Some Tips for Better Writing

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Want to wow your colleagues with your crystalline prose? Or maybe just boost your odds of getting that next book or paper published? Want to make your monograph the one people read because it’s fascinating and not merely because they have to cite it? How about aspiring to fame and even fortune? You might be the next winner of a career-furthering writing prize.

For anyone who’s concerned about better writing, regardless of the reason, we’d like to offer some tips—a checklist of easily applied techniques you can use to edit your own writing. We’ve developed these over our years of teaching writing to anthropology students (Tedlock) and working as a freelance editor of books in anthropology (Kepp). They’re nothing new; any good book on writing will tell you the same things and more. But we’ve tried to distill some of the most important ones, covering some of the mistakes writers most often make, to give you a quick-and-dirty, convenient-to-use list.

Checklist for Improving Writing

• Search your draft for every sentence written in the passive voice (“The wonderful story was written by you”) and ask yourself whether it needs to be that way for a good reason, such as creating variety of sentence structure in a paragraph. If not, rewrite it in active voice (“You wrote the story that touched my heart”). This not only makes more interesting reading but also forces you to identify the “agent” of the action in the sentence.

• Locate every “to be” verb in your manuscript and try to replace it with a more colorful verb. Much of the power of good writing comes from its verbs. All of the examples in this checklist illustrate the use of strong verbs.

• One easy way to review your work for both “to be” verbs and the passive voice is to use your software’s “Find and Replace” function. In Microsoft Word, click on Edit and then Replace to open the appropriate dialog box. Click on More, then select All,
Match case, and Find whole words only. In the Find what field, type in the word am. In the Replace with field, type in the word am. Click on Format and then on Highlight. Now click on Replace all. This will highlight in yellow the word am every time it appears in your manuscript. Repeat the operation for the words is, was, were, be, are and been. Go through your file and look at each highlighted word. Rethink the sentence and ask yourself how you might rewrite it to make it more vibrant, precise and meaningful.

• Pass up verbs that become phrases: make contact with, be subjected to, give rise to, have the effect of, play a leading role in, serve the purpose of.

• Don’t use a jargon word or a foreign phrase if you can replace it with an everyday English equivalent.

• Never use a long word when you can use a short one.

• Avoid dead metaphors: take up the cudgel for, toe the line, stand shoulder to shoulder with, no axe to grind, fishing in troubled waters, swan song. Be alert to clichés in general and find fresh substitutes for them.

• Examine every sentence for unnecessary words that you can omit. For example, the sentence “This method enables us to identify the specific pattern of factors that seem to account for the diverse ways in which cultures evolve” might become “This method enables us to identify the factors that account for the ways in which cultures evolve”—or even “This method enables us to identify the reasons cultures evolve in so many different ways.”

• Remember that the concrete is always more interesting than the abstract. Don’t say “numerous,” for example, when you can say “sixteen.” Don’t say “small birds” when you can say “finches, sparrows and hummingbirds.”

Some examples of abstract, dull words that are ubiquitous in anthropological writing are area, decline, decrease, expand, extend, extensive, increase, indicate, intensify, location, major, multiple, numerous, occupy, occur and period (of time). Of course each of these words is sometimes the best or the only option; sometimes what one really means is exactly increase or occur. But ask yourself each time you’re tempted to use such a word whether a more concrete, precise or colorful word might serve better.
An example using most of these words (with some other sins thrown in for good measure):

As population on the North Plateau increased due to immigration from the Chaco area, hunting and gathering territories decreased in size and agriculture intensified. During the period from 1300 to 1400, multiple lines of evidence indicate that a major decline in the hunting of large game occurred, concomitant with an expansion of farming. In numerous locations, the remains of check dams and agricultural terraces show that the occupation of the plateau was heavily dependent on water control.

How about this instead?

As refugees from the collapsing towns around Chaco Canyon straggled onto the North Plateau, its older residents watched their hunting and gathering territories shrink. Between 1300 and 1400 the people of the plateau devoted ever more time and energy to farming, at the expense of hunting deer and elk. Everywhere across the plateau we see remnants of stone check dams and terraces that slowed runoff and stopped erosion. For the Puebloans, water control now guaranteed survival.

• Finally, read and reread The Elements of Style, by William Strunk Jr, and E B White (4th edition, Allyn and Bacon, 1999). Follow its advice religiously. It tells you just about everything you need to know to write well, it’s short and it’s downright entertaining.

Happy writing, and we look forward to reading your next prize-winning book or article.