

100 Ways to Improve Your Composition and Creative Writing

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Part I: Composition

Before You Begin: Writing About Writing

For some people, writing is a difficult task. To others, writing is a hobby, a profession, or an art. What are your feelings about writing? After all, your attitude toward writing will, to a large degree, determine the quality of work you produce.

Exercise #1

Take some time to write about writing. Write at least one page. You might want to consider the following questions:

- What are your general feelings about writing? Do you enjoy it? Do you dislike it?
- What's the most difficult part of writing? Beginning an assignment? Spelling? Grammar? Having enough to say?
- What do you find most enjoyable about writing?
- Compare the writing you've done for school to the writing you've done outside of school.
- How did you learn to write? Describe some of your early writing experiences. Were they positive or negative?
- What type of writing do you like the most? Which do you like the least?
- What's your most memorable writing experience? Was it a story? Was it a letter or a poem to a friend?
- If you were a writing teacher, what approach would you use? What would be the most effective way to teach writing?

Word Choice

Students often think they need to build an enormous vocabulary to write well or to sound sophisticated. Although an expansive vocabulary is a plus, far more important is your ability to choose the right words. Most often, the word you're looking for is *already in your vocabulary*. Take the following example:

If you're working in the sun all day, jump in the pool. It's great.

Is there a better word than *great* to describe how it feels to cool off in a pool? What about replacing *great* with *refreshing*? Isn't *refreshing* a more appropriate word? Sometimes, one precise word can replace an entire phrase:

She felt no one was paying any attention to her.

She felt ignored.

Not only does attention to word choice produce more precise writing, but it also adds flavor by eliminating redundancy. If you're writing a story about a poodle, for example, and you've already said "poodle" and "dog" thirteen times in one page, what do you do? How about describing the dog in a new way?

The poodle barked proudly. The curly canine was afraid of no one!

Of course, you don't want to overdo it. If you write a different description every time you mention the dog, the story would be unreadable.

One way to improve your word choice is to use a thesaurus, which provides word alternatives. However, never use a word you're not totally comfortable with. Don't change,

Mr. Jones gets angry when the newspaper is not delivered.

to

Mr. Jones gets antipathetic when the periodical is not dispatched.

Unless you're going for humor, the second sentence is a mess. So, always stay with words you know well. There are plenty of them available. The trick is wanting to find them!

Exercise #2

Rewrite the following paragraph. Replace the inexact words with precise ones; eliminate redundancy by adding new descriptions. Feel free to use a thesaurus for reference.

My first trip to the amusement park was lots of fun. The rides were exciting and terrific. There were a lot of rides, including roller coasters and other rides that were scary. At first, I didn't want to go on the scariest one. People's faces looked so scared when they went down the hills. Finally, I decided to go on the biggest roller coaster. I was so scared! Most of the time I kept my eyes closed. We went really fast and did lots of turns. When the ride was over I was glad to be back. It was scary but fun.

Wordiness and Word Economy

Have you ever been offered a “free gift?” Have you ever read about “past history” in a textbook? Aren’t all gifts free? Isn’t all history in the past? As you can see, both expressions are examples of *redundant phrases*, or *wordiness*. These empty expressions are enemies of good writing. Using too many words is like adding water to soda—it dilutes the flavor. A well-written sentence should contain no unnecessary words, just as a well-written paragraph should contain no unnecessary sentences. This is one of the cardinal rules for writing: *omit all unnecessary words or phrases*. This is called *word economy*.

Empty expressions are less obvious than overdone phrases. They consist of words that add little to the meaning of a sentence. Here are some examples:

due to	it seems to me	the fact that
I think/feel	no doubt but that	the reason that
in my opinion	on account of	there is/was/are
there seems to be	resulting from	what I mean is
in order to	with regard to	the thing is

Exercise #3

Write down the corrections for each of the following redundant phrases. For example, “an unexpected surprise” is simply “a surprise.”

- at the present time _____
- due to the fact _____
- end result _____
- large in size _____
- past history _____
- climb up _____
- red in color _____
- refer back to _____
- thought to myself _____
- the honest truth _____
- usual custom _____
- repeat again _____

Exercise #4

The following paragraphs contain plenty of overdone phrases and empty expressions. (Not all of them appear on the list in Exercise #3.) Economize the language by omitting unnecessary words and phrases.

A doctor by profession, Dr. Buckwalter received an unexpected surprise when his neighbor, Mrs. Smithers, brought her sick dog into his office. Due to the fact that he had patients waiting in the waiting room, he asked Mrs. Smithers to postpone her visit until later. Mrs. Smithers started a ruckus! The end result was that Dr. Buckwalter attended to Mrs. Smithers's dog. All in all, it was an uncommonly strange situation!

At the present time, I am not going to buy the restaurant. There seem to be too many questions as to whether it will be successful or not. In the event that the restaurant did poorly, I would lose all my savings that I've saved up over the years. To tell you the honest truth, I'm not sure I'd like that to occur. So, with all due respect, I'd like to thank you for your most kind offer.

Prefixes, Roots, and Suffixes

Good writing is made up of words that are expressive and concise. One way to improve your word choice is to be familiar with prefixes, root words, and suffixes. Let's begin by looking at a word that contains a prefix, root, and suffix.

UN • REASON • ABLE

In this example, *reason* is the root word. The root word carries the primary meaning. *Reason* means “basis for action” or “with good sense.” The prefix *un* is added before the root word to change or modify the meaning. *Un* means “not.” The suffix *able* is added after the root word to change the meaning. *Able* means “sufficient ability” or “worthy of.”

So, *unreasonable* can be broken down to mean “not worthy of good sense or cause for action.” Of course, this is a rather awkward way of putting it! It's much better to say “unreasonable.” (Notice that the word *reason* is a noun; adding the suffix makes it an adjective.)

Here is a list of common prefixes and suffixes along with their meanings.

Prefix

anti— opposite, against
com—, *con*— with, together
de— reverse, remove, undo
dis— lack of, not
extra— beyond, outside of
in— in, inside, within
inter— between, among
mis— bad, wrongly
post— after
pre— before, prior to
re— again
sub— under, subordinate
trans— across, change
un— not, reversal

Suffix

—*able*, —*ible* sufficient ability, worthy of
 —*ance*, —*ence* state of
 —*ant* performing, causing an action
 —*er* one who, one that
 —*ful* full of, abundant
 —*ic* relating to, like
 —*ing* performing an action
 —*ion* a process, state of being
 —*ite* resident of
 —*ism* practice or process, state of being
 —*ity* state of
 —*less* lack, without
 —*ness* condition

Exercise #5

1. Now it's your turn to create words using prefixes and suffixes. Drawing from the list above, write down at least five words that have a prefix or a suffix or both. *Indestructible*, for example, has a prefix and a suffix.

Note: Be careful not to invent words. Not all words can accommodate prefixes or suffixes. *Distruthfulness*, for instance, is not a word.

_____	_____
_____	_____

2. Using each of the words in your list at least once, write a story describing a real or imaginary journey. The journey can take place anytime or anywhere. Be sure to use lots of details in your account. When you're done, underline each of the words from your list.
