A Baker's Dozen of Fat-Cutting Exercises

BY TERRY PHELPS

Many Americans are obsessed with fat. Unfortunately this concern does not seem to extend to our writing. Like paradoxical dieters who consume sugar-free soft drinks and low-fat cuisine, then binge on ice cream and candy, we skimp with contractions, abbreviations, initials, acronyms, and ellipses, then ladle on redundancies, nominalizations, and other weighty stuff. Surrounded by bad models, our students roll out papers marbled with "in the event that," "due to the fact that," and "adequate enough" (instead of simply if, because, and enough) to fill that 500-word assignment and impress the teacher who, they believe, considers longer better.

Consequently teachers spend hours looking for the meat in student papers, and everyone in the working world wastes time reading multipage documents that could have been half as long and easier to understand. No magic pill will dissolve all that fat, but this list of A Baker's Dozen of Fat-Cutting Exercises can work wonders.

I've learned that simply providing some students with a checklist of fat collectors in writing will do about as much good as providing the sweet-obsessed consumer with the ingredient listing on a package of cookies. What those addicted to both types of fat need is exercise. Below I invite readers to try the fat-cutting exercise I go through with my students:

1. Read the first sentence.
2. Then read the revision of the first sentence. Decide on the principle used to cut fat.
3. Apply that principle to your revision of the second sentence.
4. After you've completed this process with all 13 sets of sentences, check your revisions against the recommended revision and explanatory principles at the article's end.

Exercises

Fat Collector One
- To be promoted you will have to meet several necessary requirements.
  Revision: To be promoted you will have to meet several requirements.
- A good loan officer will gather together all the facts before making an assessment.

Fat Collector Two
- Each and every person in this room will eventually have to manage a crisis.
  Revision: Every person in this room will eventually have to manage a crisis.
- We noticed that various and sundry items had been removed from the room.
  Revision: The original contract calling for thirty installments was voided.
- Averil G. Smith is the owner of the car. Mr. Smith is five months behind in his payments.

Fat Collector Three
- The original contract called for thirty installments. The original contract was voided.
  Revision: The original contract calling for thirty installments was voided.
- Averil G. Smith is the owner of the car. Mr. Smith is five months behind in his payments.

Fat Collector Four
- It is possible that your calculations are incorrect.
  Revision: Your calculations may be incorrect.
- There are several clients who want to retain him as their attorney.

Fat Collector Five
- A decision was made by the manufacturer to recall the defective parts.
  Revision: The manufacturer decided to recall the defective parts.
- A life insurance policy was provided by Heartless Insurance.

Fat Collector Six
- The president exhibits a tendency to ramble in his memos.
  Revision: The president tends to ramble in his memos.
- This new policy makes provisions for sick leave.

Fat Collector Seven
- The court did not allow recovery to avoid expanding coverage.
  Revision: The court denied recovery to avoid expanding coverage.
- The cases are not different in many respects.

Fat Collector Eight
- Good writers are aware of their verbs.
  Revision: Good writers notice their verbs.
- The Cowboys were the winners over the Giants, 45-6.

Fat Collector Nine
- He went quickly across the room.
  Revision: He hurried across the room.
- The dog ate the food quickly and ravenously.

Fat Collector Ten
- A majority of the suggestions she offered were reasonable.
  Revision: Most of the suggestions she offered were reasonable.
- New interest rates will be established in the near future.

Fat Collector Eleven
- Most of the suggestions she offered were reasonable.
  Revision: Most of her suggestions were reasonable.
- The books belonging to Mr. Ivory vanished.

Fat Collector Twelve
- He pointed to the book that was lying open on the counter.
  Revision: He pointed to the book lying open on the counter.
- The woman, who was distraught from her loss, hired a lawyer.

Fat Collector Thirteen
- In my opinion the new program will increase revenue.
  Revision: The new program should increase revenue.
- A different point of view, I think, will improve the readability.

Solutions
1. A good loan officer will gather all the facts before making an assessment.

Avoid redundant forms. Some redundancies are subtle because they are so common and familiar that we don't notice them. But they are generally unnecessary space fillers. In the examples in number one, requirements are always necessary and anything gathered is together. Other common redundancies include sum total, covered all over, completely unique, adequate enough, past history, still persists, just exactly,

2. We noticed that various items had been removed from the room.

Eliminate unnecessary pairs of words when the meanings are basically the same. Many redundant pairs of words are common in our speech: e.g., cease and desist, any and all, aid and abet, fair and equitable.

3. Averil G. Smith, the owner of the car, is five months behind in his payments.

Avoid unnecessary repetition by combining sentences, converting one sentence to a phrase (participial phrase, appositive, etc.). Finding the repetition is easier than combining the sentences, but the
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process of sentence combining is one of the most effective methods of teaching grammar. Repetition is sometimes disguised in the form of pronouns (e.g., substitute he for Mr. Smith above), perhaps a bit more difficult to spot than exact repetition.

4. Several clients want to retain him as their attorney.

Eliminate expletives such as there and it when their removal will make the sentence more concise without making it awkward. There is an adverb most often used to tell where but is never a subject. A good strategy to eliminate there is to find the subject and reorganize the sentence to begin with the subject. It is a pronoun that takes the place of some noun or idea. A good strategy is to replace it with the noun or idea it is replacing, then restructure the sentence. Notice also that the “before” sentences are complex (more than one clause) while the “after” sentences are simple and easier to read.

5. Heartless Insurance provided a life insurance policy.

Generally, use active voice instead of passive voice. In active voice the subject does the action of the sentence (e.g., "manufacturer decided," "Heartless Insurance provided"). In passive voice, the subject receives the action (e.g., "decision was made," "policy was provided"). Active voice is usually more direct and concise. To change a sentence from passive to active usually means simply turning the subject (which has been receiving action) into a direct object and making the new subject the doer. Tip: The doer is usually found in a prepositional phrase beginning with by.

6. This new policy provides for sick leave.

Eliminate wordy nominalizations.

Nominalizations are nouns formed from other parts of speech (usually verbs or adjectives)—e.g. tendency from tends and provision from provides—which necessitate additional words such as the verbs exhibits and makes. Here are other common nominalizations revised: came to the conclusion = concluded; make an adjustment = adjust; be in attendance at = attend; conducted an investigation = investigated; be of help = help.

7. The cases are similar in many respects.

Eliminate not by replacing the negated word (e.g., allow and different) with its antonym (e.g., denied and similar). This replacement additionally makes the statement more emphatic, so it’s not just leaner but meaner.

8. The Cowboys clobbered the Giants, 45-6.

Replace being verbs with action verbs to eliminate unnecessary words and make sentences more emphatic and vivid. Good action verbs in the revised sentences eliminate prepositional phrases ("of their verbs" and "over the Giants") as well as an adjective, aware, and a noun, winners.

9. The dog devoured the food.

Use specific verbs to replace weaker verbs combined with adverbs. This not only eliminates fat but also makes the sentence more emphatic.

10. New interest rates will be established soon.

Replace fat phrases with single words that mean the same thing. In the revised sentences, the phrases are reduced to an adjective, most, an adverb, soon.

11. Mr. Ivory’s books vanished.

Use possessives to replace phrases and clauses indicating possession. In the sample sentences, the simple possessive pronoun “her” replaces the clause “that she offered,” and making “Mr. Ivory” possessive eliminates the participial phrase “belonging to.”

12. The woman, distraught from her loss, hired a lawyer.

Eliminate unnecessary use of that, which, and who with linking verbs (e.g., is, are, was, were). In the first example above, the participial phrase “lying open on the counter” is sufficient, as is the adjective cluster “distraught from her loss” in the second sentence. The elimination of constructions like “who was” in the second sentence may also provide more options for emphasis: for example, the sentence could be written, “Distraught from her loss, the woman hired a lawyer.”

13. A different point of view might improve the readability.

Eliminate first-person qualifiers. To appear less definite, writers often use hedges such as “in my opinion,” “I think,” “I am of the opinion that,” and “I feel.” Instead, use less definite verbs like should, might, may, and could. Note: Students should understand that this is not a ban on all first-person uses.

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Poetry Corner

Rejection Letter

BILL CONNOLLY

I'd been expecting you
that-smug-yet-convincing tone
filtered through the impartiality of Times New
Roman.

There's no mistaking your sneering
truthfulness.

How you look down the length of the paper
at my insufficiency
hinting at how my similes hang limp
like a wet string in October drizzle.

The months I've waited for and
anticipated your sting
make me wish for a more expedient way—
perhaps a touchstone system
where I could enter my PIN

and choose to Press 1 to be let down easy
Press 2 for constructive criticism
Or 3 for the cold, hard truth.

And yet now I think I favor the idea
of my poor, inadequate poem
wandering out there in the postal system
months,
spreading its shrouded message of possibility
among phone bills, junk mail, and calls to jury
duty.

I will continue to accept and expect your arrival
until someone says "yes"
and allows this to be my first time
to drop the envelope
and cover my mouth with my hand.

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