



Revising Approaches – Part 1

In addition to ensuring accuracy of the data and information we provide, *revising* proceeds with the intent to enable our thoughts to enter the reader's mind more easily.

Abiding by customary practices of spelling and grammar helps. If you need support with that, ask for it. Hire an editor or ask a Skilled Someone Who Likes You to line-edit your drafts for clean sentence structure, spelling, grammar, and punctuation.

Plenty of grammatically correct sentences, however, remain difficult to read. That difficulty creates friction between your ideas and the reader's mind. I want to share a couple of methods I have found useful in reducing that friction.

The **life** of your writing lies in the **verbs**. The more active and engaging your verbs, the faster the reader moves through your writing.

To-be verbs—variations of Is and Are—indicate No Action. To-be verbs also enable the **passive** voice—you know that approach to saying something **is undertaken** or **was perpetuated**, often without saying Who is doing the undertaking or perpetuating. Unfortunately, academics gravitate toward to-be verbs and the passive voice.

Here is an example from a research contributions summary:

We find that, while opening the platform and offering large early discounts are needed to leverage network effects, it is hard to raise prices later on because other competitors will keep their discounts to gain market share.

Let's rewrite that to eliminate the to-be verbs and that nonspecific It, and discover more interesting verbs along the way.

We find that, while opening the platform and offering large early discounts leverage network effects, raising prices later jeopardizes early market share, as competitors sustain discounts to encourage customers to switch.

Do not try to eliminate all Is's and Are's. Plenty of them are useful. (Did you hear that? ARE useful.)

A trustworthy method for helping yourself strengthen verbs I learned from William Zinsser's book *On Writing Well* (at least I think that's where I learned it; I'm not sure). The method consists of printing a couple of pages and, with a pencil, circling every preposition. Prepositions often lead to noun-ifying our sentences—and leaching strength from our verbs.

Let's use this approach on an example from a teaching statement.

In addition, I integrate different activities into classes to encourage engagement among students as well as a deeper level of thought about topics. The activities range from an extensive list of guest speakers to videos to current events to role plays and case studies.

Attention to prepositions gives us the chance to smooth this.

Additionally, I design in-class activities to encourage engagement and deeper thinking about topics. These range from guest speakers and videos on current events to role plays and case studies.

Again, do not try to eliminate all prepositional phrases! Many times, using them creates more graceful prose than figuring out ways not to use them. Just recognize that prepositions, like to-be verbs, signal opportunities to enliven your writing—and increase your clarity.

Let's apply these tools to one more example.

My courses are considered by students to be very challenging, because of the nature of the material and because of my expectations regarding their commitment to reading, reflecting, and writing.

First, we improve this by eliminating the passive voice and an un-needed “to be” verb.

Students consider my courses very challenging....

Now for those “because of's” and the “of the material.” To reconsider “the nature of the material,” we have to ask: What *is* the nature that students find challenging? Why do students find reading philosophy and political theory hard?

...because the material is abstract and because I expect them to commit to reading, reflecting, and writing.

Remember, revising is an iterative process. The human mind seems to believe that there are only 1

or 2 errors **possible** in a line. You must correct those you find before you can even SEE the other opportunities there.

More important, each time you revise, you can clarify—not only your writing, but also your thinking. Revising leads you to ask yourself questions *whose answers make your writing more interesting*.