

AN e-BURST OF INSPIRATION FROM THE BEST BOOKS

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**THREE FAST AND
EASY WAYS TO
EDIT YOUR E-MAILS**



Press Delivers *elements*

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Three Fast and Easy Ways to Edit Your E-mails

Natalie Canavor and Claire Meirowitz

Kill the passive and commit to action—you’ve probably seen or heard of this concept before, and it’s true: Cut the inactive verbs from your writing wherever you can and you’ll liven up your writing enormously. So what’s inactive? It’s probably easier to show you than to define the term:

The road was crossed by the chicken.

You may think that no one would say this rather than “the chicken crossed the road,” but here are some examples of everyday business language that contain the same weakness.

Example 1

The report on the company’s credit situation was written by James Coopersmith. (passive)

James Coopersmith was the author of the report on the company’s credit situation. (inactive)

James Coopersmith wrote the report on the company’s credit situation. (active)

Example 2

The accounting department's annual audit was supervised by a committee appointed by the board of directors. (passive)

A committee appointed by the board of directors supervised the accounting department's annual report. (active)

Example 3

To have edited your work after having written it may turn out to be a good thing. (inactive and convoluted)

Editing your work is probably a good thing. (active)

Or, better:

Make a practice of editing your work after writing it. (active)

Example 4

Upon review, you'll find that mistakes have been made. (passive)

When you review your work, you'll find that you've made mistakes. (active)

Why do we tend to write in a passive way so often? Sometimes because we're lazy, but often because we're pussyfooting around responsibility: We don't want to say outright that we're talking about *I*, *we*, *you*, and so on. The last passive sentence in the preceding group is an example of the "divine passive"—nobody did it, it just happened ("mistakes have been made")—and politicians, bureaucrats, accountants, and many others often present their failures that way.

But if you try for simple declarative sentences, you can avoid this temptation. Most writing will benefit from using *I* and *you* much more often. People want to know who did what and why they should care. Remember "What's in it for me?"

A major reason why you shouldn't use passive constructions is that they dilute and weaken your meaning: "John was accused by Tom of being an idiot" is a lot weaker than "Tom accused John of being an idiot."

And relying on *is*, *are*, *was*, *to be*, and related "state of being" words drains your writing of fire. Often an active verb can substitute for a long wordy phrase. "The new processing system is a replica of the one used by Johnson" is weaker than "The new processing system replicates Johnson's."

"The maple trees are very colorful in autumn" pales before "The maple trees blaze their autumn red and gold."

It's the difference between describing and showing. Good writers put endless effort into replacing passive and inactive verbs with active, interesting ones that provoke graphic images. Those active verbs get there in the editing process—rarely in the first draft.

So for real power, improve your writing by working in action words with some life to them. Or should we say, rather, to spark your writing, pepper it with words that sing.

Murder That Jargon

Exclude or explain everything that could be misunderstood by anybody else—jargon, acronyms, abbreviations.

Even highly educated people complain that their peers often use words and phrases that don't have clear meaning: industry jargon that masks a lack of thought...acronyms that demand research to track down and sometimes cannot be found...abbreviations that hinder comprehension, at best. Just try to say exactly what you mean. Here's what can happen when you don't:

We'll provide an overview here of the key enhancements in the new driver that impacts both XYZ Server 8500 and LMN Server 9310

ABCD-based data access, as well as provide a glimpse into the future roadmap for our ABCD support and commitment to enterprise-class interoperability within LMN Servers.

One problem with using jargon is that we forget that it's jargon and that its meaning may not actually be clear. Here are just a few examples from the business world:

synergies	leverage
scaling up	mission-critical
value-added	110%
functionality	shovel-ready
gain traction	360-degree thinking
leapfrog	

What are the jargon words and terms in your business or profession? Are some understood only within your company?

Jargon vs. Specialized Knowledge

If you insist that other specialists in your field will know what you mean, note that there's a difference between assuming a common base of knowledge and depending on jargon. If you're a scientist writing to other scientists, for example, you can count on their understanding scientific ideas without having to start from the ground up. When you use scientific terminology, you needn't define it—but if someone did check a dictionary, the meaning would be totally precise.

This isn't true of jargon, which typically consists of industry buzzwords that don't necessarily have a shared meaning. "Turnkey training" is an everyday example—educators use it to denote "train the trainer," while in business, it can mean ready-to-use training programs, or training that produces ready-to-go workers, or training that is customized to specific goals, and more.

It is also very risky to use acronyms that some readers won't understand and to import abbreviations from a medium like text messaging into another, even e-mail. Why? Maybe you can assume many texters understand the same protocols you do. But what about someone you're e-mailing who doesn't use text messaging?

Look for Awkward Clues

When your writing is weak and awkward, look for clues that signal a problem. You can almost always simplify, shorten, and clarify. Sometimes you can solve a tough problem by throwing out the whole sentence or writing a new one. Be aware of the following signs that a sentence can work better, and you're on the road to better writing without having to think about grammar.

Heavy Use of the Word of

The CEO of the company that produces cosmetics made of pomegranate oil is of the opinion that demand will grow.

Why not:

The CEO believes that demand for the company's pomegranate oil products will grow.

What's wrong with this?

Few things affect quality of life as much as the removal of the waste products of our civilization.

Better:

Few things affect quality of life more than removing our civilization's waste products.

Too Many to's

Jones needed to do something to revitalize the community relations project.

Better:

Jones needed to revitalize the community relations project.

Too many -ings

The lab is focused on developing nano-engineered particles that can be much more powerful in catalyzing combustion.

Better:

The lab focuses on developing nano-engineered particles that can more powerfully catalyze combustion.

Too many -ions

The dimension of the problem is an indication of the infiltration of bad work habits.

Better:

The dimension of the problem shows that bad habits are infiltrating the workforce.

Try to use only one *to*, *of*, *-ing*, and *-ion* per sentence.

When you follow up these clues, you'll find they'll lead you to fix many of the same problem areas we've identified in other ways—using the passive tense, writing awkward or confusing constructions, including unnecessary words, and so on.

At this point, you may want to ask: Will following these guidelines give me choppy, dull writing that makes me look like a simpleton? Au contraire. Consider the Gettysburg Address, *The Wall Street Journal*, Emily Dickinson's poems, Ernest Hemingway's prose, and

the Declaration of Independence. All communicate the most complex human thoughts in simple, direct language that reaches people on a deep emotional level.

Editing Tip #1

Distance yourself from your work by a day or two when you can, or a few hours, at least. It'll be far easier to spot anything awkward, ambiguous, or unnecessary and easier to find better ways to express your meaning. This definitely applies to important e-mails, and just about everything else.

Editing Tip #2

Find a writing buddy. Beyond finding mistakes, a backup reader notices whether any "attitude" is showing—hostility, for example, when you write to someone you don't like. Your writing buddy can be a friend, colleague, or even someone at home.

Editing Tip #3

Sharpen your own editing skills with this activity: Select something you wrote that's at least a page long and then cut it by half. Edit out what's not necessary or important and anything off-message. Reword for clarity, simplicity, and brevity. Work in transitions as needed. Simplify sentences and tighten everything you can until you've reduced the piece to 50 percent of its original size.

Now compare the two versions. Which is better?

Try to expand your edited version by 25 percent, adding back in some of what you cut.

If you edit well, you'll discover that it's harder to add anything back in than it was to cut it out in the first place. Lesson? Editing, even by such an arbitrary standard, improves writing.



If you liked this Element, you might like the book by Natalie Canavor and Claire Meirowitz, *The Truth About the New Rules of Business Writing* (ISBN: 978-0-13-715315-2).



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