

## Concrete Not Abstract – Writing to Provide Information

The winner of a bad writing contest was Judith Butler, a professor of rhetoric and comparative literature at the University of California at Berkeley, described as "one of the 10 smartest people on the planet." Here's her "prize-winning" sentence, from an article published in the scholarly journal *Diacritics*:

"The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relationships in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power."

Which means, presumably, that class systems are based, not just on money, but on differences in political power and social status.

Abstract nouns are those nouns which do not have a concrete referent. *Table, horse, university* are concrete nouns; *joy, death, hegemony* etc are abstract terms. There is nothing wrong with abstract nouns, but because they can have many different meanings to different people (what, for instance, springs into your mind when you think of *joy*?), they need to be described with concrete details. Use short sentences. Explain each step in one sentence- note that in the above example there are very few subjects of sentences, and no idea is explained. There are about 18 ideas in that one sentence, none of which are explained in a complete SVO structure. Who is moving? Note the unanswered questions in every third word or so. The sentence is totally meaningless to anyone except the writer.

Abstract writing also occurs in science; in fact, in every discipline. The key thing to remember is to make every word count. Eliminate any word which does not add information, and ensure that every word conveys real information.

### Use Concrete and not Abstract Language

Let's assume that the following is declaimed by a politician- how would you react? To what specifically could you react? Compare with the sentence below.

X: The issue in relation to the interest rates is that it will negatively impact consumers.

What is the issue? How is that related to interest rates? What does a negative impact actually mean? How can a reader possibly understand what the writer has meant in this sentence?

√: An increase in interest rates of 0.5% could raise the average mortgage repayment by \$10,000 a year.

Many theses use abstract terms (vague, undefined words) rather than concrete (precise) terms. Of course, theses do require specialised terminology which may include abstract nouns (ideology, patriarchy). There is nothing wrong with abstract nouns, or ideas, as long as they are supplemented with concrete instances so that the reader can understand how the writer understands the abstract term. Abstract terms leave the reader to guess what the reader means, to supplement the writer's work. Hence, abstract terms make hard work for the reader, and are unconvincing as argument because they lack evidence.

**Abstract Terminology:** Prosthetics have advanced beyond mere substitution to the ability to restore function.

**Concrete Sentence:** Prosthetics have advanced beyond wooden legs and glass eyes to new devices, such as cochlea implants for the ears, which restore the patient's use of the missing or defective body part.

Use **verbs** which actually convey information. Avoid verbs *to impact, to affect, to access, to address*. Neither of these actually convey what is happening. Another sentence is required to explain.

1. *The government will address the problems in the department of child protection which resulted in the death of a child returned to his abusive parents.*

What precisely will the government do about these problems? Solve the problems? How? Form a committee to investigate? Sack the head? Replace the department? The possibilities are endless, and this word is a weasel word to avoid commitment.

2. *The tsunami impacted the charity's profits.*

How were the profits affected? Increased or decreased? Was the disaster a reason for a drain on the reserves? Or did the inpouring of donations actually increase the profits? The reader cannot know.

3. *The customer accessed his bank account.*

Did she withdraw money? Did she check her balance? Did she deposit money? 'To give access' means to allow someone entrance into something. The verb is meaningless. The citizens were able to access their human rights? Rights are not something that should be external, but are inalienable and internal.

Read the following 2 extracts and consider how much information you, as a reader, can absorb from it.

1. Various studies of marsupials have been conducted within and surrounding the north eastern area of Queensland.

### **Regional distribution and relationship of marsupials**

1. Previous work on the regional distribution of marsupials in the northeast of the state has been carried out by Moriarty et al (2001). Analysis of the Atherton region was undertaken by Turnwell et al (1983). Detailed unpublished mapping by the Marsupial Investigation Team (JCU) to the north (1990, 1992, and 1993) and west (1991) of the Atherton area has also undertaken. The earliest fossil survey of marsupials was studied by Turner et al (2006).

A study of marsupials in northeastern Queensland region was undertaken by Fellowes and Piper (1996) who investigated relationships between marsupials and place. Piper and Lee (1997) put forward a hypothesis to suggest that these marsupials migrated to Queensland on upturned umbrellas. Lee (1998) also conducted studies in the north and south of the area to suggest a genetic relationship between those marsupials in the north and in the south. Further work by Lee et al (2004) suggested that it is the common gene sequence 2324-5.

{What expression needs to be edited for conciseness?}

### **Abstract Terminology Leaves Unanswered Questions**

Numerous organizations and settings represent themselves in various ways both to themselves and to others. Therefore, within our comprehension of current society, we should include the commodity and products of self-portrayal. This includes the creation and consumption of organisational records and other related documentation, there are numerous research settings and a plethora of research questions that cannot be adequately investigated without reference to these records and documents. As suggested by Jerry and Lewis (1998) textually transmitted applications are a necessary way in which organizations construct 'reality' and other appropriate forms of knowledge.

What does the reader really learn from the above? There are various grammatical and word-choice problems with the paragraph, but the first point to re-edit is the lack of concrete information to support the main assertion in the paragraph that companies use brochures and publicity to define themselves.

### **Concrete change:**

Organizations represent themselves in various ways to both themselves and to others. This self-portrayal can include promotional documentation and paintings or photographs. For instance, Acme's self-published, *History of Acme*, has as a

frontpiece a photo of the original 1930 building as a skyscraper towering over small bungalows. The Acme sign, with the logo, “the biggest and the best”, fills the top three storeys. The physical and mercantile dominance of the company is conveyed by its dominance over the smaller buildings, and by the prominence of this photo on the cover of the book. The same photo dominates the boardroom where takeover decisions are made. It may be argued that the ethos of the company, the aggressive takeover mentality which characterised Acme in the 1930s, was part of the ethos which commissioned this particular photo. It is also possible that the continued dominance of the photo in all Acme’s PR exercises and in the boardroom has helped to perpetuate this spirit of aggressive or robust capitalism. The decision to take over another company, Ajax, was made around a table directly under the painting and so that takeover could be said to have been made within the context of the historical documents (the photo) which reveal Acme to be always the ‘biggest and the best’. To adapt Jerry and Lewis’ terminology (1998) Acme’s own constructed history or ‘textually transmitted application’, formed the ‘reality’ which helped Acme to construct a new ‘reality’ (the merger of Acme-Ajax).

Turning abstract terms into concrete terms is an essential step in critical thinking and clarifies what the writer really knows and wants to say. Thesis writing may stall because the writer has nothing concrete on which to work. Abstract terminology cannot lead to a further argument, proposition or hypothesis. So, if the writer has a mental block, try re-editing for concrete expression and then see if this concrete expression gives rise to further thought.

### **Editing a Paragraph**

#### **Original:**

Soil quality is a concerning issue for Australia. Governments have responded by developing policies, plans, programs and guidelines. In this paper we critique current federal, state and local government quality policies, plans, programs and guidelines to consider the role stakeholders may play in them.

{what do you, as reader, understand from this? Look at how many unanswered questions there are : What is the problem with the soil? Why is this a problem for Australia (all of Australia? Particular parts of Australia??)The governments have responded? But how? What was the result? Why does the paper critique governments? What is the problem with these policies? . Do not hide information and think you have summarised it. Every word in every sentence must convey information to the reader }

#### **Rewritten:**

Soil quality has deteriorated across Australia in the last 15 years and has directly and indirectly led to both diminution of harvests and increased pollution of waterways. When soil nutrients falls below 5 units per hectare, harvests typically are reduced by 25%. Confronted by reduced harvests, farmers increase fertilisers and the subsequent run off affects water quality and fish harvest. Poor soil quality thus affects farmers, the agricultural industry, fishermen and the sports fishing industry. All levels of Australian Government have introduced policies and guidelines to redress the declining soil quality, but few of these documents have incorporated the views or experiences of those directly affected. As many studies have shown, the failure to involve stakeholders in policy decisions invariably results in poor implementations of those management decisions.

**Note:**

Opening two sentence actually tells reader what the problem with the soil quality is and who it affects (therefore who the stakeholders are) and shows the one problem affects all different sorts of people. At the end of this paragraph, the reader should have an understanding of what the problem is, where the gaps are, that the study is positioned within the wider literature, but also can anticipate what then will come in the next paragraph- the critique of these unilateral policies. The paragraph does not have to use the clumsy “in this paper we critique..”; it just gets on and critiques!

**Talking around the topic, not giving information**

The chapter will examine the vectors involved in any analysis of Blogg’s disease. These factors are influenced by variables of weather and time. The chapter shows how these variables operate, and how they can be overcome. This is important for the highly profitable agricultural industry. The chapter will first outline the vectors, and show their inter-relationship. Then it will examine how weather and time affect them. Then it will show how they can be overcome so that the agricultural industry can gain from the research.

Again, there is no information in the paragraph. The reader knows that the writer has written a chapter about Blogg’s disease, but has no information about **what** the writer has found, **how** weather and time affect it, or **how** these problems can be overcome. Provide concrete facts to supplement these areas.

**Rewritten for information:** Mycephalous incharidia (MI) affects one in three sheep fatally and costs the Australian wool industry \$20m per year. This chapter will review how MI is carried by an insect, the blue nosed mosquito, which lays its eggs in the sheep’s entrails. Mosquitoes breed more numerously in hot humid conditions, and the larvae flourish when there are exceptionally long periods of hot and humid conditions. The chapter will describe how both time and weather exacerbate the spread of disease, and how simple measures, such as, providing fans to cool sheep, and feeding them ice cream to reduce the entrail temperature, have shown a marked reduction in larvae growth. The chapter concludes with these and other recommendations to increase profitability in the agricultural industry.

### **Hiding real information in summaries:**

1. A detailed study on the mating habits and sexual reproduction of martian marsupials has been done by Loopey et al (1856). Ambrose (1997) outlined the broad evolution and taxonomy of these marsupials living in caves in north Queensland. Confuzed (2004) also did a detailed study on the food habits of martian marsupials in captivity. Hopeless et al (2005) did a study, however, on Australian marsupials and found many differences.

**Begin with key word, give the results of the studies, and order the information so that the reader knows what you know about the subject. Use links.**

**Rewritten:** Martian marsupials differ from Australian marsupials in three areas: evolution, reproduction and eating habits. Martian marsupials have evolved from 6 cylinder creatures (Ambrose 1997), whereas Australians evolved from vegemite. The martian marsupials lack pouches of Australian animals, and so reproduce in the 4 cylinders they have inherited from their forbears (Silversmith, 2009). While Australian marsupials munch on meat pies and vegemite sandwiches (Hopeless et al, 2005), martian marsupials, or at least those in captivity, prefer peanut butter sandwiches.

### **An abstract abstract- abstracts should be concrete.**

This paper is situated within the general framework of a PhD study and looks at one aspect of the data analysis regarding discourse. To understand this aspect of the data analysis, the context of the study will be first of all be discussed, as well as the use of discourse and how practices such as incarceration of juveniles can result from particular discourses. The study addresses some concerns I have had during the course of my work as welfare officer. These concerns relate to the steady increase over the years in the number of children incarcerated despite a growing body of research that argues against such practices. This paper is part of a study that looks at these issues.

### **Rewritten:**

Discourse, and the expressions used within discourse, can have profound effects on the community. An increase in the number of speeches from politicians and civic leaders which criminalises and demonises juveniles has been correlated with increased incarceration rates of juveniles in Australia. This study, part of a PhD, gathers discourse about juveniles from Australian newspapers and commercial radio over the last 10 years and subjects it to data analysis to show both the change to a more

aggressive vocabulary as well as to an increase in the portrayal of all young as irredeemably “other”.

**Another paragraph where information is hidden and generalisations make the reader work hard.**

**Original:** Of the two studies that bear directly on the proposed questions, Sterile (1986) found that couples reported improved communication after experiencing prolonged infertility treatment, while Ripe and Fertile (1987) concluded that behavioural exchanges between the couples more frequently escalated into arguments the longer that medical interventions continued. Of particular concern in Sterile’s study is the fact that because men and women were interviewed together, the couples may not have been totally honest and their responses may have been prejudiced by one another. Beyond this threat to validity, the conflicting findings of the two studies suggests the need for a more definitive investigation of the impact of fertility treatment on communication patterns within couples.

### **Rewritten**

The effect of fertility treatment on the relationships of the participants is controversial. One study has shown that couples actually improved their communication after prolonged infertility treatment (Sterile 1986). On the other hand, Ripe and Fertile found couples reported increased numbers of arguments as the medical interventions continued. The discrepancy in results may have arisen because Sterile interviewed the couples together, and the couples may have felt hesitant in admitting to arguments in front of their partners. The conflicting findings of the two studies suggest the need for a more definitive investigation...

[how? Suggest couples be interviewed together and apart for comparison? How else might the data be gathered to show how fertility treatment affects relationships? Final sentence should show reader your analysis and reasons for your conclusion don’t conclude with platitudes – all science needs further investigation, but say how or why it should be done]

**Distorted Passive (DP)** voice is acceptable in scientific and academic writing, but what is unacceptable and difficult to read is the distorted passive. The distorted passive occurs when the verb is taken and hidden in a sort of noun.

- |   |                           |
|---|---------------------------|
| 1. Acid-etching removed the rust.                                 | Active voice - acceptable |
| 2. The rust was removed by acid etching.                          | Passive voice- acceptable |
| 3. Removal of the rust was...(? <i>verb?</i> )...by acid-etching. | DP - pompous              |

The problem with sentence 3 is that the real verb which shows the action (removing) is lost in a weak noun, and so another verb must be supplied in the sentence. The various suggestions for filling in this gap are invariably the same tired, non-verbs: *facilitated, achieved, accomplished, carried out, performed, undertaken, effected, done*. None of these actually tell the reader what precisely was done. Only the precise verb, *to remove*, tells the reader what happened. *The rust was removed* is clear and precise: *Removal was carried out* sounds pompous.

#### **Rewriting Distorted Passive:**

- Check if you have written one of the non-verbs; *achieved, performed* etc.
- Find the hidden verb earlier in the sentence (in the sentence above it was *remove* from the noun *removal*).
- Use this hidden verb as a direct verb in the sentence.

#### **Turn the following distorted passive into clear passive voice or active voice.**

1. Measurement of the resistance was carried out by the ohmmeter.
2. Daily measurement of the leaf area was undertaken.
3. Dropping of the glass slipper was carried out by Cinderella.
4. Containment of the adult squidgens was achieved by the use of a net trap.
5. Destruction of the seaside area was effected by the strong gales.
6. Improvement of the techniques was accomplished for the provision of reductions in cost through modification of the model and simplification of the procedures.

#### **Some more sentences to edit**

Bloggs commented that globalisation has impacted heavily on how people perceive their standard of living.

Employment became harder to access when Western Samoa became an independent nation in 1962, because Samoans were given first preference to jobs.

Many Mennonites were able to have access to passports, leading to migration to western Europe.

Rainfall deficit in a warmer world will result in greater drought conditions than would currently be seen. This is because higher temperatures will increase evaporation losses, decrease soil moisture and thus intensify the drought conditions and reduce river flows