

Grade 8

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 on 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.

[illegible]

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 in the following paragraphs 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.

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Word Choice: Adjectives and Adverbs

Adjectives and adverbs are perhaps the most popular parts of speech. Adjectives describe nouns and adverbs modify verbs. Although adjectives and adverbs are indispensable, they must be used with care. They should be used *only when they count*. Take a look at these sentences:

A bird was flying in the blue sky.

A bird was flying in the pink sky.

Now, unless there's a good reason to remind us that the sky is blue, *blue* should be dropped. *Pink*, however, shows us something distinctive, creating a mood.

Besides unnecessary adjectives, there are also *empty* adjectives. Which one of these sentences sounds better to you?

The final exam was really hard.

The final exam was unbearable.

Unbearable is far more vivid than *really hard*.

Another habit, especially among creative writers, is the overuse of adjectives. Too many adjectives will ruin a composition, just as too much salad dressing will spoil a salad. Imagine reading a story that begins like this:

The tough men rode their dog sleds with determination through the deep snow and freezing cold of the deserted North Pole.

Here's the same sentence with economized language:

The men rode their dog sleds through the snow and cold of the North Pole.

Do we lose anything in this version? Wouldn't the men have to be *tough* to be sledding at the North Pole? Wouldn't they have to possess *determination*? Do we need to be reminded that the snow is *deep* or that the cold is *freezing*? These adjectives don't improve the description or add important information. Naturally, if you want to use adjectives in a sentence, you should. What's important is that you decide which ones are necessary.

Adverbs are also used too much. Often, a strong verb can eliminate the need for an adverb.

Here are a few cases:

talk loudly: shout, scream, holler

run fast: sprint, dash, race

touch gently: caress

hit strongly: punch, smack

cry hard: weep, moan, blubber

Exercise #6

Each of the following sentences contains either excessive adjectives, empty adjectives, or weak adverbs. Rewrite the sentences, adding precise adjectives and verbs when needed.

- a. The judge spoke quietly to the prosecuting attorney.

- b. Swimming joyously, the beautiful, graceful dolphins neared our boat.

- c. She's the best swimmer on the swim team.

- d. His car is always really, really dirty.

- e. The windy, curvy road is dangerous and scary.

- f. That dinner tasted good.

- g. The noisy thunderstorm was terrible.

- h. My headache really hurts.

- i. The millionaire is very giving; he donated lots of money to the local hospital.

- j. He was so frustrated that he hit the wall over and over again.

Here's an assignment that's challenging, fun, and frustrating. Write one paragraph about anything you like. Only one rule applies: you can use only three adjectives and two adverbs. Choose your adjectives and adverbs carefully! Write them down below so they appear above your story.

Adverbs

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Word Choice: Verbs

You probably know that every sentence needs at least two parts of speech: a noun and a verb. The noun is the subject of the sentence, while the verb supplies the action. Remember that the verb gives life to the sentence. Therefore, choosing the right verb is critical to good writing. An inaccurate or lazy verb will deaden a sentence, while a precise verb will enhance its meaning.

When speaking, we usually don't use dynamic, precise verbs. Instead, we use a limited number of common verbs. Take a look at this pair of sentences:

The climber went up the peak.

The climber scaled the peak.

In the first sentence, *went* is a weak verb. It doesn't capture or describe the moment. *Scaled*, on the other hand, is dynamic and appropriate to the action. Sometimes the right verb can replace an entire verb phrase:

He wrote down the swimmers' times.

He recorded the swimmers' times.

The phrase, *wrote down*, is not as precise as *recorded*.

Exercise #8

1. Here are four more weak verb phrases. Can you find alternatives for them?

moved around

spoke softly

had a lot of fun

laughed really hard

- The woman went to the dentist's office because her filling had come loose and she needed a new one to be put in. But when the dentist got a drill, the woman started to shout. Then she got up fast and tried to hurry out of the room. The dentist's assistant talked quietly and calmly to settle the woman down. The patient sat back down in the chair, taking deep breaths and starting to get more relaxed. Then, after using the drill, the dentist put in a new filling.

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Onomatopoeia and Alliteration

Read the following words aloud:

bang	crackle	howl	moo	thump
boom	fizz	hum	neigh	zing
chug	hiss	meow	sizzle	zip

Each one of these words is an example of *onomatopoeia*. The sound of each suggests its meaning. Better yet, the sound *is* the meaning. Find the onomatopoeic words in these sentences:

The restaurant is loud with the chit-chat of customers.

Our new bird tweets a lot in the morning.

I can hear the buzz of my dad's electric razor.

Onomatopoeia is a helpful device, but should be used *sparingly*. If you're describing a forest, beware of the temptation to fill a page with hoots, roars, and caws.

Alliteration, the use of words that begin with the same sound, is a more sophisticated technique than onomatopoeia. Here is an example of alliteration.

Oscar, I honor your offering with the official Award of Honesty.

Notice how many "O" or "AH" sounds are in the sentence. Of course, this is an extreme example. Unless you're being humorous, most effective alliteration is subtle. By echoing sound patterns, alliteration should add rhythm and beauty to a sentence *without calling attention to itself*. Take a look at this sentence:

The Earth is a miracle of majesty.

The alliterative phrase, *miracle of majesty*, has its own poetic quality that neither *miracle* nor *majesty* achieves on its own.

Using an appropriate amount of alliteration and onomatopoeia, write a descriptive paragraph. You might write about a day at the beach or in the forest, or a day in a bustling city. You can write about anything you want. Be sure to include lots of details.

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Clichés

Take a minute to study the list of expressions below. What do they have in common? How many have you heard before? Have you ever used any in your own writing?

accidents will happen	few and far between	on cloud nine
add insult to injury	fit as a fiddle	one in a million
better late than never	fit to be tied	quick as a wink
busy as a bee	go fly a kite	safe and sound
calm before the storm	go jump in a lake	sick as a dog
cool as a cucumber	green with envy	sink or swim
crazy as a loon	in seventh heaven	the last straw
down in the dumps	my cup of tea	under the weather

Each of these expressions is a *cliché*—an overused, unoriginal saying. Although clichés will surface in your everyday speech, they should almost always be omitted from your writing. Replace them with fresh, concise expressions.

The exception, of course, is if you're using a cliché intentionally. Like dialect, the proper use of clichés can enrich your writing. Because they appear in spoken English, they may have a place in dialogue.

Exercise #10

This is a two-part assignment that will require a partner. Using plenty of clichés, each person will write a paragraph describing a championship contest. (Any sport will do.)

Now rewrite each other's paragraphs, replacing the clichés with original expressions. If you want to keep any of the clichés, go ahead. However, you should be ready to justify their use.

Prepositions and Prepositional Phrases

Prepositions are words that show the relationship between a noun or pronoun to another word in a sentence. Look at this sentence:

A raccoon crawled beneath the house.

The preposition *beneath* shows the relationship between *raccoon* and *house*. It tells you **where** the raccoon is. (*Raccoon* is the subject of the sentence; it is what the sentence is about; *house* is the object of the sentence.) Here is a list of common prepositions.

about	below	inside	since
above	beneath	into	through
across	beside	like	to
after	beyond	near	toward
against	by	of	under
along	down	off	until
among	during	on	up
around	except	outside	upon
at	for	over	with
before	from	past	within

As you can see, prepositions are not limited to showing physical relationship. They can also show temporal (time-related) and logical relationships. Take a look at these examples:

The man standing behind me in line was smoking a cigar. (physical)

Before lunch, you should stop by and visit me. (temporal)

Except for the weather, our vacation was wonderful. (logical)

All prepositions exist in groups of words that form *prepositional phrases*. These parts of speech begin with a preposition and end with an *object of the preposition*. Study the sentences below. The prepositional phrase is in bold print. Try to identify the object of the preposition.

*The girl ran **on the field**.*

***Above the valley** soared the hawk.*

*We had a lot of fun **during our vacation**.*

The subjects are *field*, *valley*, and *vacation*. Remember that the *subject* of the sentence is never in a prepositional phrase. This can be confusing, especially when a sentence has more than one prepositional phrase. Take a look at this example:

During the concert, she sat in the audience, near the manager.

The subject and verb of this sentence are *she sat*. There are three prepositional phrases:

during the concert

in the audience

near the manager

The objects of these phrases are *concert*, *audience*, and *manager*.

But why learn about prepositions? How are they useful? How can they help improve your writing? First of all, prepositions are essential for description. Try to describe a place without using any prepositions. Can you do it? Is the description precise? Secondly, prepositions are very useful for creating sentence variety, an important ingredient in good writing. Take a look at these examples:

I was asleep during the train ride.

During the train ride, I was asleep.

The stars are shining beyond the galaxy.

Beyond the galaxy, the stars are shining.

Notice how the sentences have a different flavor depending on where the preposition is placed. Which example do you like best? As you write, be aware of where you place the prepositional phrases and how this decision affects the sentence.

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