The Writer's Diet

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

First 3 of 5 common problems that plague unfit sentences and practical exercises to help us develop healthier writing habits

Why?

Why?

Research

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Advance the frontier of knowledge

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Advance the frontier of knowledge

Spread the work and present it to peers

Three common problems

Verb weakness

Noun emptiness

Prepositional abundance

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

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

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Now combine the two sentences.

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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?
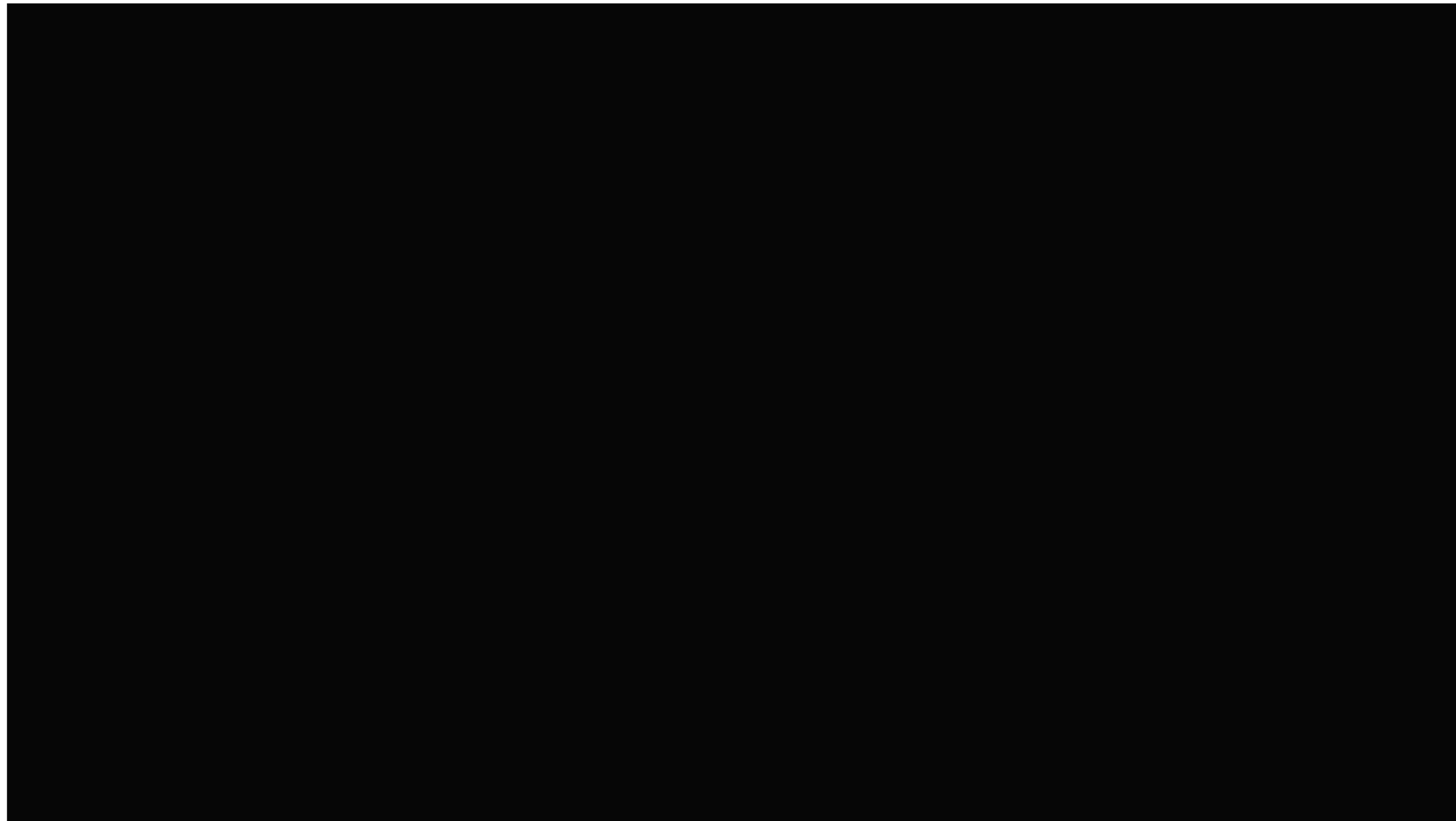
Noun density: Principles

- 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).

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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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

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Replace abstract language by concrete examples

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Identify nominalizations

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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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Prepositional podge: Exercises

Choose a page or two of your own writing and highlight all the prepositions. Next, ask yourself the following questions:

• Do you ever use more than three or four prepositional phrases in a row? (e.g. 'a book *of* case studies *about* the efficacy *of* involving multiple stakeholders *in* discussions *about* health care');

• Are your prepositions dynamic or static? That is, do they suggest action and motion (*through, onto, from*), or do they reinforce the status quo (*in, of, by*)?

• Do you vary your prepositions, or do you tend to use the same two or three over and over again?

Prepositional podge: Exercises

Commuter marriage

Although nouns and verbs can communicate with each other across wide distances, they function most harmoniously at close range. Choose a paragraph or two of your writing and identify the subject of each sentence, along with its accompanying verb. Do you find any sentences in which the subject and verb are separated by more than about twelve words? If so, try rephrasing them so that noun and verb walk hand in hand.

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