Avoiding Awkward Language

The Center

What is awkward language? Awkward language is a fancy teacher term used to describe a wide variety of sentence-related issues. You may have trouble identifying awkward language in your own writing – but you know it when you see it…or, better yet, when you hear it! Awkward and/or unclear sentences may result from the following issues:

**Wordiness**

Effective writing is concise. To be concise means to state your ideas directly, in as few words as possible. Here is an example of a wordy sentence made more concise.

Wordy: The student talked about many of the merits of visiting the Writing Center at Tarrant County College South Campus.
Concise: The student touted the South Campus Writing Center.

To proofread for wordiness, examine one paragraph for longer sentences. Condense several longer sentences per paragraph by: replacing vague phrases with more precise words, eliminating unnecessary repetition, and/or breaking apart longer sentences into shorter ones.

**Imprecision**

Effective writing is precise. To be precise means to choose the best possible words to express your ideas. Adding words to a sentence in an attempt to be clearer may actually make your ideas less clear!

To proofread for imprecision, identify and eliminate the following:

*Unnecessary determiners or modifiers*, such as: kind of, really, basically, actually, specifically, and generally.

*Redundant pairs or categories*, such as: end result, final outcome, true facts, basic fundamentals, round in shape, large in size, economics field, at an early time.

**Unnecessary Repetition**

Effective writing avoids repetition. Do you ever feel like you are repeating yourself? To repeat some key words may help your reader follow your ideas. However, redundancy may lead to awkward or lengthy sentences!
Unnecessary repetition: The writing center tutor finished tutoring the student and finished doing his paperwork.
Condensed: The writing center tutor finished tutoring the student and doing his paperwork.

To proofread for repetition, examine one paragraph at a time for repeated words or phrases. Ask yourself: What is the purpose of this repetition? Is the repetition absolutely necessary? Or, can I use a synonym here instead?

Inflated Phrases
Effective writing also avoids inflated language. Inflated language is puffed-up and overcomplicated. Your teacher may have made comments like padding or fluff – who, me? 😊
Inflated: The student utilized categorical inaccuracy about his paper.
Deflated: The student lied.

To proofread for inflated language, focus on introductory word groups that can be condensed. For instance, “as a matter of fact” can be shortened to “in fact,” “in order to” can be shortened to “to,” “at the present time” can be shortened to “currently” and “in spite of the fact that” can be shortened to “although” or “though.”

Overusing Expletives
Effective writing has varied sentence structure. Expletives are phrases of the form it + be-verb OR there + be-verb. Overuse of expletives at the beginnings of your sentences can cause wordiness and awkward language.
With the expletive: It is the writing center director who trains tutors.
Without: The writing center director trains tutors.

To proofread for expletives, look for it + be-verbs OR there + be-verbs as you begin sentences. If you find two or more in a row, vary your sentence structure.

Awkward Phrasing
Finally, effective writing avoids awkward language. Awkward phrasing tends to sound, well, awkward. 😊
Awkward phrasing: The teacher does not tolerate how students plagiarize papers.
Clear phrasing: The teacher does not tolerate plagiarism.

To proofread for awkward phrasing read your paper aloud. Any time you find yourself wondering, “Huh?” mark the sentence and revise. You may also want to read your paper aloud to a classmate or to a writing center tutor (hint, hint). S/he can help you identify awkward language as you read. Then you can work together to revise for clarity!

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