

Epistle to Thesis Writers

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There is no anguish like the anguish of writing a thesis. The stress—like all other states of mind—is likely to seep into your expressive behavior, including your style of writing.

Verb forms are the first to suffer. Your anxiety and feeling of insecurity will tempt you to an excessive use of the passive voice:

On the basis of the analysis which was made of
the data which were collected, it is suggested
that the null hypothesis can be rejected.

Please sir, I didn't do it! It was done! Try to conquer your cowardice, and start your concluding chapter with the creative assertion: Lo! I found. . .

You may attempt to defend your enervating use of the passive voice by pointing out that the only alternative is excessive reliance upon the first person personal pronoun or upon the pontifical We. It is safer, you conclude to choose self-effacement at this critical moment in your career. I reply: even in critical moments I see no harm in saying I if I mean I.

But the alternatives are specious. A good writer finds ways of avoiding both the self-defeating passive and the self-apotheosizing active. Let the data tell the story. Let the plot of the investigation rush ahead. Let viable verbs move the reader forward. Most of these dwell in the past—on what was thought, was done, on tests that were administered (or, Heaven save us, on “subjects who were administered the tests”). Everything is as static as William James' cow on the doormat: It is maintained; it is suggested; the writer (lacking free will and responsibility) is persuaded that the results WHICH he got. . .

Now “which” is the ugliest word in the English language. Occurring as it does on the average of three times in every sentence of a thesis, it renders the document a masterpiece of cacophony. Since this dissonant little word creeps unbidden into everyone's writing, your only remedy is to make a final excursion through the completed thesis (presumably at Midnight on March 31) and hunt the whiches down. Eliminate four-tenths of them altogether; change five-tenths to “that”—the grammatically proper word in most contexts; and leave one-tenth as an irreducible offering to the gritty nature of the English language.

Finally a word about pedantry of expression. It reaches its climax at the time when the graduate student is heavy with erudition heavily acquired from their ponderous forebears. The accumulation is like the snows in an Alpine Pass in February. Perhaps it is too much to expect felicity from a voice at the bottom of a snowslide.

Yet your thesis readers, being human, will appreciate your efforts to avoid monstrous and unnecessary technicalities. They will applaud your attempt at simple and direct communication.

The ten-year-old girl who wrote the following essay on a bird and a beast merits a higher degree, if not for the accuracy of her knowledge, then at least for the clarity of her diction:

The bird that I am going to write about is the Owl.
The Owl cannot see at all by day and at night is as blind
as a bat.

I do not know much about the Owl, so I will go on to
the beast I am going to choose. It is the Cow. The Cow
is a mammal. It has six sides—right, left, an upper and
below. At the back it has a tail on which hangs a brush.
With this it sends the files away so that they do not fall
into the milk. The head is for the purpose of growing horns
and so that the mouth can be somewhere. The horns are to
butt with, and the mouth is to moo with. Under the cow
hangs the milk. It is arranged for milking. When people
milk, the milk comes through and there is never any end
to the supply. How the cow does it I have not yet realized,
but it makes more and more. The cow has a fine sense of
smell; one can smell it far away. This is the reason for
the fresh air in the country.

The man cow is called an ox. It is not a mammal. The
cow does not eat much, but what it eats it eats twice, so
that it gets enough. When it is hungry it moos, and when
it says nothing it is because its inside is all full up
with grass.

As Edward Weeks says in the *Atlantic Monthly* (where this essay was first printed),
“Gentlemen, let that be your model!”

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