

## ELIMINATING WORDINESS: PART 3, WRITING PRECISELY

Vague words often invite a slew of extra words to your writing. Why? Because in order to compensate for non-specific nouns, writers have to add “qualifiers” (ie., descriptive words) to make their meaning clear. You can avoid this problem by economizing, or by choosing what Claire Kehrwald Cook calls “**bargain words**.” Bargain words get you more meaning for your money. Instead of using one word and two qualifiers, why not buy a noun or a verb that gets you two, three or even four meanings for the price of one?

- ✗ He **walked wearily** and **labouriously**.
- ✓ He **trudged**.
- ✗ She **read** the essay **rapidly**.
- ✓ She **scanned** the essay.
- ✗ The company rep **communicated** their return policy to me **via email**.
- ✓ The company rep **emailed** me their return policy.

*“Precise words are bargains; by combining both general and specific meanings, they permit economies. You get more communication per word. Trudge, amble, stroll, lumber, stride, and lope all mean both walk and a particular way of walking; coupe, sedan, convertible, and station wagon all mean both car and a particular type of car.” --Claire Kehrwald Cook, Line by Line, 14*

### AVOID “IT IS” AND “THERE IS”

“It is” and “There is/are” are empty phrases. We use them in spoken English all the time. When asked about the weather, we say, “It’s raining,” or “It’s sunny.” But when writing academic papers, we should avoid this type of phrasing because it’s *empty*. What does the phrases “it is” and “there is” convey? Nothing, really. So try to replace “it is,” “there is,” and “there are” with more specific, active verbs.

- ✗ It is important to recognize that researchers did not control for...
- ✓ Researchers did not control for...
- ✗ There are many metaphors in the novel that deal in some way with birth and renewal.
- ✓ Many metaphors in the novel deal in some way with birth and renewal.

### AVOID BEGINNING PHRASES WITH “THIS”

- ✗ The investors claimed a further deduction because the property was sold at a paper loss. The Justice Department can argue that this is illegal.\*
- ? What was illegal? The deduction claim? Or the sale of the property at a paper loss? Or both?

*“Writers frequently use a pronoun—especially this, which, or it—to refer loosely to an idea or to something implicit but not stated in what precedes. Vague at best, such a pronoun is at worst misleading; lacking a clear-cut antecedent, it may associate itself with the wrong word.”*

*--Claire Kehrwald Cook, Line by Line, pg. 98*

# ACADEMIC

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## AVOID ALL-PURPOSE OR GENERALIZED ADJECTIVES

Adjectives (i.e., describing words) like “significant,” “important,” and “unique” are not very specific, and this vagueness can undermine your authority as a writer. Consider this: claiming that something is “important” without explaining to *whom* it might be important and *why* may undermine your reader’s faith in your claims, because unfounded claims are untrustworthy. However, even if readers do not question such claims, vague adjectives add extra words to your writing without adding any meaning. You can certainly use these words, but don’t *overuse* them.

## GIVE A SPECIFIC QUANTITY

- ✗ The majority of participants...
- ✓ 79% of participants...
- ✗ The word “heartbeat” appears a lot in the first stanza of the poem, and much less in the second.
- ✓ The word “heartbeat” appears seven times in the first stanza of the poem, but only once in the second.

## REFERENCES:

Kehrwald Cook, C. (1985). *Line by line: How to edit your own writing*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.