

Editing Like a Pro: A Short Workshop

In *Revising Prose*, Richard Lanham describes what he calls the “paramedic method” for improving prose by removing extra words that serve no real purpose.

Three steps:

- 1) Identify the prepositions (see page 3 for a list). You can circle them if you’re using hard copy or highlight them in another color if you’re going digital.
- 2) Identify the passive “be” verbs: is/are/was/were. Put this action in a simple active verb.

Example of a wordy, passive construction:

There are many reasons Susan **was affected** by the administration’s decision. (11 words)

Example of an edited, revised version in active voice:

The administration’s decision affected Susan in many ways. (8 words)

- 3) Start fast—no rambling introductions or “clearing your throat.”

These 3 steps can help you cut excess words that do little by 1/3 to 1/2 in your writing. Lanham called these excess words the “lard factor” but I’ll take the liberty of using the acronym **WDL: “Words that Do Little”** (except maybe bring you closer to word count on class assignments, not the strongest basis for developing your writing skills). Besides following these rules (cutting prepositional phrases and “to be verbs”), ask yourself “What can I stand to lose? What do I absolutely have to include to say what I mean?” A general rule: less is more. Here’s an example of how this method works:

Original: This class is in need of a long weekend of relaxation. (11 words)

Revision: This class needs a long, relaxing weekend. (7 words)

WDL FACTOR: 36%

Lanham’s formula for figuring WDL: Divide the difference between the number of words in the original and the number of words in the revision by the number of words in the original:
 $11 - 7 = 4$ divided by $11 = 0.36$. This exercise resembles basketball more than golf: the higher the score the better: the higher the percentage you’ve cut WDL, the more you’ve “tightened” your prose and written in a clearer, more concise fashion.

For example:

Original: After reviewing the research and in light of the relevant information found within the context of the conclusions, we feel that there is definite need for some additional research to more specifically pinpoint our advertising and marketing strategies. (38 words)

Revision 1: The conclusions of previous research suggest that we need more research to pinpoint our advertising and marketing strategies. (WDL = 53% (38-18=20 divided by 38 =0.53).

Revision 2: Previous research suggests that we need more research to pinpoint our marketing and advertising strategies. (WDL= 60%)

Revision 3: Previous research has failed to pinpoint our marketing and advertising strategies. (WDL = 71%)

Final: Previous research has failed to pinpoint our marketing and advertising strategies. We need to know more. (WDL = 58% with actions clear)

Now, let's try this on a longer paragraph, a follow-up from the owner of a cleaning service to one of her managers who earlier that week sent an overly angry letter to his customers about recent breaches in contracts. The owner is giving the manager some tips for future communication.

Original: Now, I know that you've already sent this letter to current customers, so most of my advice is moot. I can see, though, how they might have felt put off, even insulted, by the tone here, which is formal, distant, even legal, when people want to feel that their cleaning service likes the work, approves of their home, and appreciates the business. I also realize that you have clearly had problems with some customers. But I fear you might alienate the majority by trying to address the few who make your work more difficult. My advice, therefore, is to rework this letter into a standard form that new customers sign up front. However, I still think it should sound more solicitous of the customer. The version here is all about the cleaning service's troubles. Revise to make it about the customer's convenience. That's good business. (145 words—Yikes!)

Revision: My suggestions for revision won't help regain goodwill with customers who have already reacted negatively to this letter, I realize. I understand, though, how some might have felt insulted by the formal, distant, legalistic tone. I suspect customers want to believe that a cleaning service approves of their home and appreciates the business. I know some customers have caused you real problems, but I fear you might alienate the majority while talking to those few. I advise reworking this letter into a standard form for new customers to sign, without referring to your troubles. Revise to make the subject your customer's convenience. (102 words; WDL 29%; not great)

Another try: I realize my revisions won't regain current customers who reacted negatively to this letter. I can see how some might have felt insulted by the formal and legalistic tone. Customers, I think, want their cleaning service to appreciate their business and to enjoy working in their homes. I suspect you might alienate that majority by writing to the few who have caused real trouble. I advise a standard form for new customers to sign, emphasizing your customer's convenience. (76 words; WDL 47%. Much better!)

A short list of prepositions

- aboard
 - about
 - above
 - across
 - after
 - against
 - along
 - amid
 - among
 - anti
 - around
 - as
 - at

 - before
 - behind
 - below
 - beneath
 - beside
 - besides
 - between
 - beyond
 - but
 - by

 - concerning
 - considering

 - despite
 - down
 - during

 - except
 - excepting
 - excluding

 - following
 - for
 - from

 - in
 - inside
 - into

 - like
- minus

 - near

 - of
 - off
 - on
 - onto
 - opposite
 - outside
 - over

 - past
 - per
 - plus

 - regarding
 - round

 - save
 - since

 - than
 - through
 - to
 - toward
 - towards

 - under
 - underneath
 - unlike
 - until
 - up
 - upon

 - versus
 - via

 - with
 - within
 - without