

Revising for Language Awareness



PART A Exact Language: Avoiding Vagueness

PART B Concise Language: Avoiding Wordiness

PART C Fresh Language: Avoiding Triteness

PART D Figurative Language: Similes and Metaphors

Although it is important to write grammatically correct English, good writing is more than just correct writing. Good writing has life, excitement, and power. It captures the attention of the reader and compels him or her to read further.

The purpose of this chapter is to increase your awareness of the power of words and your skill at making them work for you. The secret of effective writing is **revision**. *Do not settle* for the first words that come to you, but go back over what you have written, replacing dull or confusing language with exact, concise, fresh, and sometimes figurative language.

Part A

Exact Language: Avoiding Vagueness

Good writers express their ideas as *exactly* as possible, choosing *specific*, *concrete*, and *vivid* words and phrases. They do not settle for vague terms and confusing generalities.

Which sentence in each of the following pairs gives the more *exact* information? That is, which uses specific and precise language? Which words in these sentences make them sharper and more vivid?

1. A car went around the corner.
2. A battered blue Mustang careened around the corner.



Writing Assignment 2

Study this photograph of a wedding; then write a paragraph explaining how this scene came about. Invent a story of how the couple met, their courtship, and their decision to marry.

In your topic sentence, state the general feeling or mood of the photograph. Then tell the story behind the picture. Revise your paragraph, paying special attention to sentence variety. Try to vary sentence types and lengths.



3. Janet quickly ate the main course.
4. Janet devoured the plate of ribs in two and a half minutes.
5. The president did things that caused problems.
6. The president's military spending increased the budget deficit.

- Sentences 2, 4, and 6 contain language that is *exact*.
- Sentence 2 is more exact than sentence 1 because *battered blue Mustang* gives more specific information than the general term *car*. The verb *careened* describes precisely how the car went around the corner, fast and recklessly.
- What specific words does sentence 4 substitute for the more general words *ate*, *main course*, and *quickly* in sentence 3?
- _____, _____, and _____

Why are these terms more exact than those in sentence 3?

- What words in sentence 6 make it clearer and more exact than sentence 5?
- _____
- _____

Concrete and detailed writing is usually exciting as well and makes us want to read on, as does this passage by Toni Morrison, who won the Nobel Prize for literature:

It is called the suburbs now, but when black people lived there it was called the Bottom. One road, shaded by beeches, oaks, maples, and chestnuts, connected it to the valley. The beeches are gone now, and so are the pear trees where children sat and yelled down through the blossoms at passersby. Generous funds have been allotted to level the stripped and faded buildings that clutter the road from Medallion up to the golf course. They are going to raze the Time and a Half Pool Hall, where feet in long tan shoes once pointed down from chair rungs. A steel ball will knock to dust Irene's Palace of Cosmetology, where women used to lean their heads back on sink trays and doze while Irene lathered Nu Nile into their hair. Men in khaki work clothes will pry loose the slats of Reba's Grill, where the owner cooked in her hat because she couldn't remember the ingredients without it.

—Toni Morrison, *Sula*

Now compare a similar account written in general and inexact language:

It is called the suburbs now, but when black people lived there it was called the Bottom. One road, shaded by big trees, connected it to the valley. Many of the trees are gone now. Generous funds have been allotted to level the buildings on the road from Medallion up to the golf course. They are going to knock down the pool hall, the beauty parlor, and the restaurant.

You do not need a large vocabulary to write exactly and well, but you do need to work at finding the right words to fit each sentence. As you revise, cross out vague or dull words and phrases and replace them with more exact terms. When you are tempted to write *I feel good*, ask yourself exactly what *good* means in that sentence: *relaxed? proud? thin? in love?* When people walk by, do they *flounce, stride, lurch, wiggle, or sneak?* When they speak to you, do people *stammer, announce, babble, murmur, or coo?* Question yourself as you revise; then choose the right words to fit that particular sentence.

PRACTICE 1

Lively verbs are a great asset to any writer. The following sentences contain four overused general verbs—to walk, to see, to eat, and to be. In each case, replace the general verb in parentheses with a more exact verb chosen to fit the context of the sentence. Use a different verb in every sentence. Consult a dictionary or thesaurus* if you wish.

Examples

In no particular hurry, we strolled (walked) through the botanical gardens.

Jane fidgets (is) at her desk and watches the clock.

1. With guns drawn, three police officers _____ (walked) toward the door of the warehouse.
2. As we stared in fascination, an orange lizard _____ (walked) up the wall.
3. The four-year-old _____ (walked) onto the patio in her mother's high-heeled shoes.
4. A furious customer _____ (walked) into the manager's office.
5. Two people who _____ (saw) the accident must testify in court.
6. We crouched for hours in the underbrush just to _____ (see) a rare white fox.
7. Three makeshift wooden rafts were _____ (seen) off the coast this morning.

* A thesaurus is a book of *synonyms*—words that have the same or similar meanings.

8. For two years, the zoologist _____ (saw) the behavior of bears in the wild.
9. There was the cat, delicately _____ (eating) my fern!
10. Senator Gorman astounded the guests by loudly _____ (eating) his soup.
11. All through the movie, she _____ (ate) hard candies in the back row.
12. Within seconds, Dan had bought two tacos from a street vendor and _____ (eaten) them both.
13. During rush hour, the temperature hit 98 degrees, and dozens of cars _____ (were) on the highway.
14. A young man _____ (is) on a stretcher in the emergency room.
15. Workers who _____ (are) at desks all day should make special efforts to exercise.
16. Professor Nuzzo _____ (was) in front of the blackboard, excited about this new solution to the math problem.

PRACTICE 2

The following sentences contain dull, vague language. Revise them using vivid verbs, specific nouns, and colorful adjectives. As the examples show, you may add and delete words.

Examples

A dog lies down in the shade.

A mangy collie flops down in the shade of a parked car.

My head hurts.

My head throbs.

I have shooting pains in the left side of my head.

1. Everything about the man looked mean.

2. I feel good today for several reasons.

3. A woman in unusual clothes went down the street.

4. The sunlight made the yard look pretty.

5. What the company did bothered the townspeople.

6. The pediatrician's waiting room was crowded.

7. As soon as he gets home from work, he hears the voice of his pet asking for dinner.

8. The noises of construction filled the street.

9. When I was sick, you were helpful.

10. This college does things that make the students feel bad.

PRACTICE 3

A word that works effectively in one sentence might not work in another sentence. In searching for the right word, always consider the **context** of the sentence into which the word must fit. Read each of the following sentences for meaning. Then circle the word in parentheses that *most exactly fits* the context of the sentence.

Example The alchemist cautiously (threw, dripped, held) the liquid mercury onto copper in order to make it look like gold.

1. Alchemy, an early form of chemistry, was a (course, way, science) that flourished from ancient times until around 1700.
2. It was based on the (knowledge, belief, fact) that a metal could be converted into another element.
3. Alchemists considered gold the (perfect, nicest, shiniest) metal.
4. Therefore, their goal was to (transform, redo, make) base metals, like lead, into gold.
5. They searched (eagerly, high and low, lots) for the “philosopher’s stone,” the formula that would make this change possible.
6. All “philosopher’s stones” consisted of sulfur and mercury; the trick was to discover the proper way to (combine, destroy, mix up) the two.
7. Over time, alchemy incorporated various (aspects, things, stuff) of astrology and magic.
8. For example, certain metals were (the same as, equated with, sort of like) specific heavenly bodies—gold with the sun or silver with the moon.
9. One famous alchemist proudly (said, muttered, boasted) that he could magically transform winter into summer.
10. Many alchemists went to work for greedy princes and kings, who always (liked, lusted for, thought about) more gold.
11. It was dangerous work though; more than one alchemist was (done away with, executed, knocked off) because he could not produce gold.
12. In their search for gold, however, some alchemists (foolishly, hopefully, accidentally) made valid scientific discoveries that led to the development of modern chemistry.

PRACTICE 4 The following paragraph begins a mystery story. Using specific and vivid language, revise the paragraph to make it as exciting as possible. Then finish the story; be careful to avoid vague language.

The weather was bad. I was in the house alone, with a funny feeling that something was going to happen. Someone knocked at the door. I got up to answer it and found someone outside. She looked familiar, but I didn’t know from where or when. Then I recognized her as a person from my past. I let her in although I was not sure I had done the right thing.

Part B

Concise Language: Avoiding Wordiness

Concise writing comes quickly to the point. It avoids **wordiness**—unnecessary and repetitious words that add nothing to the meaning.

Which sentence in each of the following pairs is more *concise*? That is, which does *not* contain unnecessary words?

1. Because of the fact that the watch was inexpensive in price, he bought it.
2. Because the watch was inexpensive, he bought it.
3. In my opinion I think that the financial aid system at Ellensville Junior College is in need of reform.
4. The financial aid system at Ellensville Junior College needs reform.
5. On October 10, in the fall of 2003, we learned the true facts about the Peruvian mummies.
6. On October 10, 2003, we learned the facts about the Peruvian mummies.

- Sentences 2, 4, and 6 are *concise* whereas sentences 1, 3, and 5 are *wordy*.
- In sentence 1, *because of the fact that* is really a *wordy* way of saying *because*. *In price* simply repeats information already given by the word *inexpensive*.
- The writer of sentence 3 undercuts the point with the wordy apology of *in my opinion I think*. As a general rule, leave out such qualifiers and simply state the opinion; but if you do use them, use either *in my opinion* or *I think*, not both! Sentence 4 replaces *is in need of* with one direct verb, *needs*.
- *In the fall of* in sentence 5 is *redundant*; it repeats information already given by which word?

- Why is the word *true* also eliminated in sentence 6?

Concise writing avoids wordiness, unnecessary repetition, and padding. Of course, conciseness *does not mean* writing short, bare sentences, but simply cutting out all deadwood and never using fifteen words when ten will do.

PRACTICE 5 The following sentences are *wordy*. Make them more *concise* by crossing out or replacing unnecessary words or by combining two sentences into one concise sentence. Rewrite each new sentence on the lines beneath, capitalizing and punctuating correctly.

Examples | The U.S. Census uncovers many interesting facts that have a lot of truth to them.

The U.S. Census uncovers many interesting facts.

In the year 1810, Philadelphia was called the cigar capital of the United States. The reason why was because the census reported that the city produced sixteen million cigars each year.

In 1810, Philadelphia was called the cigar capital of the United States because the census reported that the city produced sixteen million cigars each year.

1. The Constitution requires and says that the federal government of the United States must take a national census every ten years.

2. At first, the original function of the census was to ensure fair taxation and representation.

3. Since the first count in 1790, however, the census has been controversial. There have been several reasons why it has been controversial.

4. One reason why is because there are always some people who aren't included.

5. The 1990 census, for example, missed almost five million people, many of whom were homeless with no place to live.

6. For the 2000 census, the Census Bureau considered using statistical methods. The statistical methods would have been used instead of the traditional direct head count.

7. The Bureau would have directly counted about 90 percent of U.S. residents who live in the United States and then estimated the number and characteristics of the remainder of the rest of the people.

8. Those who opposed the idea believed that in their opinion statistical methods would have introduced new errors that were mistaken into the count.

9. The distribution of \$100 billion in money, as well as the balance of power in the House of Representatives, depended on how and in which manner the census was conducted.

10. Despite controversy, the U.S. census still continues to serve a beneficial purpose that is for the good of the United States.

PRACTICE 6 Rewrite this essay *concisely*, cutting out all unnecessary words. Reword or combine sentences if you wish, but do not alter the meaning.

Dr. Alice Hamilton, Medical Pioneer

At the age of forty years old, Dr. Alice Hamilton became a pioneer in the field of industrial medicine. In 1910, the governor of Illinois appointed her to investigate rumors that people who were doing the work in Chicago's paint factories were dying from lead poisoning. The result of her investigation was the first state law that was passed to protect workers.

The following year, the U.S. Department of Labor hired this woman, Dr. Hamilton to study industrial illness throughout the country of the United States. In the next decade, she researched and studied many occupational diseases, including tuberculosis among quarry workers and silicosis—clogged lungs—among sandblasters. To gather information, Dr. Hamilton went to the workplace—deep in mines, quarries, and underwater tunnels. She also spoke to the workers in their homes where they lived.

With great zeal, Dr. Hamilton spread her message about poor health conditions on the job. What happened with her reports is that they led to new safety regulations, workmen's compensation insurance, and improved working conditions in many industries. She wrote many popular articles and spoke to groups of interested citizens. In the year of 1919, she became the first woman to hold courses and teach at Harvard University. Her textbook which she wrote, *Industrial Poisons in the U.S.*, became the standard book on the subject. By the time she died in 1970—she was 101—she had done much to improve the plight of many working people. The reason why she is remembered today is because she cared at a time when many others seemed not to care at all.

Part C

Fresh Language: Avoiding Triteness

Fresh writing uses original and lively words. It avoids **clichés**, those tired and trite expressions that have lost their power from overuse.

Which sentence in each pair that follows contains fewer expressions that you have heard or read many times before?

1. Some people can relate to the hustle and bustle of city life.
2. Some people thrive on the energy and motion of city life.
3. This book is worth its weight in gold to the car owner.
4. This book can save the car owner hundreds of dollars a year in repairs.

- You probably found that sentences 2 and 4 contained fresher language. Which words and phrases in sentences 1 and 3 have you heard or seen before, in conversation, on TV, or in magazines and newspapers? List them:

Clichés and trite expressions like the following have become so familiar that they have almost no impact on the reader. Avoid them. Say what you mean in your own words:

Cliché: She is pretty as a picture.

Fresh: Her amber eyes and wild red hair mesmerize me.

Or occasionally, play with a cliché and turn it into fresh language:

Cliché: ... as American as apple pie.

Fresh: ... as American as a Big Mac.

Cliché: The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.

Fresh: "The grass is always greener over the septic tank."—Erma Bombeck

The following is a partial list of trite expressions to avoid. Add to it any others that you overuse in your writing.

Trite Expressions and Clichés

at this point in time	in this day and age
awesome	last but not least
better late than never	living hand to mouth
break the ice	one in a million
cold cruel world	out of this world
cool, hot	sad but true
cry your eyes out	tried and true
easier said than done	under the weather
free as a bird	work like a dog
hustle and bustle	green with envy

PRACTICE 7 Cross out clichés and trite expressions in the following sentences and replace them with fresh and exact language of your own.

1. In 1929, toy dealer Edwin S. Lowe came across people having more fun than a barrel of monkeys while playing a game at a carnival in rural Georgia.

2. A leader called out each and every number, and the players used beans to cover the matching numbers on their cards.
3. The winners yelled “Beano!” at the top of their lungs when they had filled in a row of numbers.
4. According to the carnival owner, a stranger had brought the game from Europe, so it went without saying that no one owned the game.
5. Quick as a wink, Lowe saw the game was a winner.
6. As soon as he returned home, the businessman, who was as sharp as a tack, began testing beano on friends.
7. One night, instead of “Beano!” a guest who was beside himself with excitement shouted out, “Bingo!”
8. Lowe went on to market the game as Bingo, and it sold like crazy.
9. Soon many nonprofit organizations were holding bingo tournaments as a tried and true method of raising funds.
10. Because Lowe had produced only twenty-four different cards, too many people were cleaning up.
11. Therefore, Lowe paid a mathematics professor an awesome amount to develop six thousand cards, each with a different combination of numbers.
12. By 1934, hundreds of thousands of Americans were playing bingo like there was no tomorrow.

Part D

Figurative Language: Similes and Metaphors

One way to add sparkle and exactness to your writing is to use an occasional simile or metaphor. A simile is a comparison of two things using the word *like* or *as*:

“He was *as ugly as* a wart.” —Anne Sexton

“The frozen twigs of the huge tulip poplar next to the hill clack in the cold *like* tinsnips.” —Annie Dillard

A **metaphor** is a similar comparison without the word *like* or *as*:

"My soul is a dark forest." —D. H. Lawrence

Love is a virus.

- The power of similes and metaphors comes partly from the surprise of comparing two apparently unlike things. A well-chosen simile or metaphor can convey a lot of information in very few words.
- To compare a person to a wart, as Sexton does, lets us know quickly just how ugly that person is. And to say that *twigs clack like tinsnips* describes the sound so precisely that we can almost hear it.
- What do you think D. H. Lawrence means by his metaphor? In what ways is a person's soul like a *dark forest*?

- The statement *love is a virus* tells us something about the writer's attitude toward love. What is it? In what ways is love like a virus?

Similes and metaphors should not be overused; however, once in a while, they can be a delightful addition to a paper that is also exact, concise, and fresh.

PRACTICE 8 The author of the following paragraph describes a lake as winter turns to spring. She uses at least two similes and two metaphors. Underline the similes and circle the metaphors.

Mornings, a transparent pane of ice lies over the meltwater. I peer through and see some kind of water bug—perhaps a leech—paddling like a sea turtle between green ladders of lakeweed. Cattails and sweetgrass from the previous summer are bone dry, marked with black mold spots, and bend like elbows into the ice.

—Gretel Erlich, "Spring," *Antaeus*

PRACTICE 9 Think of several similes to complete each sentence that follows. Be creative! Then underline your favorite simile, the one that best completes each sentence.

Example My English class is like an orchestra.
 the Everglades.
 an action movie.
 a vegetable garden.

1. Job hunting is like _____ 3. Writing well is like _____

2. My room looks like _____ 4. Marriage is like _____

PRACTICE 10 Think of several metaphors to complete each sentence that follows. Jot down three or four ideas, and then underline the metaphor that best completes each sentence.

Example Love is a blood transfusion.
 a sunrise.
 a magic mirror.
 a roller coaster ride.

1. The Internet is _____ 3. My car is _____

2. Registration is _____ 4. Courage is _____



Writing Assignments

1. Good writing can be done on almost any subject if the writer approaches the subject with openness and with “new eyes.” Take a piece of fruit or a vegetable—a lemon, a green pepper, a cherry tomato. Examine it as if for the first time. Feel its texture and parts, smell it, weigh it in your palm.

Now capture your experience of the fruit or vegetable in words. First jot down words and ideas, or freewrite, aiming for the most *exact* description possible. Don’t settle for the first words you think of. Keep writing. Then go back over what you have written, underlining the most exact and powerful writing. Compose a topic sentence and draft a paragraph that conveys your unique experience of the fruit or vegetable.

2. In the paragraph that follows, Don DeLillo describes a “small” experience in such rich, exact detail that it becomes alive and intriguing to the reader. Read his paragraph, underlining language that strikes you as especially *exact* and *fresh*. Can you spot the two similes? Can you find any especially vivid adjectives or unusual verbs?

You have to know the feel of a baseball in your hand, going back awhile, connecting many things, before you can understand why a man would sit in a chair at four in the morning holding such an object, clutching it—how it fits the palm so reassuringly, the corked center making it buoyant in the hand, and the rough spots on an old ball, the marked skin, how an idle thumb likes to worry the scuffed horsehide. You squeeze a baseball. You kind of juice it or milk it. The resistance of the packed material makes you want to press harder. There’s an equilibrium, an agreeable animal tension between the hard leather object and the sort of clawed hand, veins stretching with the effort. And the feel of raised seams across the fingertips, cloth contours like road bumps under the knuckle joints—how the whorled cotton can be seen as a magnified thumbprint. . . . The ball was smudged green near the Spalding trademark; it was still wearing a small green bruise where it had struck a pillar, according to the history that came with it—flaked paint from a bolted column in the left-field stands embedded in the surface of the ball.

—Don DeLillo, *Underworld*

Write a paragraph or essay in which you also describe a brief but interesting experience (or event), perhaps a time you observed, admired, or truly studied an object or person. As you freewrite or brainstorm, try to capture the most precise and minute details of what you experienced or what happened. Now revise your piece of writing, making the language as *exact*, *concise*, and *fresh* as you can.



3. The figure above shows a painting by Milan Kunc called "Crocodile Village." Look closely at this painting, noting the small huts on the crocodile's back, the man in the boat, and the unusual position of the moon. What overall impression or mood does the painting communicate to you? Is it peaceful, threatening, magical?

Now write a two-paragraph composition discussing the painting. In the first paragraph, describe the painting, very specifically pointing out important details. In the second paragraph, explain what you think the painter is trying to convey by creating this picture. As you revise, make your writing as *exact*, *concise*, and *fresh* as possible so that a reader who has not seen the painting has a clear sense of it.

