

## Finding the right words

In Chapter 23 I made the point that the flexibility of language, its capacity to hold many different shades of meaning, is at odds with the sharpness, clarity and constancy of meaning that are important to consistent reasoning. This raises not just the problem of how we can express our ideas to reflect our thinking accurately, but how we can avoid the danger of the words we use controlling our ideas and the way we develop them.

Here you will learn how to de-clutter your sentences, using lists of all those words and phrases we all use without much thought.

### De-cluttering

#### 1 Cut out empty phrases

*This includes all those phrases that appear in our work, which add little or nothing to the meaning of what we want to say. For example:*

- All things considered
- As a matter of fact
- For all intents and purposes
- For the purpose of
- In a manner of speaking
- In my opinion
- In the event of
- Kind of
- What I am trying to say
- What I want to make clear

#### 2 Replace prepositional phrases with prepositions

*In contrast, the following phrases do add something to the meaning of a sentence, but they could be said in far fewer words, making the sentence clearer and more direct.*

- Ahead of schedule – early
- Arrived at an agreement – agreed
- At this point in time – now/ at this time
- Costs a total of – costs
- During the time that – while
- In close proximity to – near
- In spite of the fact – although
- In the direction of – to/ toward
- In the vicinity – near
- On the part of – by
- With regard to – about
- With the possible exception of – except

#### 3 Identify all the overused, unnecessary words in your work

*The obvious targets are the jargon of our subjects that we are accustomed to using without ever thinking about whether we are clear about what we mean by them. But there are others that we use in conversation every day, which seep into our writing, clouding our meaning and robbing our arguments of the impact they should have, words like:*

- Appropriate/ inappropriate
- Going forward
- Iconic
- Kind of/ sort of
- A lot

*You could then add to these all those combinations of words we use, which contain unnecessary elements (shown in italics, below) that we could strip out to make our sentences clearer and more concise:*

<b>Avoid tautologies</b>	
<i>absolutely essential/ necessary</i>	<i>joint collaboration</i>
<i>advance warning</i>	<i>later time</i>
<i>added bonus</i>	<i>look ahead to the future</i>
<i>alternative choice</i>	<i>meet together</i>
<i>assemble together</i>	<i>might possibly</i>
<i>basic fundamentals/ necessities</i>	<i>mutual cooperation</i>
<i>brief moment</i>	<i>mutually interdependent</i>
<i>brief summary</i>	<i>mutual respect for each other</i>
<i>careful scrutiny</i>	<i>natural instinct</i>
<i>close proximity</i>	<i>necessary prerequisite</i>
<i>collaborate together</i>	<i>never before</i>
<i>compete with each other</i>	<i>new beginning/ innovation/ initiative</i>
<i>completely destroyed</i>	<i>none at all</i>
<i>confer together</i>	<i>originally created/ built</i>
<i>consensus of opinion</i>	<i>over exaggerate</i>
<i>contributory factor</i>	<i>past experience/ history/ records</i>
<i>cooperate together</i>	<i>period of time</i>
<i>crisis situation</i>	<i>personal opinion</i>
<i>depreciate in value</i>	<i>pick and choose</i>
<i>during the course of</i>	<i>plan in advance</i>
<i>each and every</i>	<i>polar opposites</i>
<i>eliminate altogether</i>	<i>postpone until later</i>
<i>emergency situation</i>	<i>present time</i>
<i>end result</i>	<i>protest against</i>
<i>entirely eliminate</i>	<i>reason is because</i>
<i>eradicate completely</i>	<i>reason why</i>
<i>estimated at about</i>	<i>refer back</i>
<i>evolve over time</i>	<i>regular routine</i>
<i>exactly identical</i>	<i>repeat again</i>
<i>favourable approval</i>	<i>revert back</i>
<i>fellow colleague</i>	<i>safe haven</i>
<i>few in number</i>	<i>small size</i>
<i>filled to capacity</i>	<i>spell out in detail</i>
<i>final conclusion/ outcome</i>	<i>still remains</i>
<i>final ultimatum</i>	<i>sudden impulse</i>
<i>first of all</i>	<i>sum total</i>
<i>foreign imports</i>	<i>time period</i>
<i>free gift</i>	<i>true facts</i>
<i>future plans</i>	<i>two equal halves</i>
<i>general consensus</i>	<i>unexpected surprise</i>
<i>general public</i>	<i>usual custom</i>
<i>grow in size</i>	<i>very unique</i>
<i>had done previously</i>	<i>warn in advance</i>
<i>integrate together</i>	<i>whether or not</i>
<i>join together</i>	<i>write down</i>

## Strong nouns and verbs

Nouns and verbs are the most important words in a sentence. Nouns give your sentence a clear image, the sound foundations on which you develop your ideas, while verbs give your sentence its movement, its momentum.

## 1 Strong nouns

*In many cases the noun we are accustomed to using is weak because it's a nominalisation: a noun that has been derived from a verb. Usually, this is accompanied by a weak verb, so by replacing the nominalisation with the original verb we strengthen the sentence by making it more direct and specific.*

- Derive a conclusion – conclude
- Enter into discussion – discuss
- Have a belief – believe
- Make a decision – decide
- Make a discovery – discover
- Present an argument – argue

## 2 Strong verbs

*To give your sentence a clear direction, choose your verb carefully to ensure you move it in the direction you want and your readers can understand clearly where you are taking them. Getting your verb right will invigorate your writing, making your ideas and arguments clearer.*

Weak verb	Strong verbs
Criticise	compare, condemn, consider, discern, evaluate, judge, ponder, review
Talk	converse, communicate, concede, discuss, inform, negotiate, pronounce, utter
Say	announce, affirm, assert, declare, divulge, express, maintain, mention, suggest, report
Argue	allege, challenge, claim, contend, debate, dispute, imply, question, uphold
Develop	cultivate, derive, elaborate, establish, foster, instigate, progress, promote

## Qualifiers

Overstating a claim is likely to lead to its rejection, while understating it is likely to rob it of its significance. So, it's worth having by your side a list of the most useful qualifiers to ensure that you choose the best one.

Certainty	Uncertainty
All/ every	countless, majority, many, most, some
None/ no	few, hardly any, not many, some, rare
Always	common, frequent, often, recurrent, usual
Never	infrequent, occasional, rare, seldom, sporadic
To be (it is, it was, I am, I was, we are, we were)	appears, can be, may be, might be, possibly, seems
Will	could, feasible, likely, might, plausible, probable
Will not	doubtful, implausible, improbable, unimaginable
Definite	foreseeable, possible, probable, viable
Indefinite	debatable, improbable, questionable, unlikely

## Transitions

In Chapter 21 we discussed the importance of topic sentences and transitions in creating the connections between our ideas and, equally important, indicating what we are doing and why as we move from one paragraph or section to another. Keep this list by your side as you write.

<b>Transitions</b>	
Similarities	correspondingly, in the same way, likewise, similarly
Contrast	conversely, despite, however, on the contrary, on the other hand, yet
Illustration	for example, for instance, namely, specifically, such as
Extension/ addition	besides, in addition, furthermore, moreover, similarly
Logical sequence	as a result, consequently, lastly, therefore, thus, to conclude
Chronological sequence	after that, it follows, next, previously, then
Emphasis	above all, after all, especially, indeed, in particular, notably
Causal relations	as a result, consequently, for that reason, hence, since, thus
Temporal relations	earlier, in future, in the meantime, in the past, now, recently, simultaneously
Summarising	in brief, in conclusion, in summary, to conclude, to summarise
Qualification	however, in spite of this, nevertheless, nonetheless, whereas
Alternatives	alternatively, contrastingly, instead, on the other hand
Explanation	in other words, namely, that is, this means

For more information, see *How to Write Your Literature Review*, Chapter 24.