**HOW TO SAVE TIME WHILE DELIVERING FEEDBACK ON WRITING**

**by Simon Moss**

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| **Introduction** |

When reading drafts of chapters, papers, and theses, research supervisors consume many hours delivering feedback. To expedite this task, this document presents a series of comments that supervisors may copy and paste. These comments encompass many of the common mistakes that students commit or shortfalls they could overcome.

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| **Writing precisely** |

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| How to write more precisely: Avoid ambiguous pronouns and functional words | |
| Problem | Comment |
| It | For several reasons, try to avoid the word “it”. First, this word is sometimes ambiguous; that is, the reader is often uncertain what or who “it” is.  Second, this word often indicates the sentence could be shortened. For example, the phrase “it is noteworthy that…” can be omitted.  To avoid this word, you can sometimes replace “it” with a specific person, group, or object. For instance, “it is thought that” could be replaced with “researchers contend that”. |
| This | In general, to avoid ambiguities, write a noun after the word “this”. For example, “this shows” could be replaced with “this finding shows”. You need specify what “this” or “these” refer to |
| Those | Often, to avoid ambiguities, replace the word “those” with a specific noun. For example, “those who like to read” should be “people who like to read”. |
| One | In general, to prevent ambiguities, avoid the word “one” to indicate a person. “One should read 10 books” could be “Adults should read 10 books”—or some other specific noun. |
| Other ambiguous pronouns | Ensure all pronouns, such as “they” or “it”, are unambiguous. Specifically avoid the word “they” if the sentence comprises two plural nouns. For example, the stence “the participants ate the cherries, and they later exploded”, comprises two plural nouns: participants and objects. Hence, the reader cannot be certain whether the participants or cherries exploded. |
| Others | In general, avoid the word “others” as in “Other agree”. To prevent ambiguities, specify what “others” refers to, such as “other people” or “other methods”. |
| In regards to; in terms of | Phrases like “in regard to”, “in respect to”, “in relation to”, or “in terms of” are often unnecessary or vague. Sometimes they can be replaced with more specific words, one simple word—such as “on” or “about”— or omitted altogether, particularly if the sentence is slightly modified.  For example, the sentence “He spoke to me in relation to my job” could be “He spoke to me about my job”. Or the sentence “In terms of food, chocolate is my favorite” could be “Chocolate is my favorite food”. |
| Too many “and”s | A sentence like “He visited Barnes and Noble and Dymocks” can be confusing; does this sentence refer to one, two, or three places. The phrase “as well as” can be helpful, such as “He visited Barnes and Noble as well as Dymocks” |

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| How to write more precisely: replace words that connote many meanings | |
| Problem | Comment |
| Synonyms of because | The word “because” is usually better than synonyms such as “since”, “as”, “given that”, “due to”, and so forth. Some of these synonyms are ambiguous.  For example, “since” can mean “after in time, as in “Since 1990, nobody has ever won twice.” Likewise, “as” can mean “while”, as in “They sang as they cooked”. Other synonyms of because may be cumbersome. |
| Vague verbs | Many verbs, such as “get”, “give”, “take”, “make”, and “done”, are called polysemous: They connote many distinct meanings and, therefore, can be vague. Instead, replace these words with more precise alternatives—such as encourage, donate, adopt, construct, reach, conduct, and so forth. You could utilize a dictionary to identify better alternatives. |
| For | The word “for” is often vague. Use more specific descriptions, such as   * To enhance, improve, fostere, or boos rather than to introduce a program for some goal |
| Have, has, and had | Sometimes, the words “have”, “had”, or “has” can connote many meanings and thus seem vague—unless followed by a verb. That is, “he has doubts”, you might write “he experiences doubts”. You could locate replacements, such as “possess”, “adopt”, and “report”, from a dictionary. In some instances, you can even delete this word |
| Hold | The word “hold” connotes many distinct meanings and, therefore, can be vague. Use more specific verbs, such as  • To grasp or clutch rather than to hold someone’s arm  • To embrace rather than to hold someone  • To uphold, preserve, or continue rather than to hold a tradition  • To be delayed rather than held up  • To espouse rather than to hold a belief  • To retain rather than to hold a security bond |
| Put | The word “put” connotes many distinct meanings and, therefore, can be vague. Use more specific verbs, such as  • To insert rather than put the ticket into the box  • To position or place rather than put an object on the table  • To replace rather than put something back  • To intersperse rather than put commas into the text |
| Require | Often, the term “required” is either vague—not describing the events clearly—or too forceful. Instead, consider “invited”, “instructed”, “asked”, and so forth. “Participants were required to answer…” could be “Participants were instructed to answer”.  Or sentences might need to be reworded. For example, “this approach requires participants to…” could be “When this approach is applied, participants must…” |
| Run | The word “run” connotes many distinct meanings and, therefore, can be vague. Use more specific verbs, such as  • To manage or operate rather than to run a business  • To stretch or extend rather than to run from WA to Victoria  • To flow rather than to run down the river  • To work rather than to run—as in the car does not work  • To conduct rather than to run a statistical test  • To guide rather than to run the wire behind the cabinet |
| Informal phrases | Avoid colloquial phrases, informal phrases, and metaphors—such as “at the end of the day”—but instead write as precisely as possible |

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| How to write more precisely: avoid ambiguous quantities | |
| Problem | Comment |
| A number of | To write as precisely as possible, you should generally replace the phrase “a number of” with more precise words like “many”, “several, “ten”, and so forth. Sometimes you can even omit this phrase altogether |
| Lack | To avoid ambiguities, do not use the word “lack” too often. This word can mean “scarcity of” or “none of”. So, perhaps use words like “limited”, “inadequate”, “absence”, “none”, and so forth instead. |
| Unclear direction | Phrases like “this method impacts their health” could be replaced with “this method damages their health”. That is, you should, whenever possible, indicate whether the relationship was positive or negative; otherwise, the sentence is too vague. Often, the word “impact”, for example, implies the sentence could be more specific. |
| Only | If possible, insert the word “only” immediately before the term that needs to be modified; when inserted in the wrong spot, the sentence may be misconstrued. For example, “he ate only one biscuit” is correct. But “he only ate one biscuit” indicates he ate, rather than initiated another act, on a biscuit. |
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| **Writing concisely** |

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| How to write more concisely | |
| Problem | Comment |
| Verbose | Whenever possible, omit redundant words, phrases, sentences, or paragraphs—such as the phrase “a total of”. When you review your work, delete as many words as you can. |
| Tautologies | If possible, avoid tautologies, such as “summarize briefly”, “might possibly”, “rarely ever”, “past history”, and so forth. These tautologies, for example, can be reduced to summarize, might, rarely, and history. |
| He or she | Sentences like “The participants sat at his or her table” are quite cumbersome. To avoid phrases like “his or her”, “he or she”, or “him or her”, refer to people in plural form, such as “The participants sat at their table” |
| In order | The phrases “in order”, “in an effort”, or “in an attempt” are always redundant and, therefore, should usually be omitted. You should write as concisely as possible. |
| Leads to and results in | The phrases “lead to” and “results in” often indicate the sentence could be shorter. For example, “this method leads to an increase in prices” could be reduced to “this method increases prices”. Similarly, “this method results in an increase in prices” could be reduced to “this method increases prices”. |
| Results showed that | The phrases “results found that”, “results showed that”, and so forth are usually redundant. The rest of that sentence usually implies this phrase. For example, you could often replace “Results showed that carrots enhance mood” with “Carrots enhance mood”. |
| Aim to or aims to | The phrase “aim to” can sometimes be omitted. Rather than “this study aims to examine this issue”, you can write “this study examines this issue”. Furthermore, the phrase “aim to” can |
| There | The word “there” often indicates the sentence could be more concise or precise. For example, “There are researchers who claim that coffee is healthy” could be reduced to “Researchers claim that coffee is healthy”. Or “There has been an increase in obesity levels” could be reduced to “Obesity levels have increased”. |

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| **Writing correctly and professionally** |

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| Words that are often confused or used ungrammatically | |
| Problem | Comment |
| Who versus that | Use the word “who” after humans and “that” after nonhumans. “The woman who yawned looked tired. But the dog that yawned looked tired” |
| Which versus that | Use “that” to restrict the scope of your noun. For example, the sentence “The frogs that are green jump high” revolves only around a subset of frogs: green frogs.  Use “which” to describe this noun in general. For example, the sentence “The frogs, which are green, jump high” indicates that all frogs are green. |
| Less versus more | Use “fewer” for number, such as fewer people, and “less” for amount, such as “less water”. If you are able to count an object, use fewer rather than less |
| Comprise | The phrase is “comprise” or “consist of” but not “comprise of”. The sample comprises 10 people and does not comprise of 10 people |
| Data is plural | Actually, the word “data” is plural; “datum” is singular. We write “these data show” rather than “this data shows”. |
| Therefore | Sometimes, you can omit “therefore”, “thus”, or related words. In particular, do not use these words if they precede a phrase that does not necessarily follow from the previous phase. For example, in the sentence “cats are shy and therefore dogs are confident” is unsuitable; the second phrase about dogs does not necessarily follow from the first phrase. |
| Plural pronouns | Do not use plural pronouns, like “they”, to represent singular nouns, like “one person”. You should not write “A child should be told they are special”. To avoid this problem, you should often use plural nouns too—such as “Children should be told they are special”. |

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| How to write professionally and clearly | |
| Problem | Comment |
| Labels | Do not describe groups with labels. For example, rather than “Ten dyslexics, eight schizophrenics, and five normal completed the study”, you could write “Ten people diagnosed with dyslexia, eight people diagnosed with schizophrenia, and five people not diagnosed with a mental illness completed the study”. In other word, indicate how the group was identified. But do not reduce people to a label. |
| Appropriate labels | If you do need to utilize a label, ask the individuals to indicate the appropriate term and, in general, utilize more specific labels. You might prefer to write “Ten people who identified as Yolnu completed the study” rather than “Ten Indigenous people completed the study”—although ask relevant members of the community first. |
| Parallel grammar | Ideally, each item in a list should conform to the same basic grammar. For example, each item could begin with a noun, or begin with the word “to”, and so forth. |
| Emotional qualifiers | In scientific writing, avoid unnecessarily qualifying words that overemphasize an argument. These words are not precise and may compromise the objectivity of your arguments. Examples include “very” or “extremely”. |
| Contractions | Minimize contractions, such as didn’t, don’t, and won’t, in formal writing |
| Acronyms | In general, avoid acronyms, such as PFG, unless they are vital—that is, unless you save many letters and the acronym is used many times. Even acronyms that you think are common may not be familiar to your reader and, therefore, demand excessive effort to remember. |
| Ascribing human qualities to things | Avoid anthropomorphism. For example, do not write “the study hopes to show that carrots are health”. Studies are not humans cannot hope. So, do not imply that nonhumans, like research, can experience human emotions, like agreement or hope. |

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| How to use punctuation correctly | |
| Problem | Comment |
| Commas | In general, commas should be used for three purposes. First, commas separate items in a list, such as “cats, dogs, and birds” or “the big, fat, grey cat”  Second, commas surround phrases that could be omitted or shifted to another location in the sentence or to another sentence, such as “Australia, which is a large nation, is near New Zealand”. For the same reason, commas surround conditional clauses—that is, a phrase that explains when something else is true and often begins with words like when, at, during, after, before, by, and if. An example is “The lecturer, after seeing his reflection, fainted”.  Finally, commas separate independent clauses—that is, parts that could be complete sentences by themselves. An example is “The dog barked loudly, and the cat scampered away”. |
| Semi-colon | The phrase after a semi-colon should always be an independent clause; that is, this phrase could be a complete sentence by itself. An example is “The dog barked loudly; the cat scampered away”.  Use commas instead of semi-colons to separate items in a list—unless the items themselves contain commas. |
| Colon | Usually, include a colon before clarifying an unfinished claim or presenting a list: This sentence illustrates the point.  Omit these colons, unless the flow of this sentence suddenly breaks. For example, omit the colon in the sentence “The seven dwarves are: doc, grumpy, happy, sleepy, dopey, bashful, and sneezy”. |
| Brackets | Avoid too many brackets. Anything important to write should be included in the text—and perhaps surrounded by commas or em dashes—like in this sentence. Em dashes are large dashes that are created from two hyphens and no spaces. Anything not important enough to include in the text should be omitted |
| Quotation marks | In scientific writing, avoid using quotation marks, except for actual quotes—in which case, page numbers are required. For example, do not use quotation marks to earmark approximate or informal terms, but instead use the most precise word. Include quotes only when the precise wording is vital; otherwise paraphrase, because too many quotes may be perceived as lazy. |
| Italics | In scientific writing, instead of quotation marks, use italics to indicate words that are foreign or used in a different context to usual. You might, for example, write “Participants read the words *and* and *if*”. The *and* is not used in the usual way and so italics are appropriate. Do not use italics to emphasize an argument; the words alone should be sufficient. |
| Slashes | Avoid the overuse of slashes. For example, write “People can eat, drink, or both here” instead of “People can eat and/or drink”. The problem with slashes is they may be ambiguous—and can mean “and”, “or”, “a combination of”, and so forth. |

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| **Arranging sentences and paragraphs cohesively** |

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| How to organize your sentences and paragraphs better | |
| Problem | Comment |
| Length of sentences | Unless your writing is advanced, primarily write short sentences. Each sentence should present one very specific argument. The next sentence should extend this argument slightly and so forth. That is, your arguments should evolve very gradually. |
| Consecutive sentences | If possible, do not begin consecutive sentences with the same word or phrase, unless you want to create a particular effect. |
| Incomplete sentences | Often, people write sentences that are incomplete. Consider “The man slept. Whereas the woman worked”. The second sentence is not complete because words like “whereas” or “although” indicate you want to compare two objects, such as man and woman, in the same sentence. |
| Paragraphs revolve around one argument | Each paragraph revolves around one argument only—an argument that is often summarized in the first sentence. Separate arguments should be explored in separate paragraphs. |
| Length of paragraphs | Paragraphs should comprise between 2 and 8 sentences—and usually between 3 and 6 sentences. Paragraphs with only one or even two sentences do not explore the argument enough. Paragraphs with too many sentences might conflate several distinct arguments. |
| Order of studies | Often, students discuss a sequence of studies. In these circumstances, specify or imply how each study extends the previous study. For example, do not merely write “Another study also showed that…”—but instead write something like “Rather than explore …, Smith (2010) examined whether…”  Furthermore, always begin describing simple studies before describing more complex studies. You should teach the reader the basic issues before including more complex details. |
| Order of paragraphs | For many arguments, first highlight a problem—often with reference to statistics. Next, present a solution and then limitations with this solution. Continue with this sequence of solutions followed by limitations. Finally, if possible, end with a solution that solves the last set of limitations. |
| Connecting sentences and paragraphs | Remember to include words or phrases that connect consecutive sentences or paragraphs. Connecting words include “Similarly”, “Likewise”, “Furthermore”, “In contrast”, “However”, “Nevertheless”, and “Indeed”. Each paragraph should be related explicitly to the previous paragraph; otherwise, the essay could read like a series of unrelated arguments. |
| On the other hand | Rather than “On the other hand”, use “In contrast”, “Yet”, “However”, and so forth—partly because these preferred phrases are shorter. If you use “On the other hand”, a previous sentence should begin with “On the one hand”. Otherwise, the reader might not know which concepts you are comparing. |

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| **Report writing** |

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| How to write a report correctly | |
| Problem | Comment |
| Abstract | For most studies, an abstract should include one or two sentences on each of the following issues: the issue you want to solve; the aim of this study; the method; the key results; and the main conclusions or implications |
| **Literature review** |  |
| Describing studies | When describing the most relevant studies in the literature review, you should usually outline the aim, outline the method—to a sufficient detail so the reader understands the study—and then finally the results. Usually, about 3 to 5 sentences is sufficient, unless the study is complex. Often, you might dedicate a whole paragraph, or almost one paragraph, to a key study. |
| Unique aims | Always clarify or imply how your study is unique. You do not merely want to replicate another study. You need to show how your study diverges from previous work. For example, does your study control variables or examine mediators that past studies have overlooked; otherwise, the reader may not be certain how your study extends previous work. And then, more importantly, highlight with this unique feature of this study is important. That is, how or why could this unique feature affect the results? What can we learn from this unique feature? |
| More citations | If possible, include citations after each premise (e.g., Smith, 2010). Sometimes, you may even need to cite the same author several times in a paragraph. The only exception is when you cite someone outside brackets earlier in the paragraph. This citation can then apply to the remainder of this paragraph. |
| Original citations | Ideally, cite the original source—that is, the papers that uncovered this finding—rather than a textbook |
| Scholarly citations | Ideally, cite articles from scholarly peer-reviewed journals. Do not cite too many textbooks or articles from websites, company reports, newspapers, and so forth. |
| Hypotheses | Strictly speaking, hypotheses should be based on theories and not findings. Indeed, a hypothesis is a prediction that is derived from a theory or explanation—and is designed to assess that theory or explanation only. Hypotheses are not actually personal expectations.  Whenever you pose hypotheses, you need to specify the direction. Which group is higher or is the relationship positive or negative? |