BE YOUR OWN CONSULTANT: PHRASING

The goal of this handout is to provide you with some helpful techniques for identifying & correcting common reasons behind awkward phrasing.

SUBJECT-PREDICATE DRIFT
General Rule: Rephrase the sentence to keep subject & the verb together.

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<tr>
<th>Rule</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Easy Explanation</th>
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| Avoid separating the subject and the predicate of your sentence. | **WORSE:** Phillis Wheatley, whose book *Poems on Various Subjects Religious and Moral* was the first book of poetry published by an African-American, lived in Boston.  
**BETTER:** Phillis Wheatley lived in Boston. Her book *Poems on Various Subjects Religious and Moral* was the first book of poetry published by an African-American.  
**BEST:** Boston poet Phillis Wheatley wrote *Poems on Various Subjects Religious and Moral*, the first book of poetry published by an African-American. | Who’s doing what? Mark up a few sentences to see the subject & the verb. Make sure they’re as close together as you can get them. |

ABSTRACT NOUNS, DO-LITTLE VERBS, & UNCLEAR PRONOUNS
General Rule: Use concrete, specific nouns & verbs. Make sure all pronouns have clear referents.

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| Use definite, concrete nouns, and avoid verbs that don’t do anything (is, be, are, make, find, show, does, gets). Make sure all pronouns have clear referents. | **WORSE:** In her poem, Dickinson shows how we think of art.  
**BETTER:** Dickinson argues that we are wrong to think of art as something that may be dissected.  
**WORSE:** The problem with this is that it’s unclear.  
**BETTER:** The problem with this solution is that it is unclear to readers how effective it will be or how feasible it is. | Keep an eye out for the following words/phrases: (is, talks) about says includes this that it |

PREPOSITION ABUSE
General Rule: Avoid “ticky-tacking” sentences together with prepositional phrases.
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<td>Because a series of prepositional phrases can confuse a reader, try to avoid including too many in one sentence.</td>
<td>WORSE: When we consider the implications of this argument about carbon emissions and its effects on nations in the developing world, we can see one problem with possible implementation over time. BETTER: When we consider the argument’s effects on developing nations, we can see one possible problem with long-term implementation.</td>
<td>Circle the prepositional phrases in your sentence. How many are there? Often, prepositions can be reworked as modifying adjectival or adverbial phrases or as compound nouns.</td>
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**NEEDLESSLY WATERED-DOWN ARGUMENTS**

*General Rule: Avoid redundant modifiers; these can make your reader less likely to trust you.*

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<td>Don’t water down your argument with modifiers like “might,” “may,” “could,” and modifying phrases like “I believe.”</td>
<td>WORSE: In my opinion, it may be necessary to consider the possible implications of assenting to the theory proposed by Sheehan. BETTER: Before assenting to Sheehan’s theory, we should consider its implications.</td>
<td>The reader knows it’s your opinion, go ahead &amp; just say it.</td>
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**Sources:**


