

# OWLS Writing Guides: PARAMEDIC REVISION + CUTTING WORDINESS



The Paramedic Method of revision, developed by Richard Lanham, is an easy sentence-level revision method that can help you turn wordy, passive, unclear, or overly long sentences into clear and concise ones. This handout explains how to apply the method to your sentences. For more, see Lanham's book *Revising Prose*.

## Applying the PM to a sentence

1. Circle the prepositions, especially the common prepositions *of, in, on, for, as, to, and by*.
2. Circle the "be" verb forms: *is/are/am/was/were/be/been/being*.
3. Ask "What is the action?" and "Who or what is doing the action?"
4. Express the "action" with a simple active verb, and make the doer into the subject.
5. Start fast—no unnecessary wind-ups.
6. Eliminate redundancies.

### 1. Circle the prepositions (*of, in, about, for, on, to, by, etc.*).

Prepositions signal prepositional phrases, which can create unnecessary wordiness. Look to these areas for opportunities to revise for conciseness. You don't have to eliminate all prepositions, just those that cause clutter.

*Bill is kicked by Jim.* (Five words using the preposition)

*Jim kicks Bill.* (Three words without the preposition)

### 2. Circle (or box) the forms of the verb "to be" (*be, am, is, are, was, were, being, been*).

These verbs describe the 'state of being' of people or things in a sentence. They are often necessary, either as linking verbs or helping verbs (He is my friend. He is going to be late). But these verbs also create weak verbal constructions, including passive voice sentences that should usually be revised into active voice sentences. Replace as many 'to be' verbs with action verbs as you can, and change passive voice (*is defended by*) to active voice (*defends*).

*Bill is kicked by Jim.* (passive verb)      versus      *Jim kicks Bill.* (active verb)

A note on passive voice: Using the passive voice, or not, is a style issue, not a grammatical one. Use the passive when you have no other way of expressing the action (*She was born on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July*); when you wish to obscure the doer of the action; when you wish to emphasize the object of the action; or in cases where the doer is unknown (*Bill was kicked in the knee during the scuffle*). In all other cases, use active voice. Also, meaning should always govern the verb tense and voice used in your sentence. If you are expressing a continuous action (Jim is kicking Bill over and over), use the progressive form (helping verb + -ing verb).

### 3. Ask "What is the action?" and "Who or what is performing the action?" (Who is kicking whom?)

Identify what is happening in the sentence and who is doing it—the action and the doer of the action. Who's kicking whom? *Jim is kicking Bill.*

#### 4. Put that action into a simple action verb.

Express the action with a simple action verb, in active voice. The doer of the action (the kicker) will be the subject of the sentence. *Jim kicks Bill.* Avoid unnecessary compound verbs: *Jim proceeds to kick Bill.*

**5. Start fast—no mindless introductions.** Avoid introductory words and phrases that aren't necessary to your meaning: *The fact of the matter is that Jim is kicking Bill.* These almost never add anything crucial to a sentence; they just postpone your point and bloat your style.

Other examples: *Due to the fact that, The point I wish to make is, For all intents and purposes, It is the opinion of this writer that.*

#### 6. Omit redundancies and other unnecessary words.

Don't use more words than you need. Watch out for redundancies and useless modifiers:

*Bill screamed as Jim kicked him forcefully.*

NOT:

*Bill screamed loudly as he was being kicked very forcefully by Jim.*

*Completely finished = finished*

*Past experience = experience*

*Perfectly clear = clear*

*Very quickly = quickly*

Example:

In the following example, the prepositions and 'is' forms are shaded; the slow wind-up and redundancy are in parentheses, and the action and doer are identified:

Original sentence: (The fact is), this manual of instructions was prepared by our company to (aid and assist) our dealers in being helpful to their customers.

Action = preparing a manual

Doer = our company

Revised: "Our company prepared this instruction manual to help our dealers serve their customers."

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