



Writing Powerfully

To write more powerfully, put your draft through a 10-step revision:

1. Write concisely—make your point and move on.
2. Create smooth, logical transitions between sections, paragraphs, and points.
3. Begin paragraphs and sections with strong deductive (bottom-line) statements, then support the statements with analysis and detail.
4. Use active, not passive, voice. Active voice follows the natural English sentence pattern of subject-verb-object; it tells who does what to whom. Look for "to be" verbs (is, are, was, and were) to see if unnecessary passive voice is present.

Passive: The report was published by the committee.

Active: The committee published the report.

When passive voice retreats into anonymity, readers must guess who took the action.

Draft: The children were enrolled in the program.

Revision: The parents enrolled the children in the program.

5. Use parallel structure to improve readability and comprehension.

Draft: The report was both long, and it was confusing.

Revision: The report was both long and confusing.

6. Strip away unnecessary modifiers; ensure that pronouns agree with their antecedents in person, number, and gender; and break up clusters of nouns—more than three nouns in a row can cause confusion.

As a modifier, "very" in the sense of a high degree is usually unnecessary: "The program is very effective."

Incorrect agreement: The agency said they were canceling the program.

Correct agreement: The agency said it was canceling the program.

Cluster of nouns: DHS has developed a human resources improvement program proposal.

Revision: DHS has proposed a program to improve human resources.

7. Replace jargon with plain English. Technical language in particular may be precise, but it can be difficult to understand. In short, write for general readers.



Here are three ways to eliminate jargon:

- Replace technical language with more common words: For example, replace "ontogeny" with "development" and "heuristic" with "learning aid."
- Explain the term in running text (or in a parenthetical expression or footnote) and introduce a substitute: For example, "Liquefied petroleum gas is mainly propane but includes some butane. In this report, we refer to liquefied petroleum gas as propane."
- Translate the term and then use it sparingly.

Words such as effort, factor, impact, input, occur, and process can also be jargon if they are meaningless.

As a side benefit, jargon-free writing appears more objective. Writers who use insider language can appear biased.

8. Use positive sentence structure, and beware of “non” words that shroud your meaning.

Draft: The army has not fulfilled its commitment to new procedures.

Revision: The army failed to implement new procedures.

Draft: In the tests, the system proved to be nonfunctional.

Revision: The tests proved the system did not function properly.

9. Avoid bias, personification, plagiarism, and sentence fragments. When gender bias appears in drafts, use the plural instead:

Draft: If dependent care interrupts the employee’s work, he or she should charge the appropriate leave code.

Revision: If dependent care interrupts employees’ work, they should charge the appropriate leave code.

Do not refer to people with health conditions as the conditions (e.g., write "people with epilepsy" rather than "epileptics").

10. Read text aloud to ensure that it reads smoothly and clearly and that sentences and paragraphs are not overly long or complex