• Don’t use a pronoun when a noun would be clearer.
• Don’t use a general word when you can use a specific one.
• Don’t use the passive voice unless the subject is unknown or unimportant.

For most of human history, the more flowery and elaborate your language, the more admired you were as a wordsmith. In the United States, with the exponential increase in print, however, value has come to inhere in brevity. Modern people want not just fast cars and fast food but fast texts.

You should remember one caveat, however. All this advice about brevity and clarity is prescriptive—it doesn’t necessarily reflect what is happening in the pages of academic journals. Some research indicates that prestigious journals’ articles tend to be less readable and more complex than those articles in less prestigious journals (Shelley and Schuh 2001). Some scholars have fulminated against the demand in U.S. education for clear writing, reminding scholars about “the uses of obscurity” and “the delights of jargon” (Lanham 2007). Further, Merriam-Webster’s wonderful Dictionary of English Usage shows that many of the most sacrosanct writing “rules” are simply preferences. All the most famous English writers split infinitives, ended sentences with prepositions, and used “comprise” when they should have used “compose.” If you are confused about what is correct, it is precisely because you have seen so many incorrect instances in print.

So why do instructors give this advice about clarity? Because you must be more skilled to pull off a complex sentence than a simple one. Maintaining links in a complex sentence is difficult and teaching how to write good complex sentences is even more difficult. In contrast, teaching how to write a simple sentence is straightforward. Thus, recommending clarity is the easiest advice to give those with poor prose. Once poor writers have learned to link material in simple ways, they can start attempting a more complex writing style.

The conclusion? Developing skills in writing clear sentences will help you become a better complex writer in the end. So, let’s look at some ways of improving clarity.

THE BELCHER DIAGNOSTIC TEST

I have innovated a diagnostic test to help students determine where they could improve their word choice and sentence structure. I’ve based the test on the principle that certain words signal the possibility of certain problems. If you can focus your revising attention on these signal words and the words around them, you can improve your writing without having to memorize a lot of rules.

Some caveats. The test is not that helpful for nonnative speakers of English. The test is best at capturing the tics of those trained to write in North American or British schools. For nonnative speakers, I highly
recommend any of the books by John M. Swales and Christine B. Feak, including Academic Writing for Graduate Students (1994) and English in Today’s Research World (2000). Further, this diagnostic test cannot identify all the places where you could improve your prose. Only long experience reading in your field, studying style and grammar manuals, or taking composition classes can give you all the tools you need to identify poor prose and write correct prose.

Many students know that they should do something to improve their prose, but when they sit down with their entire article of 5,000 to 15,000 words, they feel overwhelmed. Where to start and how? My diagnostic test makes the task of line editing less daunting by identifying some straightforward problems and giving some simple solutions. It gives you a method for entering sentences and fixing problems. Then you will find it easier to solve the sentence’s other problems. The test is also helpful for good self-editors who need a (fun) way to defamiliarize their prose for a last check. All writers have blind spots and this test can help you to detect them.

If the test seems overwhelming at first, remember that according to linguistic theory, there are only four categories of transformation: deletion, addition, substitution, and rearrangement. In other words, there are only four kinds of changes you can make to your prose. That seems manageable, right? Start with the simplest possible solution, and only if that doesn’t work should you try something more complicated. I studied copyediting with a famous instructor in Washington D.C., Bita Lanys, who taught generations of copyeditors to train their steely eyes on turgid government prose. On the first day of class, she told us that any idiot could change a text 50 percent and improve it 50 percent. You were an editor, she said, when you could change a text 5 percent and improve it 50 percent.

Read the principles below to understand why the diagnostic test will focus on signal words.

**Diagnostic Test Part I: Words that Might Need to Be Cut**

The following words signal possible deadwood (unnecessary words). If you can rewrite the sentence without them, consider doing so. (Those of you familiar with Strunk and White’s Elements of Style will notice that it has inspired quite a few of the examples below.)

**Search for and and or.** Either of these conjunctions can signal doubling (the use of two words where one will do). To improve a sentence with doubling, delete the signal word and one of the similar terms.

- **Doubles:** Yang and Yu argued that emotion is necessary and essential.
- **Singles:** Yang and Yu argued that emotion is necessary.

Note: “Yang and Yu” is not a doubling—the two words do not mean the same thing—so you cannot cut either. But “necessary and essential” is a doubling; pick one of the words.
Either of these conjunctions can signal a list, which is fine if the list is not comprehensive. If you have listed all the subcategories, consider deleting the comprehensive list and using the category instead.

- List of subcategories: She asked the men, women, and children to stand.
  Category: She asked the congregation to stand.
  Note: Any list should have a parallel structure (more on this principle later).

Either of these conjunctions can signal a list, which is fine if you introduce it. Structure the sentence so that the list concept appears first and then the list.

- List concept last: The predominant sounds of the steel guitar and fiddle, vocal timbers of strain in their higher registers, regional accents, comparable ranges, and lyrics that address the pains of romance demonstrate that Wells and Williams sung about similar topics, such as infidelity, in comparable manners.
  List concept first: The music of Wells and Williams has in common the predominance of the steel guitar and fiddle, a strain in the higher vocal registers, distinct regional accents, and heart wrenching lyrics about infidelity and the other pains of romance.

Either of these conjunctions can signal a list, which is fine if the list is parallel. Structure the items in the list so that they appear in similar ways. Each item in the list should follow naturally from the words right before the list. The easiest way to make a list parallel is to start each item in the list with the word that appeared right before the list. Once every item starts with the same word, you know it is parallel and you can remove the word. In the example below, see how you could make the sentence parallel by adding the word “as” to each item.

- Not parallel: During the war, women did all sorts of new jobs, including acting as the police, truck driving, factory workers, and harvesting and planting.
  Parallel but awkward: During the war, women did all sorts of new jobs, including acting as the police, driving trucks, working in factories, and farming land.
  Parallel: During the war, women took on new jobs as police officers, truck drivers, factory workers, and farm laborers.
  Note: In the first sentence, the items were a verb, a noun, a noun, and a verb—not parallel. In the second sentence, all were verbs but the first item was awkward. In the third sentence, all the items are nouns that followed naturally from “as.”

Either of these conjunctions can signal a run-on sentence. If you can split a sentence into two, consider doing so.

- Run-on sentence: In their study of working-class youth, Skinitz and Sobmon contended that the tendency of women and working
class youth to retain and make decisions with respect to relationships is often interpreted by social science researchers as constraining, rather than enabling, their development, reflecting a bias that emphasizes a predominant American “developmental vision” of heroic separation from past ties to move forward.

Strong sentences: In their study of working-class youth, Skinitz and Sobron argued that women and working class youth tended to make decisions based on family ties and that social science researchers tended to interpret such decision making as constraining their subjects’ individual growth. According to Skinitz and Sobron, this interpretation reflects a bias toward heroic separation from past ties, a peculiarly American “developmental vision.”

Search for there and it. Either of these pronouns can signal deadwood or weak verbs, particularly when paired with the verb to be and that or which. To improve a sentence with a cluster of these signal words, delete the signal words, delete the verb to be, bring in a stronger verb, and then move the subject up to the front of the sentence.

- Cluttered: There were a great number of test tubes lying on the counter.
  Better: A number of test tubes lay on the counter.
  Best: Test tubes covered the counter.

- Cluttered: It was clear from the high attendance that there are many who enjoy opera.
  Better: The high attendance clearly showed that many enjoy opera.
  Best: The high attendance demonstrated that many enjoy opera.
  Note: “There are” or “It was” can sometimes help your rhythm or transitions. So you don’t have to delete them all; just examine each instance to see if you should cut it in particular.

The pronoun it often appears without a clear antecedent. Check every instance of it and make sure its antecedent is clear.

- Unclear pronoun: The experiment survived the power failure, due to the university’s backup generator, but it soon grew overheated and then it was ruined.
  Clear pronoun: The experiment survived the power failure, due to the university’s backup generator, but the generator soon overheated and the experiment was ruined.
  Best sentence: The university’s backup generator saved the experiment when the power failed, but the generator soon overheated and the experiment was ruined.

Either of these pronouns can signal a dangling participle if they appear with the verb to be and after an introductory clause. Check every instance of these pronouns right after a comma.

- Dangling: Having completed the experiment, there is no reason for the students to stay.
Attached: Having completed the experiment, the students had no reason to stay.

Note: The experiment was not conducted by “there” but by “the students.” You must change the sentence to avoid the introductory clause modifying the wrong word.

Search for that and which and who. Any of these relative pronouns often signals deadwood, especially when paired with the verb to be and there or it. When these words appear together, you can often delete them. For instance, “there are many who” can become “many.” Or, “the man who is in the front office” can become “the receptionist.” You can often transform a noun later in the sentence into an earlier modifier or verb. Just be careful—sometimes that or which is essential to the meaning of the sentence (especially right after a comma).

• Wordy: His fundamental belief is that there is a conflict between Sartre’s philosophy and his ethics.
  Clean: He believes that Sartre’s philosophy conflicts with his ethics.

• Wordy: Poor households pay more for the food that they buy because local merchants exploit them.
  Clean: Poor households pay more for their food because local merchants exploit them.

• Wordy: Government facilities can only spend funds that are available.
  Clean: Government facilities can only spend available funds.

• Wordy: It should be noted that there are several who did not agree with the verdict.
  Better: Several did not agree with the verdict.
  Clean: Several disagreed with the verdict.
  Note: See the section on “not” below for advice on how to do the second revision.

Search for prepositions like by, of, to, for, toward, on, at, from, in, with, and as. Any of these prepositions, especially when they appear in clusters, often signal unneeded phrases. You can improve the sentence in which these phrases appear by deleting the phrases or changing nouns into modifiers.

• Wordy: In order to pass the test in the field of sociology, you must study the textbook.
  Clean: To pass the sociology test, you must study the textbook.

• Wordy: With reference to democracy, we should encourage it by way of a free press.
  Clean: We should encourage democracy with a free press.

• Cluttered: In the case of a great number of developing countries, the volume of production rose over the course of the year far higher than the predictions of the economists.
Clean: The yearly production of many developing countries rose higher than economists predicted.
Best: The yearly production of many developing countries exceeded economists’ predictions.
Clean: Many developing countries’ yearly production exceeded economists’ predictions.
Note: Some will feel that the third revision is going too far as the subject is now a string of five adjectives and nouns. You can stay with the second revision and avoid strings of nouns in a row.

Prepositions often signal verbs buried as nouns (called nominalizations), especially when paired with pronouns like *it*. If you can unbury the verb, consider doing so.
- Buried verbs: *In the event that* I forget to explain the purpose of the article, please send an e-mail to me *with* a reminder about *it*.
  Unburied verbs: If I forget to explain the article’s purpose, please remind me in an e-mail.

Prepositions often signal wordy constructions, especially when paired with the verb *to be*. If you can replace the prepositional phrase with an adjective, consider doing so.
- Wordy: *It is a question of* some importance how Russians remember Stalin.
  Strong: An important question is how Russians remember Stalin.

Strings of prepositional phrases often signal awkward sentence constructions. Evaluate each sentence with three or more prepositions. If you can rewrite the sentence without some of them, consider doing so.
- Cluttered: *There had been* major changes in the presentation related to the data accumulated as a consequence of exhaustive study of the results of treatment in cancers of the head and neck, breast, and gynecological tract.
  Clean: The author changed her presentation after exhaustively studying the results of treated cancers of the head and neck, breast, and gynecological tract.
  Note: Not all prepositions were removed; some were needed.
  Avoid replacing strings of prepositions with strings of adjectives (e.g., see the “yearly production” example above).

Prepositions often signal cluttered writing, especially when paired with words like *fact, kind, sort, type, way, form, variety, range*, and so on. If you can rewrite the sentence without them, consider doing so.
- Wordy: Nkuku *was* the type of individual who could not make up his mind.
  Better: Nkuku was an individual who could not make up his mind.
  Better: Nkuku could *not* make up his mind.
  Clean: Nkuku was indecisive.
• Wordy: Due to the fact that I have to teach at that time, I will not be able to come to your talk.
Better: I have to teach at that time, so I will not be able to attend your talk.
Clean: I cannot attend your talk because I have to teach then.
Note: Sometimes switching the sentence around can solve the problem.

• Wordy: The way in which the candidates conducted themselves was observed by the election observers.
Better: The election observers observed how the candidates conducted themselves.
Clean: The election observers monitored the candidates’ conduct.

Diagnostic Test Part II:
Words that Might Need to Be Added

Sometimes you need to add a few extra words, not cut a few. Look at your pronouns to see if you need to clarify their relationship to the noun. A pronoun is a word used in place of a noun. Sometimes, it is not clear which noun the pronoun is replacing—pronouns can easily drift from their antecedent and the reader must reread the sentence to understand it. Evaluate each pronoun to see if you could replace it with a noun or add a noun to it.

Search for this and these and those. These demonstrative pronouns often appear alone, leaving their meaning unclear. Evaluate each occurrence and consider placing the antecedent, a noun, after these pronouns. The farther the pronoun is from its noun, the more likely that you need to add a noun to the pronoun to make it clear.

• Unclear pronoun: These caused the problem.
  Clear noun: These manufacturers caused the problem.

• Unclear pronoun: This demonstrates the ways in which syntax is tied to public and visible processes of projection.
  Clear noun: This study demonstrates how syntax is tied to public and visible projection processes.
  Best sentence: This study demonstrates how syntax interacts with visible projection processes.

• Unclear pronoun: Those in which the variables were left undecided were few.
  Clear noun: Those studies in which the variables were left undecided were few.
  Best sentence: Few studies left the variables undecided.

Demonstrative pronouns can be used mistakenly, their placement referencing the wrong antecedent. Make sure that clauses and pronouns are working together, not dangling.

• Unclear: Using the multiple choice tests and essay questions, these were prepared for the registrar.
Dangling and passive: Using the multiple choice tests and essay questions, these class grades were prepared for the registrar.
Attached and active: Using the multiple choice tests and essay questions, I prepared the class grades for the registrar.
Note: The first and second versions are grammatically incorrect. The grades or the registrar did not use the tests and questions, the teacher did. Fixing the passive voice helped make this clear in the third version. Passive voice after an introductory clause often leads to dangling constructions.

Search for *they and them and their and its*. These pronouns (as well as *it*) can appear too distant from their correct antecedents or too close to the wrong antecedents. Evaluate each occurrence and consider replacing the pronoun with a noun. Other pronouns are *she/her/hers* and *he/him/his* and *we/us/ours*.

- Unclear pronouns: The students were supposed to compete against their lecturers in football but they waited in vain for them to show up.
  Clear nouns: The students were supposed to compete against their lecturers in football but the students waited in vain for the lecturers to show up.
  Best sentence: The students were supposed to compete against their lecturers in football but the lecturers never showed up.
  Note: In the first version, "they" appeared after "the lecturers" but referenced "the students." Replacing pronouns with nouns made who was doing what clear.

- Unclear pronouns: *They* cannot always be confident about *its* results.
  Clear nouns: The researchers cannot be confident of the test’s results.

- Unclear pronouns: *It was not* always efficacious for all the patients, they told them.
  Clear nouns: The drug was not always efficacious for all the patients, the researchers told the company.
  Best sentence: The drug did not help all the patients, the researchers told the company.

The pronoun should not appear before its antecedent. If the pronoun appears before its noun antecedent, switch them so that the pronoun is not premature.

- Premature pronoun: If she had taken to heart all the criticism of her research, Margaret Mead might never have published.
  Clear: If Margaret Mead had taken to heart all the criticism of her research, she might never have published.
  Note: The verb *had* is necessary to the verb tense and shouldn’t be deleted.
Diagnostic Test Part III:
Words that Might Need to Be Changed

Sometimes you can’t cut words or add words; you need to change words. That is, you need to replace a weak word with a strong word. In particular, academic writing tends to bury verbs as nouns or to employ vague verbs instead of vivid verbs.

Search for forms of the verb to be, including is, are, was, were, am, be, being, and been. As has often been observed, the verb to be is the workhorse of English verbs. It is essential for the progressive tense (e.g., the dog was running), for copulas (e.g., Abena is tall), and for the passive voice. The verb to be will always be common in your writing; just make sure you have not used it when another verb or sentence construction would be stronger.

You can often replace the verb to be with a more vivid verb. Evaluate each occurrence of the verb to be in your writing. If you can rewrite the sentence without it, consider doing so.

- Weak verb: In the early twentieth century, “the Mexican Problem” was the phrase most often used in reference to Mexican American culture.
  Strong verbs: In the early twentieth century, scholars’ frequent condemnation of “the Mexican Problem” denigrated Mexican American culture.

- Weak verb: Mohammed is a mountain climber and the designer of hiking boots.
  Strong verbs: Mohammed climbs mountains and designs hiking boots.
  Note: Often, as in this example, you can find a stronger verb in one of the sentence’s nouns (e.g., “climber” becomes “climbs”).

You can often delete the verb to be when followed closely by and.

- Cluttered: Human kind is a part of nature and shares in the phenomenon that applies to other animals.
  Clean: Human kind, a part of nature, shares in the phenomenon that applies to other animals.

The verb to be often signals passive construction (e.g., a sentence that buries the subject). If the subject of the sentence is delivering the action, it is in the active voice. If the subject is receiving the action, the sentence is in the passive voice.

- Passive: The ball [object] was hit by her [subject].
  Active: She [subject] hit the ball [object].

The signal of a passive sentence is a form of the verb to be followed by a verb in the past tense (often ending in “ed”). If you can rewrite the sentence as an active sentence, consider doing so.

- Passive: My first visit to a butcher shall always be remembered by me.
  Active: I shall always remember my first visit to a butcher.

- Passive: The new city hall was designed by my sister’s architecture firm.
  Active: My sister’s architecture firm designed the new city hall.
The verb to be in the passive voice is appropriate when the subject is unknown or unimportant or when the object has been the subject of the paragraph. Passive voice also may be appropriate to avoid putting a long list at the beginning of the sentence.

- Passive: My sister won several prizes for her architectural designs. Unfortunately, she has not been asked to join any architectural firm.
  Active: [Since "sister" is the subject of the first sentence, the passive voice in the second sentence is fine.]

- Passive: The paint must be carefully prepared before it can be used in the restoration process.
  Active: [Leaving this sentence in the passive voice may be appropriate. If the section in which the sentence appears is instructional, it may not be possible to introduce an anonymous subject like "the art restoration expert" or "you." The context may not support either an invented actor or the repetition of the subject.]

- Passive: The new bridge was completed in April.
  Active: [We may not need to know that the Los Angeles Department of Public Works completed the work. In some contexts, we may have little interest in who completed the bridge.]

- Passive: Peter was attacked outside the gym and suffered a knee injury.
  Active: [The impact of the action on the known "object" Peter may be more important than the unknown "subject," the attacker.]

Search for forms of the verb to have, including had and has. The verb to have is essential for the perfect tense (e.g., they have waited, they will have waited). But to have sometimes buries another verb as a noun, especially when paired with an article like a or an. If you can rewrite the sentence to unbury the verb, or without to have entirely, do so.

- Buried verb: The candidates have a tendency to exaggerate their accomplishments, which is indicative of their insecurity.
  Unburied verb: The candidates tend to exaggerate their accomplishments, indicating their insecurity.
  Strong sentence: The candidates’ insecurity leads them to exaggerate their accomplishments.

- Weak verb: Poor scholarship also has problems with adequate research.
  Strong verb: Poor scholarship also suffers from inadequate research.

Search for forms of the verb to do, including does and did. The verb to do is essential for questions about actions (e.g., do you intend to go?). But to do can bury a verb as a noun, especially when paired with an article like a or an or the word not. If you can rewrite the sentence without this verb, do so.
• Buried verb: We would like to do a study on animal husbandry.
  Unburied verb: We would like to study animal husbandry.

• Cluttered: It is clear that the experiment that they did did not succeed.
  Better: Their experiment did not succeed.
  Strong sentence: Their experiment failed.

Search for forms of the verb to make, to provide, to perform, to get, to seem, and to serve. These verbs can also bury a strong verb, especially when paired with an article like a or an and prepositions. If you can rewrite the sentence with a stronger verb, do so.

• Weak: This course will provide an introduction to animal husbandry to undergraduates.
  Strong: This course will introduce undergraduates to animal husbandry.

Search for words ending in ent, ence, ion, and ize. These endings often signal verbs buried as nouns (nominalizations), especially if they appear with a preposition. If you can rewrite the sentence to convert the noun back into a verb, consider doing so.

• Buried verb: I would like to draw this inference from the sentence in Finnegans Wake that . . .
  Unburied verb: I infer from the sentence in Finnegans Wake that . . .
  Note: Not all words ending in ent are buried verbs (e.g., spent, sentence). Such words do not need to be changed.

• Buried verbs: The state's improvement was due to the establishment of an impartial judiciary.
  Unburied verb: The state's improvement was due to establishing an impartial judiciary.
  Unburied verbs: The state improved upon establishing an impartial judiciary.

You can convert almost any word with these endings when it is bracketed by the and of:

• Buried verb: Policymaking involves the development of acceptable courses of action.
  Unburied verb: Policymaking involves developing acceptable courses of action.

Search for not. The word not can signal a weak noun, a weak adjective, or a problem with multiple negatives. Evaluate each occurrence of the word in your writing. If you can rewrite the sentence without it, consider doing so.

• Multiple negatives: Not only does Bosey's novel not have a well-defined plot, but it also does not have strong character development or interesting writing.
  Better but weak adjectives: Bosey's novel does not have a well-defined plot, strong character development, or interesting writing.
Best sentence: A murky plot, poor character development, and uninteresting writing mar Bosey's novel.
Note: The writer veiled the harsh criticism in the first version; it is on full display in the third version. Writers afraid of their arguments embrace not because it appears kinder, but sometimes it pays to be harsh and memorable rather than wimpy and forgettable.

Search for very. This adjective can often signal cluttered writing or weak verbs. Evaluate each occurrence of this word in your writing. If you can rewrite the sentence without it, consider doing so.
- Cluttered: They were very tired.
  Better: They were exhausted.
  Best: The project participants were exhausted.
- Weak verb: This article on irrigation is very helpful and should serve to undercut the very intense fears of those involved in the project.
  Strong verb: This helpful article on irrigation should allay the fears of the project participants.

Search for words ending in ly. Such modifiers often signal weak verbs or are themselves weak. Evaluate each occurrence of these words in your writing. If you can rewrite the sentence without them, consider doing so.
- Weak adjectives: They absolutely believed that Epifania would very successfully complete her project.
  Strong: They were confident that Epifania would complete her project.
- Weak adjective: Memory is selective: it represses (or forgets) incidents that are of less interest or that reflect badly upon the individual.
  Strong: Memory is selective: individuals repress uninteresting or unflattering incidents.
- Wordy: Universalists might argue that what society accepts is not necessarily that which is most ethical. It seems to me, however, that such a principle for determining what is ethical must at a minimum play a large role in the determination of what is right and wrong.
  Strong: Universalists might argue that the practices society accepts are not always ethical. I believe, however, that social acceptability must play a large role in determining right from wrong.

**Diagnostic Test Principles Summarized**

Given all these examples of signal words and what to do when you find them, what should you remember? Seeing any of these words in your prose does not automatically indicate a problem. Many instances of signal words will be perfectly acceptable. But clusters of signal words do indicate good places to consider revising.
**Scrubitize Your Lists**

Much that is wrong with poor academic writing involves lists. That is, items strung together with little more than a conjunction to support them. Sometimes journal articles seem to be nothing but lists! By searching for *and* and *or*, you will identify the lists in your writing and can pay particular attention to improving them.

**False lists (or doublings).** Don’t use two words where one will do. Don’t say, “the desires are blocked and obstructed.” The last two words are similar; the reader needs only one to get your meaning. Use one and delete the other. If you are not sure whether the list is a doubling, use Microsoft’s Thesaurus to check if the words appear as synonyms.

**All-inclusive lists.** Don’t allow your thought processes to stand unedited on the page. If you have named all the items in a category, delete the list and use the category. For instance, replace “American army, navy, and air force” with “U.S. Armed Forces” (which includes the U.S. Coast Guard and National Guard).

**Disordered lists.** Present list items in some kind of order. Alphabetical or chronological order will often do, but so can order by word length. Ross-Larson argues that words with few syllables should appear before those with many syllables (e.g., “arts and letters” not “letters and arts”) and that phrases with few words should appear before phrases with many words (e.g., *Beowulf*, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, and *Pride and Prejudice*).

**Nonparallel lists.** Present list items in parallel. To be parallel, each item in the list must follow naturally from the last word before the list. The easiest way to make a list parallel is to start each item in the list with the same word and then, once everything works with that same word, remove the word (see page 241).

**Scrubitize Your Verbs**

Much of what else is wrong with poor academic writing involves verbs. That is, the overuse of weak verbs and the underuse of strong verbs. If you pay attention to your verbs, you can improve your writing immensely. For great examples of commanding verbs in academic prose, see Mike Davis’s book *City of Quartz* (1992).

**Weak verbs.** If you can use a stronger verb than *to be*, *do*. If you can avoid overused verbs like *to make*, *to do*, *to provide*, and so on, do so.

**Buried verbs.** Many verbs get buried as nouns. If you can dig them out, do. Why write the wordy, “she gave the explanation for” when you can write the vigorous, “she explained”?

**Passive voice.** Advice about the passive voice has varied over the years. Some insist that writers root it out of their writing. The active voice
is more direct, more forceful, and more economical because it doesn’t obscure the subject. And studies do show that readers find passive sentences more difficult to understand than active sentences. Others insist however, that the passive voice has long been useful and should continue to be embraced.

How can you tell when passive voice is appropriate? Passive sentences come in two forms: with the subject and without the subject. If your passive sentence is missing its subject entirely, this absence may suggest that the subject is not relevant. You can leave the sentence in passive voice. If your sentence has a named subject, this may suggest that you can easily convert it into active voice. Do not restructure a passive sentence to emphasize an unimportant or unknown subject.

The easiest way to check your sentences for passive voice is Microsoft Word’s grammar check feature. Not everything the grammar check identifies as passive voice is passive, and not everything it skips isn’t. But it helps you to address the most obvious examples of passive voice. Microsoft Word can also let you know what percentage of your sentences is in passive voice (just make “Show readability statistics” part of your grammar check). If you see your proportion of passive sentences drifting over 18 percent, consider converting some of the passive voice in your article into active voice.

**Scrutinize Your Pronouns**

Poor academic writing also suffers from pronouns with unclear antecedents or meanings. Focus on improving or deleting your pronouns.

**Empty pronouns.** You can often delete such pronouns as *it, there, that, which,* or *who* and transform some words around them into modifiers or verbs.

**Unclear pronouns.** If you use a noun in one sentence and then in the next refer to that noun with a pronoun, the connection may not always be clear. If the pronoun would be unclear alone, add nouns to pronouns like *this, these,* and *those.*

**Distant pronouns.** Prevent pronouns like *them, they, their,* or *its* drifting too far from their antecedents.

**Premature pronouns.** Use pronouns like *he, she,* or *they* after their antecedents, not before them.

**Dangling pronouns.** Pronouns combined with passive voice after an introductory clause are almost always dangling. Convert them into nouns and active voice to solve the problem.

**Cut Unnecessary Words**

Every writing instructor tells you to cut. If you cut as often as they told you to cut, you would have nothing left! Nevertheless, learning to cut is an
important skill. You can cut certain consistent phrases and constructions without losing the meaning of your text.

**Prepositional overload.** Watch the number of prepositions in a sentence. If they start piling up, turn some of the nouns into adjectives and some of the nouns into verbs.

**Negatives.** Avoid using *not* to hide your real thoughts or arguments. Better to be criticized for being too strong than being wimpy.

**Weak adjectives.** You can do without many adjectives. Try looking at any use of *very* and any words ending in *ly* to see if you can delete them.

## EDITING YOUR ARTICLE

It's time to take a closer look at your sentences and word choices. Let's go through this process step by step.

### Day 1: Reading the Workbook

On the first day of your writing week, you should read the workbook up to this page and skim the following pages.

Also, look through any copyediting you may have received on previous articles. Maybe a professor told you to work on a particular aspect of grammar. Maybe you published something previously and possess the editor's corrections. If you are lucky enough to have a professional edit your writing, you should really study what he or she did to improve your prose. Most of us have certain consistent problems that we need to avoid—editors can help you identify yours.

| What does the copyediting of my previous writing teach me about how I need to improve my writing? |

### Day 2: Running the Belcher Diagnostic Test

Most academics read too quickly to see individual letters and words; this diagnostic test, which highlights signal words identified in the previous section, will help you to slow down and identify problem areas. You can perform the Belcher diagnostic test in either of two ways: by hand on a print out of your article or by using Microsoft Word's Find and Replace
program on an electronic version of your article. If you are working by hand, print out a copy of your article and use colored pencils to highlight the signal words or phrases. If you don’t have colored pencils, use other symbols to mark the signal words (e.g., circles, boxes, underscores, overscore, check marks).

Alternately, you can take advantage of Microsoft Word’s powerful search options features, including its search for various forms of a word and its search for word patterns that uses wildcards. If you are not familiar with them, don’t worry—you should be able to perform this test by following my instructions. Microsoft has Help features that explain Find and Replace, if you need assistance. If at any point the test is not performing as I indicated that it would, carefully check that you have selected the right options under Search options. It is easy to forget to set Use Wildcards, for instance, especially if you have stopped and restarted the test. It also may be easiest to run the test by hand.

Running the Diagnostic Test with Colored Pencils

Below is the list of signal words and their code color (or code symbol if you do not have colored pencils).

Cutting words

- Search for conjunctions and and or and highlight with red (or put a box around the word).
- Search for there and it and highlight with blue (or underscore it).
- Search for that and which and who and highlight with blue (or underscore it).
- Search for prepositions like by, of, to, for, toward, on, at, from, in, with, and as and highlight with purple (or circle it).

Adding words

- Search for this and these and those and highlight with orange (or underscore it).
- Search for them, they, their, and its and highlight with orange (or underscore it).

Changing words

- Search for forms of the verb to be and highlight it with green (or overscore it).
- Search for forms of the verb to have and highlight it with green (or overscore it).
- Search for forms of the verb to do and highlight it with green (or overscore it).
- Search for forms of the verb to make and highlight it with green (or overscore it).
• Search for forms of the verb *to provide* and highlight it with **green** (or overscore it).

• Search for forms of the verb *to perform* and highlight it with **green** (or overscore it).

• Search for forms of the verb *to get* and highlight it with **green** (or overscore it).

• Search for forms of the verb *to seem* and highlight it with **green** (or overscore it).

• Search for forms of the verb *to serve* and highlight it with **green** (or overscore it).

• Search for *not* and *n’t* and highlight with **brown** (or put a checkmark above it).

• Search for *very* and highlight with **brown** (or put a checkmark above it).

• Search for words ending in *ent, ence, ion, ize, ed,* and highlight with **green** (or overscore it).

• Search for *ly* and highlight with **brown** (or put a checkmark above it).

**Running the Diagnostic Test with Microsoft Word’s Find and Replace Feature**

If you have superior skills in Microsoft Word, you will find unnecessarily detailed the following instructions for using its Find and Replace feature to highlight signal words with various colors. Just skim the instructions above (with colored pencils) and extrapolate. If you are not so knowledgeable, do not be intimidated! Every step is detailed below and you will find that it is not half so complicated as it looks. Just follow each step.

• Open an electronic copy of your article in Microsoft Word, save it as a copy, and work in the copy (just in case anything goes wrong).

• Place your cursor before the first character in the document.

• Move your arrow to the **TOOLBAR** and click on the **EDIT** menu. In the dialog box that pops up, click **REPLACE**.

• In the dialog box that pops up, click **MORE**.

• Under **SEARCH OPTIONS**, click on **FIND WHOLE WORDS ONLY**. Make sure no other options in **SEARCH OPTIONS** are selected.

• In the **REPLACE WITH** box, type `^&`. The caret and the ampersand should be the only characters in the box—no quotation marks, periods, spaces, or words should ever be in the box throughout this exercise.

• Make sure your cursor is in the **REPLACE WITH** box, and then move your arrow down to select the **button FORMAT**.
In the dialog box that pops up, select font and then click on the tiny scroll bar next to font color. Pick the code color red and click okay. Under the replace with box should now appear the words "Font Color: Red."

If "Font Color: Red." appear in the find what box, then you have made a mistake. Click no formatting or undo replace all and make sure your cursor is in the replace with box and try again. At any point, you can erase the formatting in the find what or replace with boxes by clicking on no formatting at the bottom of the Find and Replace dialog box. Doing so will revert the setting to default.

In the find what box, type the first word from the Signal Words List: and.

Click the replace all button and watch the red version of and replace the black versions of and. All appearances of the signal word should now be in red.

If there is a problem, reread through steps 2 through 9 and make sure you have the right options selected.

In the find what box, type or and then click the replace all button.

Now change your font color. Move your cursor to the replace with box. Move your arrow down to select the button format. In the dialog box that pops up, select font and font color blue and click okay. Under the replace with box should now appear the words "Font Color: Blue." (It doesn’t matter what color blue you use.)

In the find what box, type there and click the replace all button.

Repeat the previous step with each of the following words: it, that, which, and who.

Now change your font color. Move your cursor to the replace with box. Move your arrow down to select the button format. In the dialog box that pops up, select font and font color purple and click okay. Under the replace with box should now appear the words "Font Color: Purple."

In the find what box, type by and click the replace all button.

Repeat the previous step with each of the following words: of, to, for, toward, on, at, from, in, with, and as.

Now change your font color. Move your cursor to the replace with box. Move your arrow down to select the button format. In the dialog box that pops up, select font and font color orange and click okay. Under the replace with box should now appear the words "Font Color: Orange."
- In the **Find** what box, type *this* and click the **Replace All** button.

- Repeat the previous step with each of the following words: *these, those, their, them, they,* and *its.*

- Now change the options. Under **search options** in the Find and Replace dialog box, click off **Find whole words only** and click on **Find All word forms.**

- Now change your **font color.** Move your cursor to the replace with box. Move your arrow down to select the button format. In the dialog box that pops up, select **font and font color** *green* and click **OKAY.** Under the replace with box should now appear the words “Font Color: Green.”

- In the **Find what** box, type *is* and click the **Replace All** button. A dialog box will pop up with a warning about using replace all with **find all word forms.** You want to ignore the warning, so click **OKAY.** Word will do a search for all forms of the verb *to be,* including *is, are, was, were, am, be,* *being,* and *been.*

- In the **Find what** box, type *have* and then click the **Replace All** button. Word will do a search for all forms of the verb *to have,* including *has, have, hasn’t, haven’t,* and *having.*

- In the **Find what** box, type *do* and then click the **Replace All** button. Word will do a search for all forms of the verb *to do,* including *did, does, don’t,* and *doing.*

- In the **Find what** box, type *make* and then click the **Replace All** button. Word will do a search for all forms of the verb *to make,* including *made, makes,* and *making.*

- In the **Find what** box, type *provide* and then click the **Replace All** button.

- In the **Find what** box, type *perform* and then click the **Replace All** button.

- In the **Find what** box, type *get* and then click the **Replace All** button.

- In the **Find what** box, type *seem* and then click the **Replace All** button.

- In the **Find what** box, type *serve* and then click the **Replace All** button.

- Now change your **font color.** Move your cursor to the replace with box. Move your arrow down to select the button format. In the dialog box that pops up, select **font and font color** *brown* and click **OKAY.** Under the replace with box should now appear the words “Font Color: Brown.”
• In the FIND WHAT box, type not and click the REPLACE ALL button.

• In the FIND WHAT box, type very and then click the REPLACE ALL button.

• Now change the options. Under search options, click off find all word forms and click off find whole words only (if it isn’t off already). Do click on use wildcards. Wildcards allow you to search for patterns rather than specific characters. If you are not familiar with wildcards, read the Microsoft Word Help.

• Now change the font color. Move your cursor to the replace with box and move your arrow down to select the button format. In the dialog box that pops up, select font and font color green and click okay. Under the replace with box should now appear the words “Font Color: Green.”

• In the FIND WHAT box, type (ent)>. Do include the parentheses and arrow so you find only those words that end in ent and do not start with ent (e.g., finds “referent” but not “enter”). Click the replace all button.

• Repeat the previous step with each of the following: (ence)>, (lon)>, and (ize)>

• In the FIND WHAT box, type (ed)> Then click the replace all button. This will find many verbs in the past tense, which will help you identify passive voice.

• Now change your font color. Move your cursor to the replace with box. Move your arrow down to select the button format. In the dialog box that pops up, select font and font color brown and click okay. Under the replace with box should now appear the words “Font Color: Brown.”

• In the FIND WHAT box, type (ly)> and click replace all.

• Save your file with all the changes, so you can work on it tomorrow.

Day 3–4: Revising Your Article with the Diagnostic Test

Now you should have quite a colorful article! How do you revise in response to all this color? Skim your article and look for color clusters. The more red, blue, purple, orange, brown, and green words that cluster in a sentence or paragraph, the more likely the prose there needs to be improved. Look back at pages 240–253 for examples of how to address the color clusters. You can also read through the summary on the next page and the list of poor phrases that follows. Some instances of the signal words will be quite correct; some will not be.
Red words: redundant doublings and lists. Starting from the beginning of the article, pick the first sentence with several red words. Look carefully at the black words on either side of the red. If they are a doubling, could you delete one of them? If they are a list, could you use a summarizing word instead? If you need the list, does it appear in the right place in the sentence, after being introduced? If it appears in the right place, do the items in the list appear in the correct order (e.g., alphabetically, chronologically)? If the signal words are a run-on sentence, can you correct it? Go through your article asking if the words before or after the red could be deleted or converted.

Blue words: unneeded pronouns. Go back to the beginning of your article and start looking at sentences with several blue words, especially when they appear near green words. Could you delete the blue words (vague pronouns)? Do you need “there are . . . that” or “it was . . . who” or “it is [word] to [word] that”? The verb “to be” used with “there” and “it” can often be cut.

Orange words: floating pronouns. Examine all orange words to make sure that their referent is clear. If this or these appear without a noun, consider adding one. If it is not clear whom they or them refers to, replace the unclear orange pronoun with its noun antecedent. Blue and orange words can often participate in forming dangling participles. If you see orange words close to green words, that may mean a problem with wordiness.

Purple words: unneeded prepositional phrases. Examine sentences with lots of purple (extra prepositions), especially when they appear with brown words. Look at the words around them. Could you convert them into verbs or modifiers? For instance, “a great number of” could become many. Purple and brown words often appear with empty words like fact, kind, sort, type, way, form, variety, range, and so on. Sometimes you need them, but delete all you can.

Brown words: empty words. Examine sentences with several brown words, which often are doing little but cluttering up the sentence. Are you using not to avoid saying something with strength? Then use the strong words instead. Does a sentence have several negatives? Are you using very to intensify a weak adverb instead of picking the right adverb? Use the strong adverb instead. Are words ending in ly (e.g., really, actually, definitely) weakening your prose? Delete them.

Green words: weak verbs and passive voice. Examine all green words (weak verbs), especially when they appear close to blue words, to see if they are verbs buried as nouns. If so, try to unbury them. Is that form of the verb to be or to make needed? What about that word ending in ion? If it is just adding clutter, convert it into a verb or delete it. For instance, “this theory is important and makes a contribution to our understanding” could
become "this important theory contributes to our understanding." You can usually improve words with green endings when followed by "that the." Forms of the verb *to be* can also signal passive voice. Only use passive voice when the actor is not important or when the object of the sentence is the subject of the paragraph.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weak Phrase</th>
<th>Improved Phrase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Red signal words (and/or)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>are careful or cautious</td>
<td>are cautious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>are short and brief</td>
<td>are brief</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue signal words (that, it, who, there)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>due to the fact that</td>
<td>because</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in the event that</td>
<td>if</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>it is those who build</td>
<td>builders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in which the cars</td>
<td>when the cars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the roads that are paved</td>
<td>the paved roads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the bread that they ate</td>
<td>their bread</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the plane which flew fast</td>
<td>the fast plane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the people who ran</td>
<td>the runners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>there are those who</td>
<td>they</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purple signal words (of, by, as, for)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a small part of</td>
<td>some</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a variety of</td>
<td>different</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as a result of</td>
<td>from</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as of</td>
<td>starting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as regards</td>
<td>on, for, about</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as to whether</td>
<td>whether</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>at the end of</td>
<td>after</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>by means of</td>
<td>by</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>by way of pulling</td>
<td>to pull</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for a period of</td>
<td>for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for the purpose of</td>
<td>for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>from the standpoint of</td>
<td>for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in an effort to</td>
<td>to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in order to</td>
<td>to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in spite of the fact that</td>
<td>despite</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Purple signal words (of, by, as, for) (continued)**

| in terms of | by, in, of... |
| in the amount of | for |
| in the near future | soon |
| in the vicinity of | near, about |
| in view of | because |
| of the purpose of the paper | the paper's purpose |
| on the basis of | by, on... |
| on a regular basis | regularly |
| the number of | some |
| the type of | [delete] |
| the great number of | many |
| with respect to | on, for, about |
| with the exception of | except |

**Orange signal words (this, these, them)**

| them | the parents |
| this is odd | this odd incident |
| this was unfortunate | unfortunately |
| these are vital bees | these vital bees |
| these kinds of trees | these trees |
| those who are rich | the rich |

**Green signal words (to be)**

| is a cause of | causes |
| is a critic of | criticized |
| is a need for | must |
| is applicable to | applies |
| is indicative of | shows |
| it isn't always that | rarely |
| it is the case that all | all |
| it is unfortunate that | unfortunately |
| it is this which | this |
| there are tubes | the tubes cover |
| there are birds that | some birds |
| there are cars which | some cars |
| y was led by x | x led y |

**Green signal words (do, make, have)**

| do a study of | study |
| had gotten arrested | was arrested |
| has the ability to | can |

(Continued)
Green signal words (do, make, have) (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>has to balance</th>
<th>must balance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>have a tendency to</td>
<td>tend to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>make a practice of</td>
<td>habitually</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>make use of</td>
<td>use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>perform a dance</td>
<td>danced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>provide a loan</td>
<td>loaned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>serve as an example</td>
<td>exemplifies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>there have been many</td>
<td>many have</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Green signal words (-ence/-ion)

| had an experience with | experienced |
| explanation of | explain |

Brown signal words (not, very, -ly)

| basically | [delete] |
| not different | similar |
| not many | few |
| not often | rarely |
| not very hard | easy |
| obviously | [delete] |
| to repeatedly go | to go |

Cleaning Up After Running the Diagnostic Test

When you are completely done with your revising process, you will want to turn the remaining colorful words back into black. To do that, move your arrow to the TOOLBAR and click on the EDIT menu, and then on SELECT ALL. This will highlight your whole document. Then move your arrow to the Toolbar, select FORMAT, and FONT, and change the FONT COLOR to automatic. That will return all your words to their original black color.

Day 5: Correcting Other Types of Problem Sentences

We cannot address some significant self-editing issues in this workbook. If you have a problem with verb tense, subject-verb agreement (or any other kind of agreement), possessives, conjunctions, sentence construction, dangling or misplaced modifiers, please study a text on grammar.

Many manuals and some editors also advise you to attend to other matters than we have addressed above. They will want you to correct your capitalization, italics, alignment, and so on. This is not so important in your initial submission, but if you are interested, some instructions follow.

Commas. Academic style requires a serial comma. That is, a comma after the last item in a list. Set Microsoft Word’s grammar check on
"Comma required before last list item" to "always" and it will prompt you to change "Simon Cowell, Paula Abdul and Randy Jackson" to "Simon Cowell, Paula Abdul, and Randy Jackson." Not using a serial comma alerts an editor or reader to your status as a novice.

**Quotation marks I.** U.S. academic journals use "double" quote marks; British and commonwealth journals use 'single' quote marks. U.S. journals put punctuation inside the quotation marks; British journals put them outside. Set the grammar check on "punctuation required with quotes" to "inside" if it is a U.S. journal.

**Quotation marks II.** Do not put quotation marks around material in block quotes unless those quotation marks appeared in the original text. Separate any quote that is longer than four or five lines into a block quote.

**Quotation marks III.** Rarely put quotation marks around single words or phrases to indicate that they are problematic or that you are using them in an ironic way. You can do this once per phrase, but don’t repeatedly put quotation marks around a particular word or phrase. If the term is problematic, find another; don’t reproduce the problem. If you can’t, then just use the term; don’t constantly signal that it is a problem.

**Exclamation marks.** In the humanities, you can use one exclamation mark somewhere in your journal article, but that’s pretty much it. In the social sciences, that is one exclamation mark too many. Let your sentence structure deliver the emphasis.

**Capitalization.** Almost all U.S. academic journals have what’s called a “down style.” That is, they rarely capitalize anything but proper nouns. It depends somewhat on the journal, but most will not capitalize the names of racial groups (e.g., white or black) or titles standing alone (e.g., the professor or the president). Using many capital letters is a bit like typing your e-mail in all capitals; it is considered “shouting.” When running the grammar check, make sure you have selected CAPITALIZATION as something to be checked.

**Italics and bold face.** Most journals prefer that you use italics only for foreign words or titles of books, journals, periodicals, movies, and television programs. If you regularly use italics for emphasis, most editors will see this as a form of “shouting.” If your sentence structure is clear, you shouldn’t need italics for emphasis. The one exception is in block quotes, where you cannot restructure the sentence but may want to draw attention to parts of it. If you add italics to a block quote, always put at the end of the block quote the phrase “(italics added).” Never use bold face for emphasis; it is almost never seen in academic journals. Of course, you can use it for headings, but not to highlight the importance of a word or phrase.

**Acronyms.** Always spell out an acronym on its first appearance in the body of your article (e.g., United States Agency of International Development [USAID]). Thereafter, use the acronym not the full version of the name.
Proper names. Be careful not to refer to men and women differently; for example, calling men by their last name but women by their first name (e.g., McCain and Hillary). You should refer to all by their last name. In grammar check, select "gender specific words" to be checked. Give the full first name of any person on its first appearance in your article (e.g., Erich Auerbach, not just Auerbach.)

Hyphens and dashes. One easy thing you can do to make your writing look more professional is to use the correct symbols for hyphens and dashes. A hyphen is the well-known bar that appears in compound words. It appears on your keyboard and is the shortest horizontal line available to you. A dash is a break in thought and is the equivalent of three hyphens in a row. Editors call it an em-dash—a dash that is the width of an m. You can create it by clicking on INSERT in your TOOLBAR, then SYMBOL, SPECIAL CHARACTER, and EM DASH. It also is automatically generated in Microsoft Word if you type a word, leave no space, type two hyphens in a row, leave no space, and then type another word. There is one more kind of dash, called an en-dash, the width of an n, and it generally appears in number ranges (e.g., 35–45).

Spelling. Always run a spelling check before you send your document. A spelling check won’t help you with proper nouns, unless you use the technique described on page 80. If you spell Mazeika as "Mazeika" in the text and as "Mazieka" in the bibliography, you will have to check the Microsoft dictionary to catch that error. Pay attention to authors’ names and spell them the same throughout.

Running Grammar Check

To use Microsoft Word’s grammar check, move your arrow to the TOOLBAR and click on TOOLS, then select SPELLING & GRAMMAR. In the dialog box that pops up, select CHECK GRAMMAR box. Then select the button to the right called OPTIONS. In the dialog box that pops up, select SETTINGS. In the dialog box, you will be able to set up the exact kind of grammar check you want to do. You should set it up to check everything and then run it on a sample of your writing. If you find that the grammar check is consistently prompting you to correct something that is perfectly fine, go ahead and turn it off. For instance, I don’t find the grammar check very helpful regarding sentence fragments and run-on sentences, but the check on correct capitalization is good, as is the check on use of multiple negatives; number agreement (this is rarely right, but when it is, it’s important); misuse of possessives; incorrect punctuation (will check for serial comma and placement of punctuation inside); subject-verb agreement (also rarely right, but when it is, it’s important); incorrect verb tenses; gender-biased language; compound words; passive sentences; strings of prepositional phrases; and split infinitives. You can set it to catch number of spaces between sentences (one only) as well.
Editing Each Other’s Writing

If you are struggling with revising your own writing, you might try meeting with a colleague and exchanging paragraphs. That is, each of you work on revising a paragraph of the other person’s work. Focus on adding, deleting, substituting, and rearranging the words, whatever makes it sound better to you. Then discuss the paragraph revisions with each other. Don’t insist that your way is better, it’s up to the original author to decide what he or she wants to do, but this exercise can help you to see how many different ways there are of saying the same thing and what kinds of changes tend to improve a sentence. It can also help you to be a better editor; by dialoguing with the author you learn the article’s possibilities and how to expand them.

When I am teaching the writing workshop, we do this exercise as a group. Gather a group of people who have run the diagnostic test on their writing. Have each person select a particularly problematic sentence and write it on the board or an overhead, or project it on a screen. Then, out loud, work together to improve the sentence, with the author of the sentence making the possible edits on the draft. We often found that together we could do a much better job of improving the sentence than by working alone.

Documenting Your Writing Time and Tasks

On the following weekly plan, please graph when you expect to write and what tasks you hope to accomplish this week. Then keep track of what you actually did. Remember, you are to allot fifteen minutes to one hour every day to writing. At the end of the week, take pride in your accomplishments and evaluate whether any patterns need changing.