

Try to Say Something

WRITING SKILLS HANDOUT

Replacing vagueness with clarity and specificity

Good writers don't waste words or write meaningless sentences. They understand that language that fails to advance the point of their argument will tire or frustrate their readers and cause them to stop reading. Because they know that in good writing every sentence insures that the next sentence gets read, good writers hunt down flabby or meaningless sentences and either rehabilitate them or shoot them through the head.

Flabby or loose writing is not so deadly for audiences that already agree with the writer's point of view, but when readers are antagonistic or just reluctant to be convinced, which is most of the time, no writer can afford to disrespect a reader's time or intelligence because, whether they're aware of it or not, disrespected readers will put down what they're reading and find something else to do. And when they stop reading us, we've lost the argument.

Flabby, wasteful, meaningless Sentence #1: The author of this article has a lot to say about the nature of the current economy and how it is affected by international competition.

1. The writer neglects to say anything about the economy.
2. The writer neglects to say anything about international competition.
3. The writer neglects to say anything about the author's opinion.

Meaningful version: Author Kennedy believes our current weak economy and high unemployment are the direct result of increased international competition.

We could defend Sentence #1 by claiming that it is merely an introduction that will be rescued from vagueness by details to follow about the weak economy and global competitiveness, except that no reader is obligated to read our next sentence. Readers need the details when they do the most good. Every promise of information to come is one more burden for them to carry. Once their arms are full and we start loading up their backpacks, they will find another guide.

Wasteful, meaningless Sentence #2: Ever since the events of 9/11, our government and the country we live in have been very much impacted by what we all experienced that day.

1. The writer neglects to say in any way what events occurred on 9/11.
2. The writer neglects to say whether the government and the country changed in the same way or in different ways.
3. The writer neglects to say whether the changes have been positive, negative, or a mixed bag, the same for all, or better for some than for others.
4. The writer neglects to say whether what we experienced is the same as the events of 9/11 or whether our experience of the events is the impact.

Meaningful version: The unprovoked violence of 9/11 struck such fear into Americans that our government felt obligated to impose a series of severe, sometimes intrusive, security measures on its own citizens.