

How to Revise Your 1st Draft: Cheatsheet (2/2)

- Ensure that each sentence in a paragraph belongs to that paragraph: the first sentence defines the topic of the paragraph, and the rest stick to that topic.
- Check sentence length; aim for short, precise sentences. Try to make every sentence shorter by rephrasing ideas using fewer words and by cutting out words that don't contribute anything.
- Use active voice and avoid the passive. How to spot the passive? Easy—if your sentence ends with the actor (“by X”) or if you can insert “by zombies” after the verb without violating grammar (this tip comes from <https://twitter.com/johnsonr>). For example, “to answer this question, simulations have been performed (BY ZOMBIES)” is clearly passive (and the verb “to perform” is unnecessary). Instead, just write “we have simulated”.
- Using the passive voice may, however, be justified when the researcher wants to remove herself or other researchers from the picture. Common examples include “it has been experimentally confirmed that” or “it has been argued that”.
- Avoid nominalisations—turning verbs into nouns, leaving you in need of a replacement verb like “to carry out”, “to perform”, “to conduct”, or plain “to be”. These verbs sound like corporate speak and they make your sentences longer. Instead of saying “there is a difference between X and Y”, you can save 21 characters by writing “X differs from Y”.
- Comb your text for clunky expressions that would be simpler and shorter in plain English. For example, “because” is much more effective than “as a consequence of” or “due to the fact that”. “Although” works better than “despite the fact that.” Don't say “for the purpose of” when you can simply say “to”, or “for”. “To” is often better than “in order to”.
- Do not use jargon and complicated words as a security blanket. Excessive amounts of jargon often result from thinking that writing sounds more academic and scientific if it is full of expressions that no one uses in everyday speech. This is wrong. Science is difficult enough as it is—do not make it any more complicated with your writing.

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