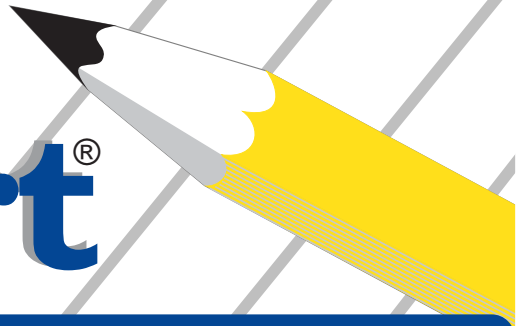


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A Clear Communication Program

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**How the English Language Works — and
How to Make the Language Work for You!**



M. R. McCLORY

PREVIEW EDITION • Write Smart[®] • Game of GrammaText™ • OSE[®] (Operating System ENGLISH[®])

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Introduction

Why Can't Smart People Write Smart?

With the information explosion ignited by the Internet, the centuries-old technology of writing has become more important than ever before. In the age of instant communication, the ability to translate ideas into lean, clean English sentences — quickly and professionally — often makes the difference between success and failure, for organizations and individuals alike.

But because of long-standing deficiencies at all levels of our educational system, most Americans — even those with all the right academic credentials — fall short when it comes to turning good ideas into good writing. The magnitude of the problem led the *New York Times*, in a February 2006 editorial, to raise questions about “the suspect quality of many college graduates from both public and elite colleges. . . . The most recent findings from the National Assessment of Adult Literacy revealed distressing declines in literacy, especially among those with the most education.”

The *Times* also questioned the conventional wisdom that “this country has the best higher education system in the world,” pointing out that “large numbers of college graduates . . . lack what should be basic skills in writing, problem solving and analytical thinking — the minimum price of admission to the new global economy.”

Several years earlier, *Fortune* magazine voiced similar concerns, bluntly stating that most “MBAs lack the ability to speak and write with clarity and conciseness . . . In skills such as writing, the B-schools are forced to compensate for the many sins of American high schools and colleges, in effect supplying remedial instruction.”

This is not just a matter of literary fussiness. A financial-services recruiter quoted in a *Wall Street Journal* article, describing the poor communication skills of young professionals with advanced degrees, put it this way: “[M]any seemingly qualified candidates are unable to write even the simplest of arguments. . . . And in my business, that means death.”

How did we get into this mess? During the last 40 years or so, America has poured billions of dollars into developing innovative technologies and exploring creative educational theories that were supposed to solve the problem. But contrary to the confident predictions of academic visionaries, the problem has gotten worse. In an exhaustive, nonpartisan survey (conducted jointly by The Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills,

and the Society for Human Resource Management), employers rated the “applied skills” of college graduates in 11 categories. Which skills were cited most frequently as “deficient”? Written communications. What about college graduates whose writing skills were regarded as “adequate” or “excellent”? Both were ranked near the bottom — 10th out of a possible 11.

So why can’t smart people write smart? Perhaps it is time to consider the question in a different way:

Why is the typical magazine article easy to follow, while so many government reports (business letters, proposals, academic papers, legal documents, scientific and technical analyses, computer manuals, e-mail and text messages, student compositions, etc.) are tedious and muddled?

Which techniques do the best professional writers and editors in America’s publishing industry use to present ideas in language that is clear, concise, and interesting?

Write Smart explains how professional writing and editing techniques can serve the needs and purposes of the millions of people who *have to write* — whether they be entry-level government employees or senior corporate executives, HR professionals or mail room supervisors, attorneys or engineers, auditors or admirals, national security specialists or law enforcement officers, educators or students. The list goes on. . . .

Is writing crisply and persuasively your objective? If so, you can begin by following the **Write Smart 12-Step Program**, which will help you break old habits and develop the critical thinking skills necessary to translate important information into clear communication. **Write Smart** also provides a series of time-tested techniques and challenging word games to show you how the English language works — and how to make the language work for you. Learn how to:

- Rely on professional writing models, not flaccid generalizations.
- Look at the English language as an operating system — **Operating System** ^{ENGLISH} (or **OS^E**) — and solve writing problems by making connections between key relationships within the system.
- Use the system architecture to build strong sentences. Treat words as if they were pieces of a puzzle, and put the pieces together by playing the **Game of GrammaTecture**®.
- Become familiar with professional punctuation practices — and the many strong, hard-working words (and forms of words) that don’t fit into any neat, logical patterns — by playing the **Game of GrammaText**™.

If you are given to metaphor, you might want to think of **Write Smart** as essential software for the brain.

Table of Contents

I - The Right Place

1. How To Write Like a Pro	1
1.1 Smart = Simple	2
1.1.1 Developing Relationships That Work	3
1.1.2 Creating Word Combinations: Descriptive Language	3
1.1.3 Making Connections: Key Words That Introduce Phrases	3
1.1.4 Making Connections: Key Words That Tie Ideas Together	3
1.2 Taking Out The Garbage	4
1.2.1 Too Many Words	4
1.2.2 Redundancy	6
1.2.3 Bombast	8
1.2.4 Introductory Fluff	12
1.3 The Write Smart 12-Step Program: Steps 1-4	13
1.3.1 Moving the Message: Action Verbs	14
1.3.2 Shifting into Neutral: Linking Verbs	18
1.3.3 Shifting into Overdrive: Phrases as Complements	19
1.3.4 Shifting into Reverse: Passive Verbs	20
1.4 Rules of the Game	23
1.4.1 What's the Name of the Game?	23
1.4.2 Rules and Roles	23
1.4.3 Sense and Nonsense: 3 Rules	25
1.4.4 How Not to Write	26
2. Building Strong Sentences: Intro to GrammaTecture	27
2.1 How To Play The Game	28
2.1.1 Action	28
2.1.2 Names	28
2.1.3 Identity	30
2.1.4 Role	30
2.2 Building Strong Sentences: 4 Dominant Patterns	32
2.2.1 Subject–Action Verb ➡ Complement	32
2.2.2 Subject-Linking Verb ➡ Complement	47
2.2.3 Subject–Action or Linking Verb ➡ Phrase	53
2.2.4 ← Passive Verbs	56
2.3 Making Connections: 4 Phrases	61
2.3.1 Words You Can't End a Sentence With?	62
2.3.2 Verb Forms That <u>Describe</u> Nouns	65
2.3.3 Verb Forms That <u>Are</u> Nouns	69
2.3.4 Verb Forms That Do It All	72
2.4 Making Connections: 4 Clauses	77
2.4.1 Clauses That Can Stand Alone	80
2.4.2 Clauses That Add A Condition	83
2.4.3 Clauses That Are Like Your Cousin	87
2.4.4 Clause That Are, Like, A Noun	90

3. Giving Clear Directions: Introduction to GrammarText	95
3.1 Punctuation: Guiding or Guessing?	96
3.1.1 Punctuation Practices, Not Punctuation Rules	97
3.1.2 Connections and Commas	97
3.1.3 Clarity and Variety	98
3.1.4 Practices Then and Now	98
3.2 Clauses	100
3.2.1 Coordination: and, but, therefore, however...	100
3.2.2 Conditions: when, where, because, if...	103
3.2.3 Relatives: who, whom, which, that...	107
3.2.4 Indefinite Relatives: that (again!), why, whatever...	113
3.3 Phrases	115
3.3.1 Infinitive	115
3.3.2 Verbal Adjective	117
3.3.3 Verbal Noun	122
3.3.4 Prepositional	124
3.4 Parenthetical Expressions	128
3.4.1 Clauses, Phrases, Words	128
3.4.2 Transitions	133
3.4.3 Appositives	135
3.4.4 Contrast and Continuation	137
4. Delivering The Message: GrammarText Apps	141
4.1 Making Every Word Count	142
4.1.1 Specific Language	142
4.1.2 Lively Language	143
4.1.3 Concise Connections	144
4.1.4 Clichés	145
4.2 Shaky Syntax	146
4.2.1 Clear Reference: Pronouns	146
4.1.2 Clear Reference: Modifiers	148
4.1.3 Is Your Participle Dangling?	149
4.1.4 From Clarity to Emphasis	152
4.3 Coherent Sentences	154
4.2.1 Wasting Words	154
4.1.2 Writing for the Reader	155
4.1.3 Omission	156
4.1.4 Parallel Construction	157
4.4 Persuasive Paragraphs	158
4.2.1 Same Old	158
4.1.2 Logical Development vs. Adding On	158
4.1.3 Meandering Sentences	159
4.1.4 Choppy Sentences	159

II - The Right Word

5 – 10. GrammaTexting in Plain English: 21st Century Standard Usage	161
5. Nouns	
5.1 Number	163
5.1.1 Plural Nouns: Add <i>s</i>	163
5.1.2 Plural Nouns: Add <i>-es</i>	163
5.1.3 Plural Nouns: Add <i>-ies</i>	163
5.1.4 Plural Nouns: Ending in <i>o</i>	164
5.1.5 Plural Nouns: Ending in <i>f</i> or <i>-fe</i>	165
5.1.6 Irregular Plurals	165
5.1.7 Irregular singular nouns: ending in <i>s</i>	167
5.1.8 Plural of Numbers and Letters	168
5.2 Person	169
5.3 Gender	169
5.4 Case	171
5.4.1 Possessive Nouns: Singular	171
5.4.2 Shared possession	172
5.4.3 Possessive Nouns: Singular ending in <i>s</i> .	172
5.4.4 Possessive Nouns: Plural	173
5.4.5 Irregular Possessive Nouns: Plural	173
6. Pronouns	175
6.1 Declension of Pronouns	176
6.2 Pronoun-Antecedent Relationship	177
6.3 Case of Pronouns	178
6.4 Possessive Pronouns	181
6.5 Coosing between <i>who</i> and <i>whom</i>	184
7. Verbs	188
7.1 Regular Verbs	188
7.1 Irregular Verbs	189
7.3 Classification of Verbs: Mood	193
7.3.1 Indicative Mood	193
7.3.2 Conjugation of Verbs	194
7.3.3 Verb Tense	198
7.3.4 Imperative Mood	200
7.3.5 Subjunctive Mood	200
7.4 Classification of Verbs: Voice	205
7.4.1 Conjugation: Passive Voice	205
7.4.1 Tense Shift	207
7.5 Agreement	209
7.5.1 Third Person: Singular vs. Plural	209
7.5.2 Third Person: Singular: Negative	211
7.5.3 Agreement Problems: Prepositional Phrases	212
7.5.4 Agreement Problems: Relative Clauses	213
7.5.4 Agreement Problems: Special Cases	213

8. Modifiers	218
8.1 Adjective and Adverb Forms	218
8.2 Comparison of Modifiers	219
8.3 Double Negatives	220
9. Connectives	224
9.1 Conjunctions	224
9.2 Prepositions	224
10. Words That Will Fail You	227
10.1 The 100 Most Commonly Misused Words	227

III - When Stylebooks Collide

11. Lists and Quotation Marks	249
11.1 Comma (or no comma) before <i>and</i> ?	250
11.1.1 Clauses in a Series	250
11.1.2 Phrases and Combinations in a Series	252
11.1.3 Words in a Series	253
11.1.4 Lists vs. Pairs	254
11.1.5 Bullets	255
11.2 Quotation Marks: Arbitrary Practices	256
11.2.1 Direct vs. Indirect Quotations	256
11.2.2 Closing Quotation Marks: Periods and Commas	256
11.2.3 Closing Quotation Marks: Dashes, Semicolons, and Colons	257
11.2.4 Colons before a Quotation	258
11.2.5 Quotation Marks within Quotation Marks	259
11.2.6 Special or Ironic Uses	259

IV - Model-Driven Writing

12. Paying Attention to Professional Writing Models	262
12.1 Critical Thinking: How the English Language Works	262
12.2 Practical Solutions: From the Grammatic to the Dramatic	267

I - The Right Place

1. How To Write Like A Pro

Jonathan Swift, the great 18th century author of *Gulliver's Travels* and many other English classics, once defined writing style as “proper words in proper places.” A little more than 150 years later, Mark Twain put it this way: “To get the right word in the right place is a rare achievement.”

Finding the right words to express your ideas can be a problem, but the real challenge for anyone who wants to write clearly and persuasively is understanding how to put those words in the right place.

1.1 Smart = Simple

Skilled professional writers know how to present complex information in a way that most readers can understand easily. Consider, for example, an article from the Associated Press that appeared on the Internet on July 4, 2003.

Nigerian Oil Workers Suspend Walkout

LAGOS, Nigeria (AP) — Nigerian oil workers suspended a walkout after union leaders reported progress in talks with the government to end a general strike over rising fuel prices.

The 5-day-old strike has paralyzed businesses and some airlines in Africa's most populous nation. Nigeria is Africa's leading oil producer and the fifth largest supplier of crude to the United States.

Peter Akpatason, president of the main blue-collar oil workers' union, said its members were asked to return to work amid negotiations to end the strike. He said the 29-union Nigeria Labor Congress will meet on Saturday to consider the proposal.

If you think of the English language as an **operating system**, you will find that the best writers and editors in America's publishing industry work with a few dominant sentence patterns. In the lead sentence of this article, we are looking at two subject-verb relationships (or clauses) that get to the point and provide just enough supporting information to present a clear picture.

workers suspended . . .

leaders reported . . .

Most of us learned many years ago that a sentence has a subject and a verb (or predicate) and expresses a complete thought. Seems simple enough, doesn't it? The problem is that although thoughts may seem "complete" while they are abstract ideas in your mind, translating ideas into strong sentences is a complicated and often frustrating process.

By looking at English through the lens of **Operating System**^{ENGLISH} (or **OS^E**), you will be able to observe the language patterns used by top professional writers and editors. Understanding the underlying principles of the **OS^E 12-Step Program** will help you turn useful information into clear communication, our century's most valuable commodity.

So for starters, we need to understand that the English sentence is a system: an organization of words that work together in specific ways to create meaning. Meaning — that's the tricky part. And that's what leads us to the third, and most challenging part, of the equation: the complete thought.

1.1. 1 Developing Relationships That Work

Writing sentences that are easy to read requires an understanding of how the English language works. So which sentence patterns — that is, which subject-verb relationships — do most professional writers and editors rely on most of the time? Let's take a second look:

workers suspended ➔ a walkout . . . leaders reported ➔ progress . . .

Establishing a strong subject-verb relationship is important, but you have to go somewhere with that relationship. Most of the sentences you read in a carefully edited magazine or newspaper article will include a **complement** — a word (or group of words) that **completes** the subject-verb relationship. In the *AP* article's lead sentence, *walkout* completes the sense of *workers suspended*; *progress* completes the meaning of *leaders reported*.

1.1. 2 Creating Word Combinations: Descriptive Language

The skilled professional adds descriptive language — in the form of words or phrases — to support the subject-verb-complement relationship. You can't just say *workers suspended a walkout* or *leaders reported progress*. Your readers will generally respond positively to combinations of words that put some flesh on the bones — *Nigerian oil workers suspended a walkout*; *union leaders reported progress*. But be careful. Too much descriptive language can make a mess of your message.

1.1. 3 Making Connections: Key Words That Introduce Phrases

Key words — such as *in*, *with*, *to*, and *over* — may introduce phrases that extend and clarify the meaning of a subject-verb-complement relationship: *progress (in talks) (with the government) (to end a general strike) (over rising fuel prices)*.

1.1. 4 Making Connections: Key Words That Tie Ideas Together

For most people, one of the more challenging aspects of writing is tying ideas together — which means tying subject-verb relationships together. Look for opportunities to use key words that add direction to your sentence.

Nigerian oil workers suspended a walkout **after** union leaders reported progress in talks with the government to end a general strike over rising fuel prices.

Think of these four concepts as the **addition**, **subtraction**, **multiplication**, and **division** of writing. In Part 2, we will focus on how to use these understandings to build strong sentences — the **GrammarText** of English. But first, we need to consider an enormous problem that, left unchecked, will bury your ideas alive: garbage.

1.2 Taking Out the Garbage

“[O]ur musings pursue an erratic course, swerving continually into some new direction . . .”

– *William James*

Exactly how we form thoughts and convert them into language is a subject of heated debate. But we do know that certain kinds of mental activities appear to take place in different parts of the brain.

Although it may be an oversimplification to say that there are specific right brain and left brain activities, accepting this generalization can help us understand the forces that come into play when we need to explain something in writing. Generating ideas — the creative part of writing — is a right brain (or **write brain**) activity; the analytical or control mechanism — what is generally thought of as editing — is a left brain (or **deft brain**) activity.

When writing a rough draft, we tend to say more — often much more — than the reader wants or needs. When editing a rough draft, keep asking, “What does the reader need to know? — not “How am I going to say this?” If you are careless about developing strong subject-verb relationships, your ideas will come across as garbled, and readers will question your competence.

1.2. 1 Too Many Words

Skilled professional writers and editors learn how to communicate clearly by eliminating clutter. The seasoned professional, either consciously or intuitively, will take pains to make sure the subject-verb relationship drives the message, adding appropriate descriptive language to support and clarify that relationship.

Nigerian oil workers suspended a walkout after union leaders reported progress in talks with the government to end a general strike over rising fuel prices.

The unwary writer, intent upon impressing rather than expressing, may allow descriptive language to bury the subject-verb relationship.

There is evidence to suggest that considerable numbers of very frustrated and thoroughly demoralized workers in the petroleum industry in the West African country of Nigeria have arrived at what would appear to be a decision in favor of a suspension, at least for the time being of a previously announced walkout after definite indications on the part of union leaders of substantial progress in extensive negotiations with key government representatives.

Many otherwise reasonable and capable people make the mistake of confusing this kind of deeply piled verbiage with intelligent writing. The result? They bore everyone to death.

Do not confuse quantity with quality. The surest way to lose your reader is to obscure the subject-verb relationship with too many words.

Original: The Human Resources Department is currently involved in the process of preparing a training manual for the purpose of showing computer programmers how to develop the ability to write instructions that are both clear and concise.

The problem is that the writer has turned what could have been a straightforward statement into a virtual landfill of verbiage.

Edited: The Human Resources Department is preparing a training manual that will show computer programmers how to write clear, concise instructions.

Learning how to develop a concise writing style requires patience and effort. As Lord Chesterfield said in one of his famous letters, “I am sorry to have written a five-page letter, but I did not have time to write a one-page letter.” (You will find examples of some common long-winded phrases on page 143.)

One of America’s most remarkable editors was Gouverneur Morris,* who in 1787 was chosen to revise the rough draft of the United States Constitution. Mind you, he was dealing with a group of gifted and opinionated writers, James Madison and Alexander Hamilton among them, so he faced a formidable task. The original document began something like this:

Original: “We the People of the States of New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Vermont, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Delaware, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia . . .”

Even the noblest idea will not accomplish much if it takes forever to get to the verb of the sentence. Morris’s revision resulted not only in a more concise sentence, but also in a new national identity.

Edited: “We the People of the United States . . .”

The contagion of information overload now infects most areas of American life, including national security. As former Senator Warren Rudman, co-chair of the U.S. Commission on National Security/21st Century, has pointed out repeatedly — both before September 11, 2001, and after — the problem with our intelligence gathering and reporting is “too much information, not not enough information.”

**Gouverneur Morris, the Rake Who Wrote the Constitution* by Richard Brookhiser

1.2. 2 Redundancy

Redundancy is another common problem that will distract the reader.

Original: Although you and I may not agree on this issue, I respect your opinions and am glad that you decided to share them with me on this important issue.

Here, the redundancy *on this important issue* causes a strong statement to come across as pompous and insincere.

Edited: Although you and I may not agree on this issue, I respect your opinions and am glad that you decided to share them with me.

Think of redundancy as unnecessary or unconscious repetition.

Original: This legislation would establish spending limits on presidential libraries presently in place for our former presidents.

Edited: This legislation would establish spending limits for existing presidential libraries.

Here are two typical examples, taken from government reports, of unconscious repetition.

The Human Resources Department has developed a process that enables the agency to process job applications expeditiously.

We are committed to providing services that enhance the development of occupational skills and provide financial support services.

The words *redundancy* and its adjective form, *redundant*, are subject to frequent abuse. We often hear engineers and IT professionals refer to a *redundant* system, by which they mean a system that takes over if a primary system fails — in other words, a *backup* system. If NASA officials insist that a spacecraft needs a *backup* system in case something goes wrong, most of us will readily agree that safety must come first. But if they bemoan the lack of additional funding for a *redundant* system, we may be inclined to think that it sounds like a waste of money.

Do not confuse redundancy with repeating for emphasis. Abraham Lincoln concluded his *Gettysburg Address* with the hope “that government of the people, by the people, for the people — shall not perish from the earth.” Lincoln used the deliberate, cadenced repetition of the word *people* to inspire a sense of confidence in the future of democracy. And redundancy isn’t the same as replicating. We rely on a 26-letter alphabet to represent hundreds of thousands of words. It follows that in many words, some letters will be repeated. (For example: in the word *engine*, the letters *e* and *n* appear twice; in the related word *engineer*, the letter *e* appears three times; etc.)

When Malcolm Baldrige served as Secretary of Commerce (1980-1987), he issued what *The Washington Post* called a “hit list” of common writing problems, which included the following redundancies:

serious crisis	new initiatives	important essentials	end result
final outcome	future plans	personally reviewed	enclosed herewith

Let the strong sentence core carry your message.

Original: Many experts predict that the automobile industry will soon face a serious financial crisis.

If it’s not *serious*, it’s not a *crisis*.

Edited: Many experts predict that the automobile industry will soon face a financial crisis.

Original: Next month, the administration will propose a new Medicare reform initiative to limit rising costs.

An *initiative*, derived from the verb *initiate*, is new. You can have a *new plan*, a *new proposal*, or a *new project*, but you cannot have a *new initiative*.

Edited: Next month, the administration will propose a Medicare reform initiative to limit rising costs.

To see what happens when you obscure the subject-verb relationship with too many words **and** redundancies, look at this paragraph from an F.B.I. press release.

Original: While there are many influences that dictate the volume of crime on our Nation’s streets, the efficiency of law enforcement is an integral ingredient in combating the crime problem. It has long been accepted that greater citizen involvement in crime resistance is equally significant in diminishing lawlessness in our society.

Taking out the garbage will help you come up with sentences that are leaner, more interesting, and easier to follow.

Edited: While many influences dictate the volume of crime on our Nation’s streets, the efficiency of law enforcement is an integral ingredient. Greater citizen involvement has long been accepted as an equally significant factor in fighting crime.

You may be able to think of other — perhaps better — ways to express this information concisely.

1.2. **3** Bombast

In his brilliant essay, *Politics and the English Language*, George Orwell satirized the tendency of some writers in certain academic disciplines to gain a kind of perverse satisfaction by resorting to inflated language that obscures meaning. He offered this sentence as an example:

Objective consideration of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must inevitably be taken into account.

Huh? Orwell's point was that a certain kind of writing — which may seem “intelligent” on the surface — can transform simple ideas into a dense stew of ponderous abstractions. Clear, strong subject-verb relationships will inevitably get lost in the mix.

Relying on important sounding language produces a phenomenon that I call “information overload.” Consider this announcement, written by a college professor, of an upcoming seminar.

“Asia-Pacific” serves as a powerful political-economic signifier to bespeak the border-crossing expansionism and cash-driven transfusion of trans-nationalizing economies from Taipei to Honolulu. . . . This talk will contest the makings of APEC's “Asia-Pacific” by fleshing out micropolitical dimensions of the call across the region for a more localized “Asian-Pacific Cultural Studies” that is being carried out in the key globalized localities and heteroglossic Asian-Pacific islands of Taiwan and Hawaii.

Is the purpose to connect with the reader or to display the superior intellect of the writer? Advocates of bloated verbiage defend the practice by arguing that people in a particular discipline need to employ a specialized vocabulary to communicate in precise language with one another. Not so. “Cut the Communications Fog, Say Physicists and Editors” — a recent article in *Science* magazine — says the problem is not just an “inability to communicate with the lay public . . .” but that, because of the tendency toward producing “endless sentences and nightmarish graphs . . . physicists can no longer understand each other.” According to the article, the problem could be solved if people learned to develop strong communication skills “as undergraduates, before poor writing habits have become irreversible.”

For most people, these habits have reached an advanced stage before graduation from high school. Another article, this one in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, points out that only 17 percent of incoming students at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) passed a recent written evaluation . . . “‘The quality of writing of a lot of the students who come to MIT leaves a little bit to be desired,’ says Kip Hodges, a geology professor and chairman of the faculty committee that oversees the writing requirement.”

This is not to suggest that developing a large vocabulary is a bad idea or that there is something inherently evil about technical words. The appropriate use of technical language helps us understand technical realities. If you need to have some work done on your car, you expect the mechanic to talk about changing the “spark plugs” (not changing “those funny-looking little gizmos”). You probably wouldn’t want to get your car fixed by a mechanic who can’t distinguish between the “exhaust system” and the “ignition system.”

The term **jargon** generally refers to the inappropriate use of technical language. Allowing technical language to get in the way — that is, to subvert a clear subject-verb relationship — will make a mess of your message.

Jargon: An extended seasonal deficiency in precipitation caused the biota to experience a mortality rate of 100 percent.

English: A long summer drought killed all the plants.

For centuries, critics have poked fun at people who take pleasure in abusing technical language. At one point in Henry Fielding’s 18th century comedy of manners, *The History of Tom Jones*, the unfortunate Jones got hit over the head during a barroom brawl. A British army officer, hoping that the injury was not serious, asked a doctor how long it might take for Jones to recover. In answer to this simple question, the doctor offered the following explanation:

I was once, I remember, called to a patient, who had received a violent contusion in his tibia, by which the exterior cutis was lacerated so that there was a profuse sanguinary discharge; and the interior membranes were so divellicated, that the bone very plainly appeared through the Aperture of the Vulnus or wound. Some febrile symptoms intervening at the same time (for the pulse was exuberant and indicated much Phlebotomy), I apprehended an immediate mortification. To prevent which, I presently made a large orifice in the vein of the left arm, whence I drew twenty ounces of blood; which I expected to have found extremely sizy and glutinous, or indeed coagulated, as it is in pleuritic complaints; but, to my surprise, it appeared rosy and florid, and its consistency differed little from the blood of those in perfect health. I then applied a formation to the part, which highly answered the intention; and after three or four times dressing, the wound began to discharge a thick pus or matter, by which means the cohesion . . . but perhaps I do not make myself perfectly well understood?

To which the army officer, bewildered by this verbal deluge, replied:

No, really . . . I cannot say I understand a syllable.

Bombast is most troublesome when it interferes with our ability to function in society as productive, law-abiding citizens. The verbal garbage that most directly interferes with our lives is **legalese**.

Not all legal writing is legalese, and not everyone who adopts a legalistic writing style is a lawyer. In fact, studies on the writing style of highly successful lawyers demonstrate that judges are far more likely to rule in favor of arguments couched in plain English than those that rely heavily on legalisms.

Legalese is an oppressive form of inflated language preferred not only by lawyers with a shaky command of the language, but also by many government officials hoping to enhance the authoritative tone of their pronouncements. In 2003, the United States Merit System Protection Board published a report criticizing the offensive tone of “legalistic language” that has effectively discouraged talented people from seeking federal government employment.

The private sector also has a weakness for legalistic obfuscation. Here is a memorandum that appeared one day on the screens of a high-tech company’s employees.

To All Employees:

Company Internet and E-Mail Usage Policy

Employees are advised that the company’s e-mail and Internet systems may only be used for legitimate company-related business purposes and employees should not expect any level of privacy with respect to messages sent, messages received, or information stored on the systems. The e-mail and Internet software that may be on each individual employee’s computer system is the property of the company, and the company retains the right to regulate the use of these systems. The fact that an employee has the ability to choose his or her own password to the e-mail system does not, in any way, imply a right to privacy.

Employees are strictly prohibited from using the company’s e-mail or Internet systems to send, display, or create offensive messages or pictorials. “Offensive” is defined as any material that may be reasonably deemed to be offensive to another person because of their race, religion, sex, national origin, age, color or disability, or material that is otherwise intended to harass another individual. Employees are also advised that they are prohibited from using the e-mail and/or Internet systems for uses that are criminal or otherwise improper.

In order to ensure compliance with this policy, the company will periodically select on a random basis messages to review. Any violation of the policies contained herein will be grounds for discipline, up to and including removal from employment. Any questions concerning the e-mail and Internet usage policy should be referred to the Office of Human Resources.

As David Mellinkoff once said in his book *Legal Writing: Sense and Nonsense* (referring to a clause in the U.S. Uniform Commercial Code), “There is so much stuffing between the head and tail of this turkey that the meat is hard to find.”

Aside from punctuation errors, agreement problems, and superfluous combinations (“otherwise intended . . . contained herein”), the wording of this message qualifies as garbage on several levels:

- The heading of the statement identifies the audience as “all employees.” By continuing to refer to “employees” *ad nauseam*, the writer adopts a style that is at once impersonal and irritating.
- Insisting that employees restrict their use of the systems to “**legitimate** company-related business purposes” suggests the possibility that some “**illegitimate** company-related business purposes” are okay.
- Tacking “purposes” onto the tail of “business” is an obvious redundancy.
- Getting carried away with legalistic constructions often causes the writer to lose track of the logical order of sentences in the first paragraph and of words in the second. (Wouldn’t you have to “create” a message before you could “send” it?)
- Failing to see the redundancy in the second sentence of the second paragraph results in circular logic (“ ‘Offensive’ is defined as . . . offensive . . .”).

Although none of these sentences could pass the first test of clarity (i.e., a strong subject-verb relationship), the last sentence in the second paragraph is a real laugh. Can you imagine a business telling employees that they are “prohibited from embezzling company funds, stealing company property, or engaging in activities that are otherwise criminal . . .?”

Here is an edited version. You might think of other possibilities.

To All Employees:

Company Internet and E-Mail Usage Policies

The company’s e-mail and Internet systems are for company-related business only. The e-mail and Internet systems are the property of the company, which retains the right to control their use. The fact that you may choose your own password does not confer a right to privacy with respect to messages sent, messages received, or information stored.

You are prohibited from using the company’s e-mail or Internet systems to create, display, or send offensive messages or images. This includes any material relating to race, religion, sex, national origin, age, color, or disability that another person might find offensive or material that is intended to harass someone.

Violating these policies may be grounds for discipline or termination. To ensure compliance, the company will periodically review employees’ e-mail messages.

If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Human Resources.

1.2. **4** Introductory Fluff

[O]ld threadbare phrases . . . are nauseous to rational hearers, and will seldom express your meaning as well as your own natural words.” – *Jonathan Swift*

Most books on writing tell you to avoid clichés (“easier said than done,” “water under the bridge,” “last but not least,” etc.) and encourage you to look for opportunities to use fresh, original language. Many people who lack confidence in their writing skills fall into the habit of introducing sentences with useless information — introductory fluff. Here are some of the most common:

I am writing to inform you	As you know
Needless to say	As you may know
In the final analysis	Please be advised that
The purpose of this letter	The fact of the matter is
(The purpose of this report . . . The purpose of this memo . . .)	

Fluff: *I am writing to inform you* of two significant travel-related changes that will take effect on January 1, 2002.

You may resort to empty introductions in a first draft. Most writers have a hard time figuring out how to get started. I certainly do. But when you edit your draft, you need to take out the garbage so that you can get to the point and deliver a lean, clean message.

Edited: Two significant travel-related changes will take effect on January 1, 2002.

Fluff: *The purpose of this memorandum is to inform you that* the computer class originally scheduled for Room B-202 will meet in Room B-170.

The reader knows it is a memorandum. The purpose is self-evident.

Edited: The computer class originally scheduled for Room B-202 will meet in Room B-170.

Fluff: *Needless to say,* the new guidelines will help us to reduce waste and improve efficiency.

Fluff: *As you know,* Section 104 requires each Department to submit an annual financial report.

If it is *needless to say*, why say it? If I already know about Section 104, why tell me?

Edited: The new guidelines will help us to reduce waste and improve efficiency.

Edited: Section 104 requires each Department to submit an annual financial report.

For more about clichés, see page 145.