

Weasel Words to Watch For

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Take Your Writing to a New Level

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WEASEL WORDS TO WATCH FOR

What are weasel words, and why should we avoid them? That's a very good question.

Weasel words are unnecessary and extraneous words and phrases that add nothing to your statements and make your writing wordy.

- They don't add any value to a sentence.
- They make sentences wordy.
- Often they are redundant.

Read the following for news on many types of weasel words. Learn them well so you will avoid them while writing. Then you won't have to weed them out during the revision process.

1) Meaningless Words

There Was/There Is
Stood There/Sat There
That

2) Wordy Phrases

Two Prepositions in a Row
Redundancies
Legalese
Qualifiers

3) Was and Other Being Verbs

Passive Voice
Progressive Tenses
Descriptions

Meaningless Words

1) There was/there is

These phrases take the emphasis away from the active verb and give the sentence a passive feel. Many times you can take this phrase out without changing anything, but sometimes you'll need to tweak the sentence for it to make sense.

EXAMPLES:

DON'T: **There are** only a few pieces of candy left.

DO: Only a few pieces of candy **remain**.

DON'T: **There were** eerie sounds coming from the house.

DO: Eerie sounds came from the house.

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2) Stood there/sat there

The use of "there" indicates that the character is still doing what the same thing he's been doing, so there's no need to emphasize it. You can remove these words without taking away any meaning.

EXAMPLES:

DON'T: He **stood there** and stared at the ghost floating in the doorway.

DO: He stared at the ghost floating in the doorway.

DON'T: She **sat there** and thought about the problem.

DO: She thought about the problem

3) That

This word is often not needed and can be removed without losing any meaning.

EXAMPLES:

DON'T: I wish **that** he would quit tapping his foot against the chair.

DO: I wish he would quit tapping his foot against the chair.

DON'T: The best thing **that** he could get me for my birthday is an engagement ring.

DO: The best thing he could get me for my birthday is an engagement ring.

Wordy Phrases

1) Two prepositions in a row

Rarely do you need to use two prepositions in a row. Choose the one essential for understanding the sentence and delete the other.

EXAMPLES:

DON'T: He ducked **down under** the bed.

DO: He ducked **under** the bed.

DON'T: The narrow cave tunnel opened **out into** a huge cavern.

DO: The narrow cave tunnel opened **into** a huge cavern.

2) Repetitions

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Definition = words that tell something about the word they describe which is already implied. These repetitions are not needed and can be dropped.

EXAMPLES:

- nodded **his head** (what else would he nod?)
- nodded **in agreement** (doesn't nodding mean agreement?)
- let out a **loud** roar (isn't a roar always loud?)
- kicked **with his foot** (what else would he kick with?)
- enter **in** (do we ever enter out?)
- **twelve** noon (noon is twelve o'clock)
- one a.m. **in the morning** (if it's in the a.m., we know it's in the morning.)

3) Legalese

Definition = phrases that are often used in legal documents and are long-winded ways of saying smaller words. (Credit for this list goes to columnist Paula Larocque, as reprinted in the Society of Professional Journalism's April 2008 Quill.)

EXAMPLES:

- **with the exception of** = except
- **in all other cases** = otherwise
- **by the same token** = likewise
- **on the occasion that** = when
- **at a later date** = later
- **in regard to** = about
- **in the event that** = if
- **at this point in time** = now
- **until such time as** = until
- **in order to** = to

EXAMPLES:

DON'T: In order to go get a college scholarship, he must score well on the ACT or SAT.

DO: To get a college scholarship, he must score well on the ACT or SAT.

DON'T: In the event that I don't return, please open this letter.

DO: If I don't return, please open this letter.

4) Qualifiers

Definition = adverbs which describe adjectives. They put a limit on the words they describe, yet are generic and vague.

Adverbs Which Are Qualifiers

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a little	definitely	kind of	rather	totally
a lot	extremely	mostly	slightly	very
almost	just	nearly	sort of	

Like other weak words, qualifiers don't adequately convey the author's meaning. It is better to choose more descriptive words, which will create a clearer picture.

EXAMPLES:

DON'T: After the door to the butcher's freezer closed, it became **a lot** colder.

DO: After the door to the butcher's freezer closed, the air became **frigid**.

DON'T: The **mostly** brown dog jumped into my lap.

DO: The brown dog **with a white spot around his nose** jumped into my lap.

Was and Other Being Verbs

1) Passive Voice

Definition = when the subject receives the action. Passive voice uses a form of the verb "to be"—usually was or is—along with the past participle of an active verb.

a) The passive voice is usually expressed in two ways

1. The subject is not mentioned.
2. The subject and object are reversed.

EXAMPLES:

The passive phrases are in bold.

- The life jacket **was thrown** into the water.

(The subject is not mentioned. We don't know who threw the life jacket.)

- The life jacket **was thrown** into the water by the captain.

(The captain is the subject—the person who threw the life jacket—but the order of the sentence has been reversed to put the object—the life jacket—before the subject.)

Why we should avoid the passive voice

- Active verbs are stronger and more descriptive, which makes the writing more exciting, vibrant, and personal.
- The helping verb used in passive voice de-emphasizes the active verb (in the examples above, "thrown" is the active verb), which minimizes the action. And since action moves the story forward, using passive voice slows the pace of the story.

How to fix Passive Voice

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Add the subject if it is missing. If the subject and object are reversed, swap them. Tweaking the sentence either way will automatically make the verb active.

FROM THE EXAMPLES ABOVE:

The captain *threw* the life jacket into the water.

(Now that the subject is present, the object is in its proper place, and the verb “thrown” is active.)

b) Another way writing becomes passive

When a form of “to be” links the subject with a description in the predicate, the sentence takes on a passive-like feel.

EXAMPLE:

- The kingdoms **are** at war.

How to correct this version of passive voice

Replace the form of “to be” with a strong, descriptive verb to put the focus on the action.

FROM THE EXAMPLE ABOVE:

- The kingdoms **warred** with each other.

- The kingdoms **engaged** in war.

MORE EXAMPLES OF PASSIVE VOICE:

PASSIVE: The flower was planted at the gravesite.

ACTIVE: The grieving mother planted the flower at the gravesite.

PASSIVE: The airplane was taken over by the terrorists.

ACTIVE: The terrorists took over the airplane.

PASSIVE: The president was a fit man.

ACTIVE: The president worked out to stay fit.

2) Progressive Tenses

Definition = verb phrases consisting of a form of “to be” plus a verb participle (usually a verb ending in –ing). Progressive tenses show continuing action. The continuity of an action can also be shown with the verbs “begin/began” or “start/started.”

EXAMPLES:

- She **was walking** down the street.

- He **is playing** with chalk.

- She **began washing** the dishes.

- Charlie **started skateboarding** through the park.

Why we should avoid the progressive tense

- The use of “was” or “is” gives the sentence a passive-like feel.

Weasel Words to Watch For

- The helping verb takes emphasis away from the vivid, active verb.
- It focuses on the fact that the action started or continues rather than the action itself.
- Unlike in a movie, where we can see multiple actions at the same time, in a book events can only be described one at a time: this happens, then that happens, then that over there happens—even if they happen simultaneously.

How to Fix the Progressive Tense

Change the progressive tense to the simple past or present tense. This will put the focus back on the active verb.

FROM THE EXAMPLES ABOVE:

- She **walked** down the street.
- He **plays** with chalk.
- She **washed the dishes**.
- Charlie **skateboarded** through the park.

COMPARE THE EXAMPLES BELOW:

(The progressive tenses and the verbs that replace them are in bold.)

PROGRESSIVE TENSE: While Billy Bob **was throwing** a wild punch at Dueling Dan, Sue Ann **was letting** out a bloodcurdling scream, and the bartender **was ducking** under the counter.

SIMPLE PAST: When Billy Bob **threw** a wild punch at Dueling Dan, Sue Ann **let out** a bloodcurdling scream, and the bartender **ducked** under the counter.

The use of the simple past/present strengthens the verb and tightens the writing, which makes the action more immediate and exciting.

The Exception

The only time it is necessary to use a progressive tense is if the action is not completed—if it is interrupted at some point.

EXAMPLE:

Let's say that a mother and her two children are baking Christmas cookies. While they are in the process of baking, their Christmas tree bursts into flames. In this instance, it would be appropriate to say something like, "While the three were rolling out the dough..." or "When the three started to roll out the dough..." Then the fire in the other room interrupts their action.

3) Other Uses of "Was"

Sometimes "was" is needed, especially in descriptions. A good rule of thumb, however, is to get rid of as many uses of "was" as possible. Do your best to reword each sentence that contains "was," but if you find yourself dealing with either of the following situations, you should leave the "was" in the sentence.

Weasel Words to Watch For

- If attempts to change the wording create an awkward or convoluted structure.
- If tweaking the structure or using different words changes the meaning of the sentence

Once you become skilled at taking “was” from your writing, you will find that these exceptions happen less often than you might think.

Integrate Action into Descriptions

As mentioned in the previous section, letting the characters interact with something leads to showing instead of telling. While telling might feel like the natural way to describe something, it is possible—and preferable in storytelling—to show a description as much as possible. When you add action to a description, you make it a part of story instead of stopping the story to tell the readers something.

How to Show a Character Description

In a movie, the camera can focus on a person while other action goes on around the character. In writing, we don't have that luxury. When we stop to tell what someone looks like, we stop the action. And since action pushes the story forward, we stop the progression of the story whenever we tell a description.

EXAMPLE:

TELLING: The baker welcomed us into his shop. The rotund man wore a stained white apron. Pale blue eyes sat underneath thinning brown hair. After waving towards a rear door, he led us into a back room.

(The action stops after the first sentence for the description in the second sentence, then picks up again in the third sentence.)

SHOWING: “Come in. Come in.” The baker waved a flour-covered hand towards the back door. His pale blue eyes glared at our small group as he wiped his hands on the stained white apron that barely covered his rotund mid-section. He ran a shaking hand over his thinning brown hair, then led us into a back room.

(There is no break in the action even though there are phrases that describe the baker.)

Not only does this add action to the description of the baker, but it also shows the readers that he's nervous and doesn't like his guests. The action describes him *and* shows the readers his feelings, which gives more bang for your words.

The following example from my novel, *PERIL: Fast Track Thriller #1*, demonstrates how to weave action into a character description:

Stuart lifted a hand to run it through his hair, but stopped when he remembered the boatload of hairspray it had taken to tame his wavy, sandy-blond hair. Instead, he pulled on the lapels of his tuxedo to shift it into a more comfortable position across his barrel chest. The torture he subjected himself to in the name of representing NASCAR.

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Although I didn't give a full description with showing instead (doing so is rather tedious for both author and reader if overdone), it gives readers enough to form an image, and they fill in the details themselves.

Ferret Out Your Weasel Words

The saying goes, "Forewarned is forearmed." Since you have now been forewarned, you are now armed to attack your work in progress (WIP). Find those weasel words and get rid of them! Your manuscript will thank you for it.

This booklet is excerpted from *Write This Way: Take Your Writing to a New Level* by Suzanne Hartmann, available through her website at <http://suzanne-hartmann2.blogspot.com/2007/01/write-this-way-take-your-writing-to-new.html>