and that is aluminium.

He left early *this* morning.

Waste words: *this (these, those, that)*

MRCD [Multirecursive Constraint Demotion] can be applied to a set of full structural descriptions, and it will either determine that the set is inconsistent or return a grammar consistent with all of the descriptions. *This* means that we could try to deal with structural ambiguity by collecting a set of overt forms, and for each overt form generate all possible interpretations of the form.

Waste words: *this (these, those, that)*

MRCD [Multirecursive Constraint Demotion] can be applied to a set of full structural descriptions, and it will either determine that the set is inconsistent or return a grammar consistent with all of the descriptions. *This* means that we could try to deal with structural ambiguity by collecting a set of overt forms, and for each overt form generate all possible interpretations of the form.

Whenever you encounter *this* on its own, ask yourself, '*This* what?' This concept, this principle, this statement?

Waste words: *that*

Waste words: *that*

That dog.

Waste words: *that*

That dog.

That's great!

Waste words: *that*

That dog.

That's great!

That is no country for old men

Yeats, *Sailing to Byzantium*

Waste words: *that*

It is of great significance to develop methodologies that, in collaboration with domain experts, assist extracting low-dimensional representations that structure the data.

Waste words: *there*

Waste words: *there*

Are we there yet?

Waste words: *there*

Are we there yet?

There was speech in their dumbness, language in their very gesture.
Emily Dickinson

Waste words: *there*

Are we there yet?

There was speech in their dumbness, language in their very gesture.
Emily Dickinson

There are multiple directions for future research.
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Waste words: Examples

The symmetric Laplacian has the nice property that, by construction, it is positive semidefinite, so that it has all real nonnegative eigenvalues.

TSP, accepted for publication

Waste words: Examples

The symmetric Laplacian has the nice property that, by construction, it is positive semidefinite, so that it has all real nonnegative eigenvalues.

TSP, accepted for publication

The symmetric Laplacian is positive semidefinite, with nonnegative eigenvalues.

Waste words: Exercises

From your writing or a paper from someone else, highlight every occurrence of the word *it:* What is it doing in the sentences?

Many writers find it all too tempting to use this little pronoun as liberally as if it were a more interesting vocabulary item than it really is.

Waste words: Exercises

Now try the same exercise with *this*.

When we use this word too frequently, we grow lazy and complacent. This causes us to lose sight of our own meaning. How can we prevent this from happening?

Waste words:
Exercises

Whenever you find yourself using *that* more than once in a single sentence or more than three or four times in a paragraph, ask yourself a simple question: Do all those that-phrases direct the flow of your sentences, or do they muddy the waters?

Waste words: Exercises

Whenever you find yourself using *that* more than once in a single sentence or more than three or four times in a paragraph, ask yourself a simple question: Do all those that-phrases direct the flow of your sentences, or do they muddy the waters?

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,

that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights,

that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

Waste words: Exercises

Whenever you find yourself using *that* more than once in a single sentence or more than three or four times in a paragraph, ask yourself a simple question: Do all those that-phrases direct the flow of your sentences, or do they muddy the waters?

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,

that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights,

that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

A sentence that makes clear that the author has not thought carefully

about its structure will ensure that readers lose their way.

Waste words: Exercises

From your writing or a paper from someone else, highlight every occurrence of the word *there*:

There is no reason why you should not use the word *there* at least occasionally. Indeed, if there were a law passed tomorrow banning all use of the word *there* except as a marker of place, there would undoubtedly be protests by professional writers.

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Let's leave the opening *there* and eliminate the other two:

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Good academic writing examples

Good academic writing examples

Management

Where do new markets come from? I construct a network model in which national markets are nodes and flows of recorded music between them are links and conduct a longitudinal analysis of the global pattern of trade in the period 1976 to 2010. I hypothesize that new export markets are developed through a process of transitive closure in the network of international trade. When two countries' markets experience the same social influences, it brings them close enough together for new homophilous ties to be formed.

Jesse Shore, Boston University

Good academic writing examples

Electrical engineering

In applications of machine learning and data mining, one frequently encounters large collections of high dimensional data organized into a table. Each row in the table represents an example, and each column a feature or attribute. These tables may have columns of different (sometimes, non-numeric) types, and often have many missing entries.

For example, in medicine, the table might record patient attributes or lab tests: each row of the table lists test or survey results for a particular patient, and each column corresponds to a distinct test or survey question. The values in the table might be numerical (3.14), Boolean (yes, no), ordinal (never, sometimes, always), or categorical (A, B, O). Tests not administered or questions left blank result in missing entries in the data set.

Madeleine Udell, Cornell University