
The Pen Is Mightier Than the Shovel

Once the grammar has been learnt, writing is simply talking on paper and in time learning what not to say.

—BERYL BAINBRIDGE IN *CONTEMPORARY NOVELISTS*

Eskimos can't have more words for snow than Upstate New Yorkers do. Having lived through twenty-some Upstate winters, I have my own words for snow. *Go away.*

I admit, though, that this white (or gray or black) stuff has its uses. For example, it inspires metaphorical thinking. One minute I'm chiseling frozen slush off the sidewalk, anticipating the moment when my son, Brian, and his high-school pals make their way up the soon-to-be-walkable concrete steps, and the next minute I'm thinking, *This is like editing.* To edit is to hack, hack, hack at the bits and heaps and chunks of junk obstructing the mind's way until either (a) we give up and leave our readers, like unfortunate pedestrians on a precarious trail, to fend for themselves or (b) we stand back in sweaty awe of the path we've created.

Is it coincidence that passages of text are called passages?

If you're hardy enough to apply a shovel to your own writing, give the heave-ho to the following words.

-ly words (and other
vapid adverbs)

Many adverbs, especially the ones that end with ~~-ly~~, ~~actually~~, ~~truly~~, ~~frankly~~, ~~extremely~~, ~~definitely~~, ~~totally~~, ~~really~~, ~~simply~~, ~~literally~~, ~~basically~~ have less substance than the weightless, drifting snow that Eskimos call weightless, drifting snow. ~~Relentlessly~~ chip away adverbs that ~~redundantly~~ repeat the meaning of the verb.

Word Up!

Don't jettison every *-ly* word, though. What's not to love about, say, a fabulously frumpy winter coat? As bestselling writer Arthur Plotnik points out, "joltingly fresh adverbs ...are among the hottest locutions in contemporary prose."^a

very, such, so
(and other empty
intensifiers)

Despite their reputation as intensifiers, *very, such, and so* fail to intensify. When you come across one of these wimpy so-called intensifiers, hurl it into the bushes, and put a brawny verb to the heavy lifting. *I have a ~~very~~ strong desire to clear ... I have ~~such~~ a strong desire to clear ... I ~~soooooo~~ want to clear ... I long to clear this walkway.*

For those times when you need to make a point that's bigger than big—when even a hyperbolic Batman of a verb needs a Robin of an intensifier—sweep past all those nonboostingly stale booster words and pluck yourself a "wallopingly fresh superlative."^b

Alternatively, let data do the intensifying: *For twelve sleepless hours, I've thought of nothing but clearing this walkway.*

not, no
(and other
negative words)

Negative words often ~~do not have~~ **lack** muscle. They come in handy, though, as differentiators. The two *nots* add clarity here:

In the sentence Call me a shoveling fool, the word shoveling is a verb only in form, not in function. It functions not as a verb but as an adjective.^c

a. Arthur Plotnik, *Spunk & Bite: A Writer's Guide to Bold, Contemporary Style* (New York: Random House, 2007), 37. I review this inspiring book here: <http://howtowriteeverything.com/spunk-and-bite-arthur-plotnik-book-review>.

b. This hyperbolically entertaining (I hope) Batman-and-Robin reference serves as an example of a superlative-freshening technique. For more, see Arthur Plotnik, *Better than Great: A Plenitudinous Compendium of Wallopingly Fresh Superlatives* (Berkeley: Cleis Press, 2011). Even if you have no immediate need for a wallopingly fresh superlative, you'll find this book a wallopingly good read.

c. For an introduction to a controversial (and valuable) modern way of looking at the forms and functions of words, see "A Modern Take (Is *Take* a Noun?) on Parts of Speech" on page 61.

<i>the fact that</i>	Does the fact that you're sitting comfortably your comfort have you feeling guilty about others doing all the shoveling?
<i>just</i>	Just say no to <i>just</i> . <i>Just</i> just gets in the way. Sometimes it just slips out, especially right before a verb where it just adds no value. It just happens. Just forgive yourself, just delete it, and just move on.
<i>begin to, start to</i>	Don't begin to describe the beginning of an action. Cut to the action itself. Start to get to work! ^d
<i>try to</i>	I determine to <i>try to</i> shovel the walk. You determine to shovel the walk. We all know who gets the chore done.
<i>tend to</i>	Tend to avoid <i>tend to</i> . Dig straight into the real verb.
<i>in order to</i>	Put on a wool hat in order to keep your ears warm.
<i>point in time</i>	If you say you don't want to shovel <i>at this point in time</i> , you sound like you're running for office. Admit that you don't feel like doing it <i>now</i> . Remember, though, that the snow will be heavier and crustier if you go after it at some future point in time later .
<i>period of time</i>	You have too much to accomplish to waste even the brief period of time it takes to say <i>period of</i> .
<i>in light of, in spite of, in terms of</i> (and <i>of</i> in general)	In spite of its innocent looks, the innocent-looking little word <i>of</i> ("in anything other than small doses") has been called "among the surest indications of flabby writing." ^e In terms

d. I owe this tip to Jack Hart, who says, "We all ... share a compulsion to describe the beginnings of actions, rather than the actions themselves ... The beginning of any action is an infinitely brief point. You can visualize the action itself ... but the beginning forms no image at all ... [So rather than write] 'The plane began to circle' ... simply write ... 'the plane circled.'" (Hart, *Storycraft*, 118.)

e. Garner, *Garner's Modern American Usage*, 585–586.

Word Up!

~~of tight writing~~, strong writers use few *ofs*. Stay strong! Avoid the preposition *of*, ~~in spite of its siren song!~~ Did you ever consider *of* that big of a deal? Don't worry about *of*, though, when it contributes to a phrasal verb's idiomatic meaning, as in *George didn't know what to make of that day's snowfall*. In this example, *of* acts not as a preposition but as a verb particle.^f For ~~a whole lot of discussion~~ **more** on verb particles, see "You Don't Know From Prepositions" on page 49.

may or may not

You ~~may or may not~~ **might not** finish the job today.^g

proverbial

Nothing clutters like a cliché—except the term *proverbial*, which adds clutter to clutter. You can't freshen a stale phrase, like *a breath of fresh air*, by calling it a proverbial breath of fresh air. You'd have better luck clearing away snow by tossing on more snow. Send the whole phrase sailing.

different

If you're of two ~~different~~ minds about whether to use the term *different*, take a break, rest your arms, and mosey over to page 41, "Let Me Count the—Different?—Ways."

weak *be*-verbs

If you haven't taken that break yet, ~~be smart~~ **wise up** and take it now. You need to know about the hazards of *is*, *are*, and other weak verbs, as described on page 13, "*To Be or Not To Be*."

f. ... unless George (in not knowing what to make of that day's snowfall) is debating whether to make a snowman or an igloo, in which case the verb is neither phrasal nor idiomatic—it's not *make of* but simply *make*—and the *of* acts as a preposition after all.

g. The phrase *may or may not* raises two problems: (1) The *may or* is redundant because the *may not*, all by itself, implies both possibilities. (2) *May not* raises questions of permission. "The phrase should probably be *might not*" (Garner, *Garner's Modern American Usage*, 529).

false *but*s

A false *but* (a *but* that contradicts nothing) leads people astray like a sign pointing the wrong way. Example: *People could slip on that sidewalk, but I don't feel like clearing it.* This *but* implies a contradiction, **but where** no contradiction exists. A true *but* indicates contradiction: *I wish I felt like clearing that stinking sidewalk, but I don't.*

particular

This **particular** word only gets in your way. Over the shoulder it goes!

any other words
that you can pitch

Going after impediment words like the ones in this list (or in any of a thousand such lists) merely warms you up. After you chuck these words, stretch, bend, twist, shake out your hands, and tackle the real chore: eliminating ~~all manner of overabundant, superfluous, or worn-out words~~ **verbiage**.

never

I'm kidding. Of course you can say *never*. How else can you tell people what words never to use?

This kind of shoveling takes time. But nothing beats the satisfaction of easing someone's way. That satisfaction awaits you. In fact, if you're not busy right now, how about grabbing a shovel and helping a gal out? Come on now, put your back into it.⁵⁷ Brian will be home any minute.

57. Unlike your back, writing rules are for breaking. If you're writing poetry or lyrics, say, or if you're conveying a tone or a voice, or if you have any other reason for using "forbidden" words, knock yourself out. Not literally. There, I used an *-ly* word. How do you know whether your rule-breaking works? Seek out the kind of readers you'd like to reach, and ask. Have someone read your words to you out loud. My husband does this for me. Sometimes I'm delighted. Sometimes I'm humbled. I never outgrow the need for these reminders that my writing works only when it works for someone other than me.