



How to Revise at the Sentence Level

Read your paper out loud, sentence by sentence, and follow Peter Elbow's advice:

"Look for places where you stumble or get lost in the middle of a sentence. These are obvious awkwardnesses that need fixing.

Look for places where you get distracted or even bored – where you cannot concentrate. These are places where you probably lost focus or concentration in your writing. Cut through the extra words or vagueness or digression; get back to the energy.

Listen even for the tiniest jerk or stumble in your reading, the tiniest lessening of your energy or focus or concentration as you say the words...

A sentence should be alive..." (*Writing with Power*, 135)

Practical advice for ensuring that your sentences are alive

- **Use Forceful Verbs** — Replace long verb phrases with a more specific verb. For example, replace "She argues for the importance of the idea" with "She defends the idea." Look as well for the true action of a sentence being buried in a noun. "My mother made the decision to ground me" is more forceful this way: "My mother grounded me."
- Look for places where you've used the **same word or phrase twice or more in consecutive sentences** and look for alternative ways to say the same thing *or* for ways to combine the two sentences.
- **Cut as many prepositional phrases as you can without losing your meaning.** For example, the following sentence, "There are several examples of the issue of integrity in Huck Finn," would be much better this way: "Huck Finn repeatedly addresses the issue of integrity."
- **Check your sentence variety.** If more than two sentences in a row start the same way (with a subject followed by a verb, for example), then try using a different sentence pattern.
- **Aim for precision in word choice.** Don't settle for the best word you can think of at the moment – use a thesaurus (along with a dictionary) to search for the word that says exactly what you want to say. Be as concrete and specific as possible. Why write "dog" when that dog would be small, such as a teacup poodle, or as frightening as a bull mastiff? Choose the word that not only conveys meaning but also feeling.
- **Look for sentences that start with "It is" or "There are"** and find the real subject and real verb. For example, in the sentence, "There are many reasons for the project's failure," the true subject is "project" and the action or true verb is "fail." The sentence reads better as: "The project failed for many reasons."