

The “Paramedic Method”

Richard Lanham (2007) *Revising Prose*, Fifth Edition

The Paramedic Method, focuses on single sentences, provides emergency therapy, a first aid kit, a quick, self-teaching method for people to translate “Official Style” into plain English. Lanham outlines simple ways to quickly diagnose the most common modern English writing problems. These are suggestions and analysis tools, not hard and fast rules, for concise writing. The goal is attention economy, meaning spending your reader’s scarce time efficiently, by removing the lard.

1. **Circle the prepositions.** (e.g. of, to, in, for, on, with, as, by, at, from, per, about, back, except, following, into, beside, among, between, over, off, onto, under, through, around) Prepositions behave like glue, attaching nouns and pronouns to verbs or another pronoun. As connecting is all they do, every preposition means more dead weight in the sentence.
2. **Circle the “is” and “to be” verb forms.** (e.g. is, are, has been, have been, was, were, will be, will have been, is being, are being, am) Variations of the passive verb “to be” reverse sentence action to the subject being acted on rather than the subject acting upon the object through an active verb. These encourage long strings of prepositional phrases, further pacifying and deactivating your writing. Microsoft Word identifies passive voice if you turn on this grammar checking feature, which you do by opening the Grammar and Spelling checker, click “Options,” change “Writing Style” to “Grammar and Style” and under “Settings” check “Passive sentences.”
3. **Find the sentence’s central action: “Where’s the action?” “Who’s kicking who?”** Sounds easy, sometimes isn’t. “He was physically aided in his exodus from the property via the actions of security personnel,” really means, “Security kicked him out.” Actor > Actor’s action > Object of action.
4. **Put this action into a simple (not compound) active verb.** Simple enough. I’ve got the action, now I use it.
5. **Start fast; no slow windups due to meaningless introductory phrases.** Get to the point quickly by laying down your actor and their action as early as you can. “Blah blah is that” is the worst offender. Deleting anything before “blah blah is that” doesn’t change sentence meaning. Find by searching for “is that.”
6. **Read the passage aloud with emphasis and feeling.** Reading your writing aloud helps you find the rough spots.
7. **Write out each sentence and mark off its basic rhythmic units with a “/.”**
8. **Mark off sentence lengths with a “/” between sentences.** If the sentences all look about the same length, or more specifically, only a few short ones, the passage will tend to drone and sound monotonous. Consistent versus variable, boring versus active.

The Lard Factor = (number of words removed)/(number of words in original sentence)

Write in the active voice:

Faulty: In each picture, the responses are shown.

Better: Each picture shows the responses.

Use personal pronouns (I, we, our) when they are appropriate and clarify your text:

Faulty: It has been found experimentally that genetically altered strawberries are frost-resistant.

Better: In this experiment, we found that genetically altered strawberries are frost-resistant.

Write sentences that have “things doing something to things:

Faulty: It was decided that company policy be changed to allow employee selection of personal leave.

Better: The personnel committee decided to change company policy and allow employees to select their own personal leave.

Avoid nominalizing (changing verbs and adjectives into noun forms):

Faulty: We conducted an investigation of the accident.

Better: We investigated the accident.

Avoid stringing nouns together and creating what scientist Peter Medawar describes as “one huge noun-like monster in constant danger of falling apart.”

Faulty: Early childhood thought disorders misdiagnosis often occurs as a result of unfamiliarity with recent research literature describing such conditions.

Better: Physicians unfamiliar with the literature on recent research often misdiagnose disordered thought in young children.

Maintain parallelism:

Faulty: The new regulations could cause problems for both the winners and for those who lose.

Better: The new regulations could cause problems for both winners and losers.

Emphasize important words by placing them either at the beginning or, for greatest emphasis, at sentence end:

Faulty: Rather than being a judge who pronounces the verdict, the teacher becomes an editor who guides students' writing with this method.

Better: With this method, the teacher becomes an editor who guides students' writing, rather than a judge who pronounces the verdict.

Place subordinate ideas in subordinate constructions:

Faulty: The value is 50 watts and is best determined by actual test.

Better: The value, which is best determined by actual test, is 50 watts.

Substitute descriptive verbs for vague verbs:

Faulty: He went to the island.

Better: He sailed to the island.

Substitute lean words for ponderous expressions:

Faulty: Align the tubes in such a manner that they all heat at the same time.

Better: Align the tubes so they all heat at the same time.

Substitute familiar for unfamiliar words:

Faulty: Everyone should be cognizant of the danger of explosion.

Better: Everyone should be aware of the danger of explosion.

Avoid overused expressions:

Faulty: Utilization of crystal clear goals and objectives will optimize our capacity to prioritize our concerns so that we will impact upon the major thrust of our company's future plans and prospects.

Better: If we clarify our goals and objectives, we will be better able to concentrate on what is most important for our company's future.

Cut unnecessary words:

Faulty: After a time interval of one to two minutes, the tone usually stops.

Better: After one to two minutes, the tone usually stops.

Be precise:

Faulty: The cost must not be prohibitive.

Better: The cost should not exceed \$100 per thousand gallons.

Avoid confusing pronouns:

Faulty: As the temperature falls, a compressive stress is exerted by the bezel on the glass because of its greater temperature coefficient.

Better: As the temperature falls, the bezel, because of its greater temperature coefficient, exerts a compressive stress on the glass.

Keep sentence elements in their proper order:

Faulty: The sample to be analyzed first must be put into solution.

Better: The sample to be analyzed must first be put into solution.

Avoid dangling modifiers:

Faulty: Walking up the hill, my umbrella was blown away by the wind.

Better: While I was walking up the hill, the wind blew away my umbrella.

Reduce strings of prepositional phrases:

Faulty: The October 31 deadline *for* submission *of* proposals *in* response *to* an invitation *from* the National Science Foundation also applies *to* unsolicited proposals.

Better: The deadline *for* both solicited and unsolicited proposals *to* the National Science Foundation is October 31.

Remove filler words and phrases that do not add content: (e.g., really, actually, usually, deeply, very, quite, too, little, rather, thing, problem, aspect, situation, process, concerned with, there is, it is)

Faulty: As far as my professor is concerned, the problem of wordiness is the thing she'd really like to see us involved with actually eliminating.

Better: My professor wants us to focus on eliminating wordiness.