

**A preliminary compilation of
some tips for good writing**

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Preamble

It has been said that a scientist does not merely need to know how to write; he/she needs to be a writer. That is, the person should become fond of writing, and take pleasure in creating a well-crafted piece.

That, of course, takes practice, and therefore time.

To help you get there, I have compiled some suggestions by people who think about what a well-written piece looks like.

This ppt does not an attempt to teach much grammar, but just to introduce a few concepts of good writing.

There are some books referenced at the end of this document that explore other aspects of good writing. They are also humorous. Read them for guidance on the next step.

The number of the subject and the verb

The bittersweet **flavor** of youth – its trials, its joys, its adventures, its challenges – **are** not soon forgotten.

The bittersweet **flavor** of youth – its trials, its joys, its adventures, its challenges – **is** not soon forgotten.

[We're talking about the flavor, so the verb has to be singular.]

Tense

Usually one uses a single tense
Any exceptions should be deliberate

A piece of writing should either have
went, did, told, showed, ...

Or

go, do, tell, show, ...

Usually these words would not occur in the same piece.

Make every word count

He is a personal friend of mine.

He is a friend of mine. ('personal' is implied)

At this point in time

Now

Smile happily

Smile

Tall skyscraper

Skyscraper

(inspired by Zinsser, referenced at the end of the ppt)

Frequent words

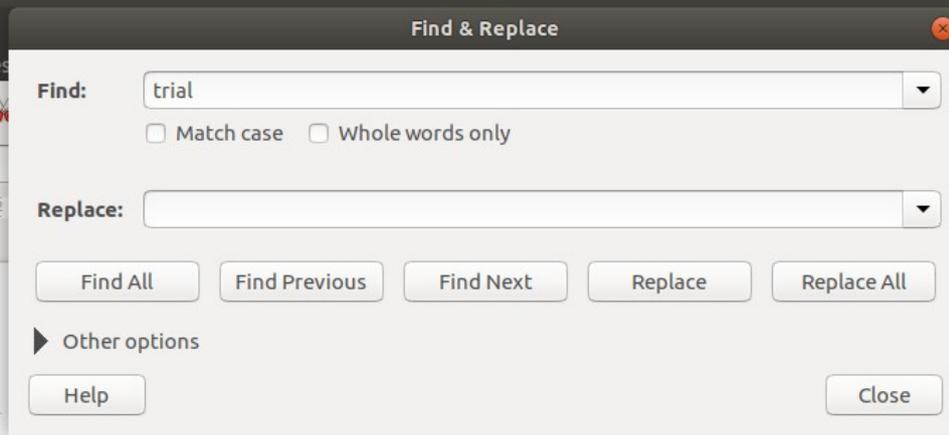
1. Your own favourite:

Each of us has a tendency to use one particular word. Identify it and avoid over-using it.

2. Dictated by the material:

Do a 'find all' for that word, and highlight all occurrences (as illustrated on the next slide). Then figure out how to delete or replace it as often as you can.

Frequent words



A comparative analysis of all the primary registries and ClinicalTrials.gov

A comparative analysis of important public registries

Nisha Venugopal and Gayatri Saberwal

In the 1970s, in the United States (US), there were two calls for clinical **trial** registries, but with different aims [2003, Dickersin]. First, to enhance the rate of enrollment of patients in these **trials**. And second, to reduce the chance of bias in the subsequent reporting of the **trial**, caused by the selective publication of positive outcomes of **trials**. [1986 – Simes. Mention] Since then, and particularly since 2000, such registries have proliferated. Today, there are dozens of them [Fleminger and Goldacre, 2018], supported by governments, universities, non-profits, or companies.

It has been a long and sustained battle by many stakeholders to make the existence and use of registries what it is today. The kinds of efforts that it has taken include pressure from medical journals, activists, researchers, the WHO, and governments [2005 Clinical **trial** registration the differing views of industry WHO Ottawa group.pdf, 2007 SSN Mandatory CT registration:

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Itemize a list

This paragraph includes a list

Records have been put to other uses as well, such as examining whether the clinical research enterprise mirrors the disease burden of a nation, tracking the development of new medical technologies, and identifying ethically questionable studies.

[A comma does the job of separating phrases, but not very well.]

Records have been put to other uses as well, such as examining whether the clinical research enterprise mirrors the disease burden of a nation; tracking the development of new medical technologies; and identifying ethically questionable studies.

[A semi-colon does the job of separating phrases better than a comma, because it is more distinct.]

Itemize a list

This paragraph includes a list

Records have been put to other uses as well, such as **(i)** examining whether the clinical research enterprise mirrors the disease burden of a nation, **(ii)** tracking the development of new medical technologies; and **(iii)** identifying ethically questionable studies.

[Itemizing the list is best, since it makes it clear – from the very first item – that this is a list. Also, it is a much more distinct separation of each item.]

Anything that helps the reader understand the sentence quickly is useful.

Itemize a list

It is perfectly fine to have a para with First,..... ;
Second,.....; and Third,..... even if the text is
quite voluminous.

Prefer active voice to passive voice

Active: I hid the pen.

Passive: The pen was hidden by me.

Avoid long sentences

<http://countwordsworth.com/>

This website
will help you analyze a sentence
in various ways

Simplify sentences

<http://www.hemingwayapp.com/>

This website
will help you simplify a sentence

Simplify

Simple phrases and sentences are usually better

“Clutter is the disease of American writing. We are a society strangling in unnecessary words, circular constructions, pompous frills and meaningless jargon.”

(Zinsser, referenced at the end of the ppt)

Simplify

Simple phrases and sentences are usually better

1. “The airline pilot who announces that **he is presently anticipating experiencing considerable precipitation** wouldn’t dream of saying that **it may rain.**”

2. “**Such preparations shall be made as will completely obscure all Federal buildings and on-Federal buildings occupied by the Federal government during an air raid for any period of time from visibility by rason of internal or external illumination**”

“Tell them,” Roosevelt said, “that in buildings where they have to keep the work going to **put something across the windows.**”

(Zinsser, referenced at the end of the ppt)

Combine two short sentences if the theme is the same

Each registry has a particular **variant** of a given feature. This **variant** may be more useful or less so.

Each registry has a particular variant of a given feature, **that** may be more useful or less so.

Connect successive paragraphs

If post-approval studies are mandated but not carried out, it is a matter for regulatory action...

Along similar lines, this study used data in two registries to ascertain whether Indian law has been broken.

[‘Along similar lines’ connects the two paragraphs.]

Connect two paragraphs

Other phrases that are useful for this

We then used ...

Next, we identified ...

We went on to ...

As such...

Finally, we did two types of ...

Be positive

In most situations it is better to be positive

This law is a complete disaster.

This law could be better.

Don't be vague

Give specific details

A period of unfavourable weather set in.

It rained every day for a week.

[unfavourable weather could mean too hot, too cold, too wet...]

He showed satisfaction as he took possession of his well-earned reward.

He grinned as he pocketed the coin.

[How did he show satisfaction? How big was his reward?]

In each case, the second sentence is more detailed, and is stronger. It is shorter, too.

(From Strunk and White, referenced at the end of the ppt)

One paragraph has one theme

One para has one theme.

However one theme may be explored over several paras.

Repetition is sometimes ok

bafflegabumab – left pinkie toe cancer – rejected

bafflegabumab – left ring toe cancer – rejected

bafflegabumab – left middle toe cancer – rejected

bafflegabumab – left pointer toe cancer – rejected

bafflegabumab – left big toe cancer – approved!

“This principle, that of parallel construction, requires that expressions similar in content and function be outwardly similar.”
(Strunk and White, referenced at the end of the ppt)

Avoid clichés

A cliché is an over-used phrase. Put in the effort to be original.

Some examples:

Between a rock and a hard place.

Time will tell.

All that glitters isn't gold.

Live your dreams.

Low-hanging fruit.

The game is up.

It's an uphill battle.

Haste makes waste.

How time flies.

There's a method in the madness.

Remove any ambiguity

She lectured on the ship.

Did she lecture **while on** the ship?

Did she lecture **about** the ship?

So, a better phrasing would be:

She lectured as she stood in the engine room of the ship.

She lectured about the engineering of the ship.

Remove any ambiguity

“Walking slowly down the road, he saw a woman accompanied by two children.”

Who was walking?

“He saw a woman, accompanied by two children, walking slowly down the road.”

(Strunk and White, referenced at the end of the ppt)

The way to improve

“You learn to write by writing.”

Write often, **and** get someone who is good at writing to correct your work.

The more you practice, the better you’ll get.

Beautiful sentences

Look out for lovely sentences. They will inspire you.

Barbara Beese still remembers the atmosphere of the courtroom.
“It was male, pale and stale,” she says.

Aside from rhyming, which has its own charm, the sentence succinctly condemns a courtroom that only had white men, who had no fresh thoughts on the subject.

Acknowledgements

Some of the topics were suggested by

The Elements of Style, 3rd edition, by William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White, Macmillan Publishing Co, New York, 1979.

Now available for free:

<https://faculty.washington.edu/heagerty/Courses/b572/public/StrunkWhite.pdf>

<http://www.jlakes.org/ch/web/The-elements-of-style.pdf>

On Writing Well. An informal guide to writing nonfiction; 3rd edition, by William Zinsser, Harper & Row Publishers, New York, 1985.

Now available for free:

<http://richardcolby.net/writ2000/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/On-Writing-Well-30th-Anniversa-Zinsser-William.pdf>

Let's make this ppt better

I am happy to receive comments or suggestions at gayatri@ibab.ac.in.

I will acknowledge the sender of any material that I make use of.

That's it!