

# Two-and-a-Half Easy Tricks for Writing Better Academic Prose

Academic writing is by necessity complex, heavily documented, and slow-moving. In this kind of writing, you are leaving an intellectual trail that your readers must be able to follow. Complex thoughts cannot always be put into simple, direct, punchy sentences, nor would most people want it this way. Some scholars, however, make their writing more tedious than it has to be. If you suspect your writing is too elliptical or lacks force and vigor, it's a good bet that you're relying too heavily on two devices: the passive voice and weak intensifiers. These two devices make up a disproportionate amount of the tedious, unreadable writing you see around you.

Fortunately, these faults are easy to correct.

## Active vs. Passive Voice

In English, sentences can often be worded two ways and mean the same thing. For example:

The XYZ Project excavated the site in June of 1985.

*or*

The site was excavated by the XYZ Project in June of 1985.

The difference in these sentences is not tense, but something called voice. The first is active voice and the second is passive voice. In the active voice, the subject does something to the object. In the passive voice, the subject has something done to it. People tend to use the passive voice too often, and when used too often, your writing sounds weak, flaccid, and inconclusive.

The passive voice has a legitimate use. Use it when the agent performing the action is unknown, unimportant, or not the point of what you're trying to say. In the above example, for instance, passive voice ("was excavated") seems justified. The XYZ Project is probably not the topic of the article. The site excavation is.

In the example below, however, the passive voice only makes the writing sound feeble and vague.

It has been shown in this study that the health of a population is influenced by and affected by the diet consumed by them.

When you change it to the active voice (and slightly rearrange some of the components) you get:

This study shows that a population's diet affects and influences their health.

When you do this, you might also notice that you can prune it a little further, to say only:

This study has shown that diet affects health.

## Another example of the passive voice:

While far from straightforward, it is clear that important and interesting insights can be gained when remains of lagomorphs are examined in detail, and when these insights are combined with information from other classes of archaeological and paleoecological data, it is expected that the nature and dynamics of past human adaptations will be greatly clarified.

Again, you'll notice that putting it in the active voice alone doesn't entirely fix it, but this is a good place to start because it better illuminates the problems. When we put it in the active voice we get something like this:

We gain interesting insights when we examine lagomorph remains in detail, and when we combine these insights with information from other classes of archaeological and paleoecological data, we can expect to clarify the nature and dynamics of past human adaptations.

There didn't seem to be anyplace to put the "while far from straightforward" clause. Perhaps that's because it's unclear what is "far from straightforward." The important and interesting insights on lagomorphs? Or the nature and dynamics of human adaptations? Or combining these insights with other archaeological and paleoecological data? And when you put sentences like this in the active voice, which necessitates continually saying "we gain this," and "we expect that," you realize just how pedantic and unenlightening those observations sound. So you might pare that sentence down to:

The insights gleaned from examining lagomorph remains can be combined with other types of archaeological and paleoecological data, and may someday clarify the nature and dynamics of past human adaptations.

Notice that the passive voice came back into it ("insights gleaned from"), because as noted above, it's not always in-

appropriate. And the substitution of “glean” for “gain”? The word seemed slightly better. It’s a little more unusual, a little more descriptive; it seems to require a little more active searching on the part of the person examining these remains. As an editor, that’s what I would do with this sentence. As an author you might be able to do a little more. You might want to put in a sentence that specifies what is “not straightforward” about this process. You might have meant something important by that, though to make it mean anything, you need to be more specific. But let’s leave that and go on to the other major cause of bad academic writing.

### **Weak Intensifiers and Other Useless Words**

Somewhat, rather, fairly, basically, relatively, comparatively. Writers often reach for these words automatically, sprinkling them throughout their prose because they seem to make the sentences more graceful, less abrupt. Used sparingly, these words do just that: they suggest that you are a temperate, reasonable person who knows that few things are either black or white. Few people use these words sparingly enough, though. A lot of people toss them into nearly every sentence without thinking. Not only will this make your writing sound weak and equivocating, but it will make your very thought processes sound that way.

When you strike these words from your writing, you’ll find you have to think harder about what you’re trying to say, and this is good. For example: “The results of this study were somewhat surprising.” What do you mean? Were they surprising, or weren’t they? If they were, it’s more forceful to say: “The results of this study were surprising.” If they were somewhat surprising in the sense that you wouldn’t have done the study if you’d known exactly how it would come out . . . this isn’t worth mentioning, is it? Everything in your life is “somewhat surprising” when measured by this standard.

“Relatively” is another meaningless and over-used word in academes. “We found relatively few Early Woodland sherds at this site.” Relative to what? Relative to other sites where there were more? Really?

Avoid common, meaningless adverb clichés: “seriously consider” (this would mean something only if you were in the habit of frivolously considering things), “closely scrutinize” (scrutinize by its very definition means to look at something closely), “fully recognize,” “carefully investigate,” and so forth.

Perhaps the most abused is the simple “very.” It should act as an intensifier, but it often has the opposite effect. Whenever you write this word, try striking it out and see if it doesn’t make the sentence stronger.

### **For Advanced Student: The Verb “To Be”**

If you’ve stripped your writing of unnecessary adverbs and passive verbs, and you’re still looking for other ways to liven it up, you can check to see if you’re relying too much on the verb “to be.” “It is,” “there is,” “there are,” “it was,” “they were,” and so on are not the most exciting ways to begin a sentence.

“To be” is a useful verb, and if you are too aggressive in purging it from your writing, your writing can begin to get that exhaustingly dynamic tone of hard-sell marketing pitches and you don’t want that either. But you can probably prune some of the “to be’s” out of your prose.

Instead of saying: “There is a lot more research to be done,” say “This area warrants further research.” Instead of saying “It is our conclusion that . . .,” say “We conclude that . . .”

### **Final Exam**

Now you know why this is a bad paragraph, and how you could fix it.

Somewhat surprisingly, there is relatively little evidence that squirrels were hunted by Paleo-Indians; although what little evidence there is is extremely preliminary. When the remains of a very large site in Ontario were carefully investigated, and the results tabulated, it was concluded that, basically, fish—and not squirrel—formed a fairly large part of the diet upon which these people subsisted.