**Dumb Writing Advice, Part 1: Word Prohibitions**

**October 2, 2014 by**[**Geoffrey Pullum**](http://chronicle.com/blogs/linguafranca/author/gpullum/)

An Überflip page by Andrea Ayres-Deets is headlined “[5 Weak Words That Are Sabotaging Your Writing](http://hub.uberflip.com/h/i/19920605-5-weak-words-that-are-sabotaging-your-writing/).” If only there were a few words that you could simply expunge to get an immediate improvement in your prose! But of course it’s nonsense. Writing advice can’t be reduced to word prohibitions; and the prohibitions recommended here would be ridiculous overkill.

Here are the words you should allegedly shun: (1) *really*; (2) *things* and *stuff*; (3) *I believe*, *I feel*, and *I think*; (4) the *be* of the passive; and (5) the word *very*.

It’s dumb advice, from top to bottom.

**1. *Really***This useful adverb, which Ayres-Deets illustrates with the (putatively bad) example *The swimmer really performed admirably*, has two meanings. First, it can be an intensificatory modifier, adding an extra helping of emphasis and enthusiasm–and I hope I never see the day when emphasis and enthusiasm are extinguished by the cold, grey hand of writing tuition.

But *really* can also serve (much like *actually*) as an adjunct expressing trans-world locational information. It’s used to contrast the real world with a fictive one. There’s nothing redundant or trivial about doing this: When I say *He imagined she would be clumsy, but she really performed admirably* I mean that the clumsiness claim held only in the world of his imagining; here in the real world her performance was admirable. Humans spend much time discussing hypothetical or imagined worlds. Sometimes they need to be brought back to earth with a world-shifting adverb.

**2. *Things* & *stuff***Things are entities that can be individuated; stuff is abstract or concrete substance that cannot be. But we don’t always want to sound like Oxford metaphysicians.

Look at a couple of concrete examples, plucked from Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (the text happens to be on my laptop). Jonathan Harker’s journal records a a terrified old peasant woman as saying: “Do you not know that to-night, when the clock strikes midnight, all the evil things in the world will have full sway?” *Things*, because who knows the correct terms for the horrors that might stalk Transylvania at midnight on St. George’s Eve. Later on, Dr. Seward’s journal describes Van Helsing sealing the vampire Lucy Westenra’s tomb with “some whitish stuff, like dough or putty.” Seward writes *stuff* because at the time he has no idea what Van Helsing is using (a paste of consecrated communion bread). These word choices aren’t sabotaging Stoker’s writing! Sometimes you need generic terms.

The “bad” example Ayres-Deets presents for *things* and *stuff* is: “The article said a lot of things and stuff.” Certainly, that sounds inept (for one thing, the phrase *and stuff* is an extremely informal substitute for the *etc.* of academic English). But simply banning the two most basic terms for discrete objects and nondiscrete material is no way to sensitize students to the norms of academic English.

**3. *Believe*, etc.**Prefixing every statement you make with an announcement that it’s a personal belief, feeling, or opinion is a mistake, of course. But again, prohibition isn’t the answer. Sometimes it should be made explicit that a personal reaction is being expressed, and sometimes not.

**4. Passives**The article condemns the word-forms *was*, *is*, *are*, and *am* (missing *were* by mistake), but the motive immediately becomes clear: It’s another standard-issue condemnation of passive voice. The passive is called “unnecessarily complex”; it is “less engaging and requires the writer to use more words per sentence”; it “forces the reader to do more work to get to the same conclusion” instead of using “short, punctuated sentences that get to the point.”

None of this is true. Some passives are longer and others shorter; some are clunky or hard to understand, and others aren’t. (For a detailed critique of the familiar hogwash see my “[Fear and loathing of the English passive](http://ling.ed.ac.uk/~gpullum/passive_loathing.pdf)”). An added note that “passive voice does have its place” and “not every form of ‘to be’ represents passive voice” only underscores the fact that this whole misguided warning about the passive bogeyman is bunk.

**5. *Very***The final proposal simply proscribes the most basic positive intensifier for gradable adjectives and adverbs in English. If you truly believe no distinction need be drawn between hot water and very hot water, then all I can say is that you shouldn’t be the one to give the baby a bath.

Don’t think I oppose writing advice. I emphatically agree that novice writers should be encouraged to steer clear of vagueness, overuse of intensifiers or emphasis, needlessly tagging claims as personal opinion, and so on. But the judgments are delicate, and call for careful elucidation and thoughtful exemplification. Blanket word prohibition as a substitute for thoughtful style advice is just dumb. Very dumb. It is a thing that I really don’t believe writing instructors should be encouraged to engage in.

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