

A Word-level Editing Checklist

A Supplement to the book *PUBLISHED*

the
Productive  Academic

get [academic] things done

Check For	How to Fix It
Weak Verbs	Search for the following words: change, affect, occur, facilitate, perform, conduct, implement, and similar verbs that are weak and ambiguous. Replace them with stronger alternatives like: modify, create, increase, decrease, invade, react, inhibit, accelerate, and disrupt.
Nominalizations	When we turn verbs into nouns, we often suppress a strong verb as the false subject of a sentence. For example, “Increasing toxicity is caused by X.” becomes, “X increases toxicity.” Search for words ending in -ence, -ent, -ion, -ize to find some nominalizations, then turn them back into verbs.
Adverbs	Adverbs modify verbs and adjectives. They add nuance to literary writing, but we academic writers often use them to inflate our claims, with words like: substantially, rarely, or negligibly. These types of words lack substance, and we have better methods for creating emphasis. Adverbs have little use in academic writing. Keep some if you must but try to eliminate the majority. To find most adverbs, search for words ending in -ly. For adverbs that subtly change a word’s meaning, find a better word: e.g., “increasingly slowed” becomes “decelerated.” For adverbs that repeat meaning already contained in a word, remove them: e.g., “violently explode” becomes “explode.”
Verb Qualifiers	Search for verb qualifiers like: sort of, tend to, seem to, could have, begin to, etc. and remove them. If you’re using these qualifiers to hedge a claim, reframe that claim into something more defensible.
Jargon	Favor simple words over complicated ones. For the reader’s sake, avoid jargon unless it provides clear benefits for making the writing more succinct. If you must use jargon, place it in the middle of sentences where it draws the least emphasis.
Acronyms	A type of jargon, avoid acronyms unless they are commonly known or provide clear benefits for making your writing more succinct. It’s annoying to continually consult the nomenclature table of an acronym-heavy publication. Consider removing all acronyms, unless your manuscript uses them more than four times. Otherwise, they won’t add much brevity, but might alienate your readers.
Abbreviations	Abbreviations can be more useful than acronyms because they have a stronger ability to retain their original meaning in their shortened form. Make them unambiguous. Don’t use “Scenario A” when “Mild Scenario” will do.
Em Dash (—)	Em dashes—long dashes the width of a capital M—have a variety of uses. Mainly, they help us go on short tangents. They can be used in the middle of a sentence—often instead of parentheses—or at the end of a sentence where you might want to place an incomplete thought in the sentence’s most powerful position—like this.

Colon (:)	Colons have a few nuanced uses, but you should mainly use them to introduce a list at the end of a sentence. Search for colons, if they don't introduce a list, they can probably be replaced with an em dash.
Semicolon (;)	Semicolons connect two independent clauses to balance them against each other. Semicolons can be useful, but are complicated to get right. Grammatically, they can be replaced with periods, which changes the writing's emphasis but not its meaning. Avoid semicolons if you don't want to deal with them.
Exclamation Point (!)	Exclamation points are used when a person's actual quotation was an exclamation. In academic writing, they come off as silly attempts at emphasis. Avoid them.
However & For Example	These phrases belong in the middle of sentences, not at the beginning. Place them at a natural pivot point and bookend them with commas. This sentence, for example, illustrates the phrase's correct placement.
But & Yet	These words belong at the beginning of a sentence. But they are too casual for academic writing.
Not & No	Readers overlook these small words too easily, and then fail to realize that you intended something negative instead of positive. Replace these words with negative verbs and expressions, e.g., "not accurate" becomes "inaccurate."
Because	Many phrases—e.g., due to, as a consequence of, due to the fact that, etc.—should be replaced with "because."
To	Many phrases—e.g., in an effort to, in order to, etc.—should be replaced with "to."
In this study	Unless you are distinguishing your study from other publications—e.g., in comparison to other literature—it is implied that your writing always refers to your own article. Thus, the phrase "in this study" can usually be removed.
Its & It's	"It's" is a contraction that means "it is". "Its" is a possessive pronoun indicating that something belongs to "it". Search for these and fix them as needed.
This, It, That, & These	By themselves, these words can be ambiguous. Search for them in your manuscript. If their meaning is clear—i.e., it is obvious what noun they represent—then keep them. Otherwise, follow them with a noun that clarifies their meaning.
While	"While" should only be used if you can replace it with "during the time that" without changing its meaning. If contrasting two ideas, use "although" instead. If used in the middle of a sentence followed by a comma, replace it with "but" or "and." Otherwise, delete it.

Of	Search for prepositional phrases that use “of” and reorder them so that the “of” is unnecessary. E.g., “method of delivery” becomes “delivery method.”
Data	Data is a plural noun. Give it a plural verb. E.g., “The data shows” becomes “The data show”.
Effect	A noun which means “result”—so don’t use it as a verb. In fact, don’t use “affect” as a verb either—you can think of stronger alternatives.
That & Which	“That” indicates the noun that you are referring to. “Which” elaborates the noun, which adds some superfluous detail. If you remove a which-phrase from a sentence, its meaning doesn’t change, it just loses some detail. The common error is to use “which” instead of “that”. Search for every “which.” If the “which” elaborates a noun, try to rephrase the sentence to remove the “which.” Otherwise, delete the “which” or replace it with “that” if appropriate.
Comparisons	“Better,” “worse,” and other comparisons must include the thing you are comparing against. Something cannot be merely better; it must be better than something else.
Prepositional Phrases	Search for the following words: by, of, to, for, toward, on, at, from, in, with, as. These words—especially clusters of them—often signal unnecessary phrases. Consider reworking your sentences to remove the need for these prepositional phrases.
And & Or	Search for “and” and “or” to see if they form two-word lists—or dyads. Many dyads, especially in the same sentence, dull your writing—for example: a sentence or phrase with four or five dyads feels rhythmic and droning, which lulls and bores your tired and confused readers. If appropriate, opt for one noun instead of a list of two or more.

Resources

Writing Your Journal Article in Twelve Weeks by Wendy Laura Belcher

Writing Tools: 55 Essential Strategies for Every Writer by Roy Peter Clark

Published by Thomas Deetjen

The Professor Is In: The Essential Guide To Turning Your Ph.D. Into a Job by Karen Kelsy

How to Write a Scientific Paper by Jari Saramäki

Writing Science by Joshua Schimel

Write it Up by Paul J. Silvia