

## Some of My Own Principles of Revision

Adapted from John Trimble, Dept. of English, University of South Carolina

(1) I challenge myself to improve at least every other verb. Five ways:

1. Convert a passive construction into an active verb.  
“It was considered” becomes “They considered”  
“It is believed” becomes “They believe”
2. Substitute a verb with fewer syllables.  
“Try” for “attempt”; “expect” for “anticipate”
3. Substitute a more precise verb.  
“Caress” for “touch”; “sprint” for “run”
4. Substitute a single verb for a verb phrase or verb + preposition.  
“Emphasize” for “place much emphasis on”; “discuss” for “talk about”
5. Substitute a more vivid, pictorial verb, especially if the original verb is a form of “to be” or linking verb—“is,” “are,” “am,” “was.”

(2) I challenge myself to cut roughly a quarter of the words in each sentence. I always assume wordiness; I don’t just look for it.

“It is significant that...” becomes “Significantly...”

"The large majority of us..." becomes "Most of us..."

"For him to deny the fact that he was guilty of wrongdoing is..." becomes "His denial of wrongdoing shows..."

I especially like to cut adjectives and adverbs. It's pretty simple to do: just substitute a more precise noun or verb so that the modifier becomes unnecessary.

“He ran quickly to the post office” becomes “He sprinted to the post office.”

(3) I try to minimize the number of polysyllabic words in each sentence, particularly when I've used two or three in succession. I count syllables exactly like words—i.e., every syllable saved is a word saved. If I've used a three-syllable word, I search for a two-syllable equivalent. If I have a two-syllable word, then I search for a one-syllable synonym. Every extra syllable is simple one more piece of datum the reader must process. Cutting extra syllables is being kind to my reader. But it's also being kind to myself, since it increases the power and pace of my prose. I am especially suspicious of every noun ending in “-ion.” Those nouns are invariably too abstract and lardy. Also, they're often part of a whole phrase that can be converted into a single verb. Example: “take into consideration” becomes “consider.”

(4) I try to find a more natural, idiomatic way of expressing each sentence. If I can't imagine myself actually saying a sentence in conversation, I ask myself how I'd spontaneously say the thought. I then write that down and edit *it*, not the original version. "The basic appeal of language is to the ear," said Judge Jerome Frank. Most readers want as much as anything else to enjoy the illusion of actually hearing the writer talk to them,

(5) As I reread each sentence, I look at the individual words and phrases and ask myself whether they adequately answer the following questions: Who, What, When, Where, Why, How, Which? If the reader is apt to be tantalized, I must supply an explanation somehow. Here's a sentence loaded with mystery: "She went home." Who is she? Where is home? How did she get there?

Why did she go home? When did she go home? A writer can supply answers through three simple recasting operations:

- (1) Substitute a more specific word or phrase (sharpening):
  - “a large audience” becomes “an audience of 250 persons”
  - “car” becomes “Chevrolet”
  - “After an exotic breakfast” becomes “After a breakfast of croissants and Amaretto”
- (2) Add an explanatory adjective or adverb:
  - “He replied” becomes “He replied angrily”
- (3) Add an appositive:
  - “The airline executive” becomes “The airline executive, a former astronaut”

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(7) I try to introduce a few very short sentences here and there—maybe only 2-3 words long—as a change of pace. And throughout I'm acutely conscious of varying my sentence length and of using too many sentences that run past 20 words or so.

(8) I'll frequently replace parentheses with dashes or appositives, mainly to help the flow.

(9) Bridges (paragraph transitions) obsess me. I like my transitions to seem inevitable and silky smooth.

(10) I'll consciously work in some radically short paragraphs as mental rest-stations or as highlighting devices.

(11) I look for *word clusters*—e.g., “for the purpose of,” “in the event that,” “in order to,” “with the result that”—and get rid of them by recasting. Invariably this saves words and simplifies *my* style. You can get rid of a lot of clutter when you kill those word clusters.

(12) I change “which” to “that” about 90% of the time. It's more idiomatic, more conversational, shorter, and less bookish.

(13) I inspect each sentence to see that it's instantly intelligible. If there's even a chance that it might momentarily confuse a reader, I'll rephrase the thought—or “translate it,” as I sometimes say, into plainer English.

(14) I look hard at my opening paragraph. I ask myself: “Does it go for the jugular or does it prance around and take its own good time getting to the point?”

(15) I'm a bug about these two things: (a) I like to see my thesis clearly stated and readily located; and (b) I like to show a lively awareness of possible objections and counterarguments.