The PEN Institute

Equipping Editors

Since 2007

NONFICTION EDITING 101

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LESSON #8

Noun Strings, Jargon, and More

This is to acknowledge receipt of your payment of the 25th instant and notwithstanding the fact that payment was, in fact, early, your account is still in arrears in the amount of $387.14.

At this point in time, my mother, who is seventy years of age, rose to the occasion and, taking the bull by the horns, made a momentous decision that took me off the horns of a dilemma.

If you had difficulty figuring out what the sentences mean, don't worry. These are but two examples of poor writing. They are anything but clear and straightforward. And they are perfect examples of what we'll be studying in our final lesson of Nonfiction Editing 101.

Introduction

I'm sure you're familiar with some or all of these terms: *jargon*, *cliché*, *trite expressions*, *redundancy*, *noun string*, *wordiness*, and *echoes*. Maybe you know them collectively as *mumbo jumbo*, *gobbledygook*, or *gibberish*. Whatever you call them, no doubt you understand that they are not welcome in writing and speaking because their use only confuses the reader, creates doubt, and muddles the message.

Therefore, as an editor, it is your job to locate these superfluous intrusions and pare them down to uncluttered, clear, and concise expressions.

In this lesson I'll define the following language manipulations, give examples, and point out what to look for so you can edit them out of the manuscript:

- Noun strings
- Gender- and bias-free language
- Jargon
- Clichés

- Trite expressions
- Redundancy
- Echoes
- Wordiness

Noun Strings

Noun strings combine a series of nouns as if they were adjectives modifying the final noun. You don't know what you're reading about until you reach the end of the string. Noun strings bog down the reader and can lead to ambiguity, which means the reader may interpret something different from what the author intended.

Many of these strings have worked their way into common use so that most people have no problem understanding them (e.g., health maintenance organization). Other noun strings are truly frustrating and make no sense. We wonder, "Who thinks up these things?"

The following examples are from
https://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/Clear,_Concise,_and_Direct_Sentences.pdf.

Noun string: MHS has a hospital employee relations improvement program.

Correction: MHS has a program to improve relations among employees.

Noun string: NASA continues to work on the International Space Station astronaut living-quarters module development project.

Correction: NASA is still developing the module that will provide living quarters for the astronauts aboard the International Space Station.

In both examples, the corrected form contains more words than the original, yet the second sentence is clear and avoids ambiguity.

Follow any or all of these steps to eliminate noun strings:
- Start at the end and, working your way to the beginning of the sentence, break down the sentence parts.
- Turn nouns into verbs or verbals and insert prepositional phrases and articles.
- Define the relationship between the elements.

Let's apply these techniques to the following sentence from EEI Communications Online Training:

Noun string: The marketing department strategy committee formation meeting was changed to 2 p.m.

The last noun in the string is *meeting*.

Change *formation* to the verb *form* or *forming*.
Define relationships among elements: strategy committee, marketing department.
Insert a prepositional phrase: for the marketing department.

Result: The meeting to form (or on forming) a strategy committee for the marketing department was changed to 2 p.m.

That was a lot of work, right? That indicates how bad noun strings are. Never let them escape your scrutiny.

Some fields (medical and legal, for example) have a greater tendency toward noun strings. Government agencies are notorious for using noun strings.

Gender- and Bias-Free Language

A massive cultural shift began in the 1950s. Some people say it began earlier, but it's undeniable that the evidence of the changes powerfully emerged in the late '50s. Several decades later, one of the results of this shift showed up in the use of "he." For centuries, the pronoun *he* referred to a person of unspecified gender. It was the familiar use of "one who," which is considered formal or even stilted writing.

There's no denying that many work titles were tied to males because it was only males who had careers outside the home: *policemen*, *mailmen*, and *firemen*. But that's not the case today. Instead, we have *police officers*, *mail carriers*, and *firefighters*. There was a time when doctors were male and nurses were female. This division is a thing of the past.

Does our language reflect our society, or does it shape it? We could discuss this for hours. As editors, we must deal with the state of our language in our society. I hope we can all say that we help our clients achieve precision through word choices that steer clear of any bias, while not compromising truth.

However, sometimes we come up against bizarre rationale . . .

Recently reported in the news, schoolteachers in Lincoln, Nebraska, were given "suggestions" about not calling the students girls and boys. Long story short, the teachers received a suggestion to call the students "purple penguins." This is genderphobia at its worst (not sure that's a word, but the idea is certainly real). It's beyond the purview of this course to discuss how something this foolish could have worked its way into our educational system (does anyone see the oxymoron in this sentence?), but the fact is that you will deal with words regarding gender identity at some point.

Gender- and bias-free language has a positive side: it makes writers reach for more accurate words. What does the word *manmade* mean? Artificial, handmade, synthetic, simulated, or contrived? Writers must pinpoint their meaning by using precise words. Gender- and bias-free language is here to stay, and it's your job as an editor to help your clients adhere to the practice.

It used to be acceptable to refer to a person as *handicapped*. Then the preferred word to use was *disabled*. And now it has shifted to *a person with a disability*. The emphasis is on the person, not the disability. In fact, there is a difference between *handicap* and *disability*: *handicap* is an obstacle, a barrier, while a *disability* is a condition, a functional limitation. Rosalie Maggio says in *The Bias-Free Word Finder*, "Someone with multiple sclerosis has a disability; the two flights of stairs leading to a classroom present a handicap to that person."

Unless the disability is necessary to the material of the manuscript, there's no need to mention it. If the disability is relevant, always speak of the person first, before the disability. Never define a person by their condition or disease: an arthritic, a diabetic, etc.

Be on the lookout for hidden bias. Even though no biased words are used in a sentence or paragraph, the message can be biased. This example is from *The Bias-Free Word Finder*:

> "More women than ever before are living with men without being married to them. And more unmarried women than ever before are having babies."

These sentences convey negative assumptions about women. These could be rewritten like this:

> An increasing number of unmarried men and women are living together. More than at any time in history, unmarried couples are having babies.

Feminine endings are a thing of the past. No more "-ette" or "-ess" suffixes. The argument is that these suffixes are diminutive and that using them to differentiate between males and females perpetuates the idea that the female role is a subset of the male role, and the endings identify gender when it is irrelevant. So no longer do we have actors and actresses; instead, there are only actors.

I'm sure you're aware that you will edit out any stereotypical language and assumptions. Be on guard about groups and individuals being labeled with names or terms they do not use for themselves (recall the NFL ruckus over "Redskins").

Mentioning a person's race, sex, age, religion, etc., when it is not relevant to the topic should be avoided.

Jargon

Merriam-Webster defines *jargon*: 1) "confused unintelligible language" and 2) "obscure and often pretentious language marked by circumlocutions and long words." Jargon can also refer to technical or specialized terms that are not readily understood by the nonspecialized-speaking/reading audience.

Probably the first example of jargon that comes to mind is the language of government. Jim Boren of the International Association of Professional Bureaucrats (and a satirist) wrote of bureaucratic language:

To insist that government lawyers write so simply that people can understand what they write is to strike at the very heart of the bureaucratic way of life. We bureaucrats protect ourselves by articulately fuzzifying what we say. If mere taxpayers ever learn what we are saying or doing, there may be great trouble across the land.

Some writers feel the need to use "buzz words" (jargon) in general writing to enhance their self-perceived importance. Some fields employ jargon to veil insider knowledge that we "commoners" aren't privy to, thus heightening our need for their professional services—the legal field, for example—the party of the first part, *habeas corpus*, and all that.

Communication intended for a wide audience has no use for jargon. We don't want any evidence of it in our manuscripts. However, should you specialize in a technical, medical, legal, or other field and your client is writing for a medical or legal journal, you might not want to edit out the jargon. It is expected and reasonable to use vocabulary that would be jargon to the general market but is pertinent to a particular field and understood by members within that field. It's not called jargon when the words are used in their proper setting. Using these buzz words in their appropriate environment becomes a sort of communication shorthand among insiders.

Here's an example of jargon from old federal procurement regulations.

> Oral discussions or written communications should be conducted with offerors to the extent necessary to resolve uncertainties relating to the purchase prices or the price to be paid.

Can you figure that out? In other words, someone in the procurement office has to either speak with or write to a supplier to establish a firm price for whatever the government is buying. Normal people would handle it this way:

> "Hey, Joe, this is Barb in the procurement office. What do you charge for a thousand pencils?"
> "It's good to hear from you, Barb. We charge five dollars."
> "Thanks. I'll be in touch."

Taking care of business this way takes seconds. Figuring out what the procurement regulations mean could take minutes . . . many valuable minutes.

Here's another example.

> **Q:** What causes cancer?

> **A:** We have programmed 40 percent of our available research funds to identify carcinogens and their origins, and another 20 percent to find remedies for carcinogenic-inspired cancers. We are also intensively engaged in identifying apparently spontaneous cancers and exploring surgical and chemical therapies for them as they become known.

A straightforward answer would be: We don't know, but we're working on it.

The above response is the kind of "answer" politicians give when asked a simple yes or no question. Frustrating, yes?

So how can you edit jargon when you struggle to understand what's being said? It's rather ironic that I received a large portion of my formal editing education through the Graduate School, USDA. Yes, the same USDA as in the United States Department of Agriculture—long story for another day. I say ironic because the US government is the worst when it comes to jargon, wordiness, and noun strings. I sometimes wonder how I survived some of my courses! In many of my assignments, I had to fight through paragraphs of jargon to glean the meaning. It was hard but good training because I learned to figure out the meaning. I didn't use a magic wand or call Daddy to bail me out. Instead, I read the passage. I read it a second time. A third time. And kept on reading until I could discern intent. I sometimes had to define each word, but repeatedly reading and pressing through the selection helped me develop a sort of inner ear to "hear" what was being said.

Go back up to the procurement example, and I'll explain my process.

"oral communication": speaking
"written communication": either writing or reading
"should be conducted": do
"with offerors": vendor or seller
"to the extent necessary to resolve uncertainties": learn, determine, or know
"purchase price or price to be paid": price

While I was figuring out this process, my kids loved to watch the Disney movie *The Richest Cat in the World*. A line from it stuck with me: "Yard by yard life is hard; inch by inch life's a cinch" (the saying is not original to the movie). That's what I had to do: tear it down into manageable parts. Only then could I figure it out.

Of course, you can always contact your client and ask them to clarify, but if you're working for a publisher, the PM might expect you to straighten it out. If you simply can't, add a comment explaining the problem and asking the author to clarify.

Clichés and Trite Expressions

Let's move on to clichés and trite expressions.

Clichés

If I asked you to define a cliché, what would you say? Some folks have trouble answering that, saying, "I'll know it when I hear it." *Merriam-Webster* comes to our rescue: "a phrase or expression that has been used so often that it is no longer original or interesting."

Though this definition is certainly true, there's no denying that clichés also convey big ideas in just a few words. For example, "the pen is mightier than the sword" is old and worn out. It's

been so overused that no one even considers the idea behind the words. Coined by English author Edward Bulwer-Lytton in 1839, the phrase means that written communication can wield more effective destruction than straightforward violence. A sword can maim or kill a person, but words can ruin reputations, incite rebellion, crumble empires, and so much more.

Generally speaking, you want to avoid using clichés. Some editors will tell you *never* to use them. I'm not sure that I would agree, but let me give you some guidelines to help you decide whether the manuscript you're editing (or writing) should use the cliché or lose it.

First, using a cliché usually diminishes the importance of what you're trying to say. Sayings become clichés because they've been used over and over and over again, thus people become so familiar with the sayings they no longer consider the interpretation of the cliché. Overuse of anything devalues it because it becomes common.

Second, a cliché weakens the validity of the idea being presented. Using a cliché to, say, prove a point reduces the argument to "nothing new under the sun." Ho-hum. Let's say you are working with your client to put together a proposal to sell her manuscript to a major publisher. Instead of stating the unique strengths of the manuscript, she uses clichés like "take a tiger by the tail" and "think outside the box." What does that convey to the acquisitions editor? The author presents no original thought; therefore, whatever the author has put in the manuscript has already been written. That author can expect to receive a rejection letter.

I can just about guarantee that eliminating the cliché will improve the sentence and overall writing. Remember, clichés are overused, common, and don't express ideas in fresh ways. On that alone, removing them from the text will improve it. Let's explore some examples.

> John makes many promises, but he doesn't walk the talk.
> John makes many promises, but he never follows through.

Both sentences say pretty much the same thing, but the second, the one without the cliché, removes any doubt that John is not a man of his word. This sentence makes a stronger point precisely because it does not rely on a worn-out cliché. Let's do another one.

> Love is blind.
> Mary never recognized her beloved's wandering eye.

The cliché is vague, general, and doesn't focus on who and what. The second sentence tells us who—Mary and her beloved—and what—she doesn't notice his attraction to other women.

Should you decide to let a cliché stand, let me give you a couple of guidelines. First, make sure the cliché fits the context. Let's say the context is a discussion of a father who is upset with his son's decision not to go into the family business of manufacturing shoes.

> "But, Father, I want to be a teacher."

> "A teacher? Do I need to remind you how you struggled just to get a C on your report cards? You're not teacher material. If God had meant you to fly, he'd have given you wings!"

If you stretched and twisted the cliché, you could try to make it fit the father's thinking—that if God had wanted the son to be a teacher, he'd have equipped him accordingly. But that's not what the cliché means. This phrase came into being by those who were afraid to fly.

Third, make sure the cliché is not mangled. Saying "Don't burn that bridge until we come to it" is a mangled version of two clichés: "Don't cross the bridge till you come to it" and any variation of "Never burn your bridges."

Trite Expressions

Similar to a cliché, a trite expression is a word or phrase that is boring, ineffective, and nearly meaningless because of overuse. Delete trite expressions. Don't let your authors fall into lazy writing by using them. Following are a few examples:

dead as a doornail	barking up the wrong tree
reinvent the wheel	he wouldn't recognize it if it bit him
amazing	think outside the envelope
awesome	

Redundancies, Echoes, and Wordiness

I've grouped redundancies, echoes, and wordiness into one section because they are somewhat related.

Redundancies

A simple definition of redundancy is the use of superfluous words within a phrase. Sometimes redundancies get past us because of their familiarity. These unnecessary words must be cut because they add no substance to the text. Instead, the extra words make readers work harder because they must read more words, and the extra words typically add clutter instead of clarity to the topic.

A copyeditor must know the meaning of many words to quickly spot redundancies. Another way to spot these irksome phrases is to be familiar with common redundancies. Go to https://www.thoughtco.com/common-redundancies-in-english-1692776 for several redundancies listed in alphabetical order.

To familiarize yourself with redundancies, each day choose a letter of the alphabet and read the redundancies from the above list. In less than a month, you'll have gone through the entire list.

Echoes

An echo is similar to redundancy in that an echo results from using the same word, or a form of it, too close together. It's easy for some authors to fall into this trap (I struggle with this too). Sometimes it happens because they write in small chunks of time and don't read what they wrote previously before picking up where they left off; therefore, they reuse words without realizing it.

Of course, they should catch most of them when they read through their drafts, but it's easy to miss them. (That's another reason why writers need editors and proofreaders.)

Here's what mystery writer Elizabeth Spann said in her blog about echoes:

> An example from the first page of my manuscript: I reference a **wild looking** woman at the protagonist's front door. *Five lines later:* I describe the woman's **wildly** colored, mismatched clothes.
>
> Some other repeated words: disastrous and disaster (4 lines apart), quickly (4 lines apart), chilled and chill (10 lines apart), honestly (2 lines apart), normally (2 lines apart), running late and run by (in the same line) . . . yes, the list goes on![1]

In this same blog, she mentioned that these echoes had gotten past her agent and the senior editor at the publishing house. It was her copyeditor who found them!

When you spot echoes, either mark them as echoes or fix them if you can tell from context what the author intends.

Wordiness

Concise writing is vital to clear communication. Wordiness is the opposite of conciseness, which leads to muddled communication—and I use *communication* loosely in this situation because wordiness interferes with communication. This is not a case for more is better. Using more words than necessary obscures or talks around the message and confuses or bores the reader.

William Strunk Jr. in *Elements of Style* writes:

> Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.

Now that you understand wordiness is to be eliminated, let's learn how to do that.

1. **Replace any form of the be verbs (*am*, *is*, *are*, *was*, *were*, *be*, *being*, *been*) with an action verb.**

   Wordy: The reason I was late is because the car ran out of gas.

   Concise: I arrived late because the car ran out of gas.

   Wordy: There are* ten gifts on my Christmas wish list.

   Concise (okay): Ten gifts are on my Christmas wish list.

Concise (better): I put ten gifts on my Christmas wish list.

*Watch for sentences that begin with *there are*, *there is*, *there were*, etc. Ninety-nine percent of the time, rewriting the sentence eliminates this do-nothing phrase and converts the sentence from passive to active. The second correction above addresses the real subject of the sentence, making it active.

2. **Use simpler words.** Simple words do not imply simple ideas or simple minds. At its core, English uses small, often one- or two-syllable words. Simple words are natural to us. They make writing livelier and the ideas clearer, instead of hiding behind big, flowery phrases.

   Wordy: In the very near future, Global Industries will effect an improvement in its written and oral communication pursuant to our agreement.

   Concise: Global Industries will soon improve communication as agreed.

The wordy example contains twenty-one words, and we have to work to figure out what's being said. The concise example uses only eight words, and we don't have to work to get the meaning—it's clear.

3. **Reduce the number of prepositional phrases.** Readers can get lost if they have to read a string of prepositional phrases. When I taught sentence diagramming in school (elementary, middle, and high school), the students learned to temporarily eliminate all prepositional phrases before they identified the subject, verb, and modifiers. This allowed the students to remove any clutter so that the bones of the sentence became easily recognizable.

In the same way, eliminate unnecessary prepositional phrases to blow away the fog they create. Here, I enclosed the prepositional phrases within parentheses.

   Wordy: John can claim the $10,000 (for the cost) (of the garage) (at his new home) (as part) (of his home office expense).

   Concise: John can claim the $10,000 cost (of his new home's garage) (as a home office expense).

Summary

We've come to the end of our lesson and our course! Today we learned about noun strings, which you rarely find in fiction pieces but are more likely to find in nonfiction manuscripts. We learned how to unscramble the puzzle of noun strings.

Then we touched on editing for bias- and gender-free language and learned that as society and its language shifts and changes, editors are to make sure their clients remain respectful of both the

readers and others in society. We touched on jargon, clichés, trite expressions, and other uses that clutter and conceal the passage's meaning.

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[1] 1. Elizabeth S. Craig, "Eliminating Echoes in Our Writing," *Mystery Writing Is Murder* (blog), January 16, 2012, (no longer available).

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LESSON #8 ASSIGNMENTS

Assignment #1

Decipher then rewrite this ~~whopper~~ sentence containing a noun string. (If you were to encounter something as muddled as this, you'd need to contact the author for clarification. For our purposes, you may have to make an assumption as to some of the words' meanings and edit accordingly.)

> By pooling the resources of many investors into a limited partnership, it is possible for individuals to benefit from the multimillion dollar data management peripheral equipment leasing industry.

Assignment #2

Edit the following sentences for gender- and bias-free language.
   a. The cheerleader's mother hired a hit man to kill the competition.
   b. Use a fall guy to avoid detection.
   c. The cleaning woman will arrive at 5:00.
   d. The vehicle is designed for a quadriplegic.

Assignment #3

Find five examples of jargon (in a newspaper, magazine, website, book, etc.).

Assignment #4

Following are several clichés. Rewrite them so that the meaning is clear and concise. Feel free to simply restate it in your own words or create a simile.
   a. No sense crying over spilled milk.
   b. That's the way the cookie crumbles.
   c. It's water over the dam.

d. Beware of Greeks bearing gifts.
e. His bark is worse than his bite.

Assignment #5
Improve the following sentences by eliminating unnecessary words and trite expressions.
a. At this point in time, you must rise to the occasion and, taking the bull by the horns, render a decision that will take you off the fence.
b. He must pull himself from the depths of despair and take advantage of the calm before the storm. Only then will he come out on top.
c. In no uncertain terms is she to take matters into her own hands. Instead, she must reign herself in and wait for the decision of the administrator.

Assignment #6
Locate and correct redundancies in the following sentences.
a. The court recognizes the general consensus of opinion.
b. Principal Smith is currently reviewing the request.
c. The panel is gathering data information that is necessary to make an evaluation of the issue.
d. Syntax's board is presently in the process of reviewing the statements of procedures.