

Revision Assignment 2: Editing for brevity and clarity

DUE DATE

This assignment is due in class on Tuesday February 9th, 2016.

TOPIC

Last week, you used three techniques for increasing the brevity and clarity of your writing: avoiding the passive voice, nominalization, and adverbs. This week, you will practice two new techniques for the same purposes: avoiding progressive tenses and uses of the phrases “it is” and “there are.”

For this assignment, you will produce three different documents. To create the first document, please print your paper from last week. Then, in different colored pens or highlighters, circle, highlight, or underline all instances of the following: (1) verbs in progressive tenses, (2) the phrases “it is” and “there are”, and (3) a miscellaneous verbose phrase of your choice. I explain more about these three categories below. You may also highlight the relevant words using a word processor, as long as you distinguish among the three categories. Please number each sentence containing a word that you have highlighted or circled.

In the second document, rewrite each numbered sentence from the first document, and eliminate the circled phrases. Finally, submit an edited version of your second paper. In the edited paper, replace each numbered sentence if you believe the revised sentence is shorter, clearer, more precise, or more interesting. You do not need to replace every numbered sentence, as sometimes your original sentence will be shorter, or clearer, and so on.

TECHNICAL REQUIREMENTS

Please submit your marked up paper in class on Tuesday February 9th, 2016. Please submit your revised paper on Canvas in .doc, docx, .pdf or .odt format, and include a complete bibliography with any secondary sources that you have consulted. Your paper should be no longer than 500 words, excluding the bibliography.

BREVITY

“It is” and “There are”

You can generally eliminate the phrases “it is” and “there are” without loss of content.

Example 1: “It is worth noting explicitly that we are concerned here with the *total* experience of the knower.” Kitcher 1985, p.22

Comments: The phrase “It is worth noticing explicitly that” is unnecessary. We can rewrite the sentence as follows: “We are concerned with the *total* experience of the knower.”

Example 2: “It could happen that the fully general truths are too abstract to be very important, and it could also happen that the fully general truths are beyond our epistemic reach . . .” McGee 2000, p. 54

Comments: The phrase “It could happen that” is like “it is”, except the former uses the subjunctive. We can rewrite the sentence as follows: “The fully general truths may be too abstract to be very important, and they may be beyond our epistemic reach.”

Example 3: “It is hoped that my story of modern probability will draw a few more lines to the portrait of the European scientist of a special era” Von Plato 1998, p. 3

Comments: We can replace the phrase “It is hoped that” with “I hope that” or “Hopefully” without loss of content.

Example 4: “it is this fact which gives the original statement its illusion of contingency . . .” Kripke 1972, p. 150.

Suggested Rephrasing: “This fact gives the original statement its illusion of contingency.”

Example 5: “But there are special factors that seem to have boosted Locke’s popularity as a target of scholarly interest.” Chappell 1994, p. 4

Suggested Rephrasing: “But special factors seem to have boosted Locke’s popularity as a target of scholarly interest.”

Progressive Tenses

Verbs in the present, past, or future progressive tense end in “ing” and are preceded by a conjugated form of “to be.” Some authors use a progressive tense (e.g., “he is studying mathematics at Harvard”) when the corresponding simple tense is shorter and crisper (e.g., “he studies mathematics at Harvard.”).

Example 1: “Now suppose that we are thinking within a Kantian overall frame, and we are not willing to abandon the fundamental thesis that mathematics has its origins in the human mind, not in experience or the outer things” Ferreirós and Gray 2006, p. 16

Comments: The sentence contains two uses of the present progressive: “we are thinking” and “we are not willing.” Because the phrase “we are not willing to abandon the fundamental thesis that mathematics” is verbose, we can shorten it instead of rewriting the verb “to will” in the present tense. Finally, we replace the noun “origins” with the verb “originates” to obtain the following sentence: “Now suppose that we think within a Kantian framework and accept the fundamental thesis that mathematics originates in the human mind, not in experience or outer things.”

Example 2: “. . . it would not be molecular motion (and therefore not heat!), which was causing the sensation” Kripke 1972, p. 151

Comment: We can replace “was causing” by “caused.” Moreover, we can eliminate the use of “it would be” and write, “Molecular motion would not cause the sensation.”

Example 3: “This was apparently the way H. P. Grice was thinking about acts of communication in ‘Meaning’ (1967/71). I was following a different but parallel route earlier when I described the possible evolution of fully conventional leader–follower coordinations from exaggerated and stereotyped natural anticipatory movements” Millikan 2005, p. 19

Comments: We can rewrite the sentences as follows: “This was the way H. P. Grice thought about acts of communication in ‘Meaning’ (1967/71). I followed a different but parallel route earlier when I described the possible evolution of fully conventional leader–follower coordinations from exaggerated and stereotyped natural anticipatory movements.”

Miscellaneous Phrases

Dozens of wordy phrases litter our writing. Below I have listed several common examples of verbosity in philosophical writing. You may search for (and eliminate) instances of one or more of the following phrases in your paper. Alternatively, do your own research! Find tips for increasing the brevity of *your* writing, and cite your sources.

- **The fact that ...** - Instead of “in spite of the fact that” or “despite the fact that”, you can always write “although” or “while.” Instead of “due to the fact that” or “in light of the fact that”, you may write “because” or “as.”
 - **Example:** “In spite of the fact that Kant then went on to confess ...” Guyer 2010, p. 4
 - **Comments:** Both “in spite of the fact that” and “went on to” are verbose. We can rephrase the sentence by writing, “Although Kant later confessed ...”
- **Could/Might/May and Seems that** - Philosophers often hedge claims by adding “could be”, “might” “may”, or “it seems that” to the beginning of sentences. If you say “It seems that φ ” and then later assume that φ is true, your writing is both unclear and verbose; eliminate the hedging phrase.
 - **Example:** “What is at issue here is whether the subject can come to know this on the basis of an inference. It seems very plausible to say that this should be possible; hence Nozickian accounts have a problem here” Baumann 2012, p. 17
 - **Suggested Rephrasing:** “A subject may come to know this on the basis of an inference; hence, Nozickian accounts have a problem.”
- **Would argue/defend/claim** - Many academics unnecessarily add “would” in front of “argue” or “defend.” Instead of saying “I would argue”, however, you can say “I argue.” Similarly, philosophers often say they “want to defend” or “would like to say” something. These phrases can almost always be replaced by the verb “defend” or “argue.”
 - **Example 1:** “In fact I would argue that it is neither androcentric nor gynecentric, but tries instead to more accurately portray the nature of rationality in all its complexity” Tuana 1996
 - **Example 2:** “But we presumably want to hold that “gene” in Mendelian genetics does denote, partly because we want to say that many earlier claims about genes have truth values.” Bertolet 2013
 - **Suggested Rephrasing:** “The word “gene” in Mendelian genetics does denote partly because claims about genes have truth values.”

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