Concise and Precise Writing: Strategies Learners of English Can Use

Mary Westervelt

Every writer of English should follow the guidelines laid out in **Concise Writing: Sentence Structure and Wording**. However, non-native speakers have the added challenge that their culture may not value conciseness as much as the culture of English does. Furthermore, wording which is appropriate in other languages may seem weak or vague when directly translated into English. If English is not your first language, you'll need to self-edit to avoid the following errors.

1. Don't write the verbs *make, do* or *be* plus a noun phrase when a simple verb is available.

Look at the following examples from student essays and reports:

☒ It's easy to make censorship against art.

☒ The doctor must do instant action in an emergency.

☒ This short story is exemplifying of the widespread tendency to act as apathetic bystanders in everyday situations.

☒ The steering column had a malfunction during the race.

Compare the following sentences, which replace weak, flabby constructions with more expressive verbs:

● It's easy to censor art.

● The doctor must act immediately in an emergency.

● This short story exemplifies the widespread tendency of bystanders to avoid getting involved in everyday situations.

● The steering column malfunctioned during the race.

2. Avoid weak noun and pronoun expressions such as this one:

☒ Who can decide *which thing* will debase our quality of public life?

Revise this sentence as follows:

→ Who can decide *what* will debase the quality of public life?

3. Do not translate from your first language, either for style or for wording.

This guideline is really a summary of all the other guidelines in this lesson, but it bears repeating. Wording taken directly from a language other than English is likely to sound strange to English speakers, as in this example:

⊠ We FDK group are considered as the comprehensive electronic-component manufacturer. We supply from electronic materials to hybrid electronic components to achieve our aim at the realization of comfortable society. (From the FDK 2004 website, as quoted in Markel, *Technical Communication* (2007, p. 84).

If we were to simply correct this passage, we would make the following changes:

The FDK group is a manufacturer of electronic components, supplying everything from electronic materials to hybrid electronic components used in effort-saving devices.

The resulting passage is grammatically correct, but it still lacks appropriate focus for the average speaker of English. Compare the equivalent passage from the 2010 website (FDK (2010):

●This year, FDK marks the 60th anniversary of the founding of the company. Keeping our customers in mind, we supply high performance batteries and electronic devices based on material technology which FDK has cultivated over many years and which increases the value and function of our customers' products.

Revisions have produced a passage which eliminates the unnatural phrasing of the earlier passage, and which has a more appropriate focus for the target audience (native speakers of English).

You may be saying, "Yes, but HOW do I know what sounds wordy or unnatural in English, and HOW do I know what constitutes expressive, concise writing?" This is a good question. Here are some suggestions:

Keep an English language notebook of phrases and words that prove useful.

Each language has a set of norms for writing. These are not just points of grammar, such as whether a language has articles or how a language with articles uses them. You need to pay attention, not just to grammar, but to the **norms** of English style. Note useful expressions or turns of phrase. Start a notebook of useful examples, and add examples to your notebook from both your reading and your listening.

Take advantage of writing textbooks and on-line writing helps for native speakers.

> Writing textbooks typically provide examples of what constitutes a well-written essay, letter of introduction, or report. Many university writing centers give examples as well; take some time to explore on line to find ones appropriate for your needs.

Note the norms for writing in your professional field.

> Each field constitutes a subculture of English usage. Do published writers in your field use the passive extensively, or do they avoid it? What words and phrases are most commonly needed to describe research or results in your field? Develop the habit of reading, not just to learn the author's message, but to learn from the author's style, grammar, and word choice as well. (**Note:** Avoid copying entire sentences or paragraphs from the work of another author! Doing so constitutes plagiarism. Instead, practice building your own sentences using writing models as templates.)

Trust your ability to judge whether a writer's style is worth emulating.

> Maybe your English is still far from proficient. However, if you are reading this, you are not a beginner! You can probably distinguish between a speaker or writer who is clear, and one who is wordy, unorganized or confusing. If you have a hard time understanding a writer, don't use his or her writing as your model. Instead, develop your writing ability by emulating the writing of authors whose style seems especially clear to you.

A final word of caution: careful writing takes time, even for writers who are proficient in English! Don't think that you'll be able to produce perfect work in an instant. Take time to write, edit, revise and rewrite. Be encouraged, not just by improvements in your writing, but by improvements in your learning techniques. Ask another person to read your writing and to advise you regarding your word choice and phrasing. Above all, don't give up!

References:

Markel, Mike (2007). *Technical Communication, Eighth Edition.* Boston: Bedford/St Martin's.

Ozo, Tono (2010) Message from the president. FDK Corporation. Retrieved July 20, 2010, from http://www.fdk.co.jp/company_e/message-e.html