
A Word, Please: Hall of shame

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Good news, kind of. I discovered a new sentence structure I hate. It's a pattern I see often but only recently, while editing an article, realized it belongs in my writing hall of shame.

Why would I bother hating certain sentence structures, you may wonder? Well, the better structured your sentence, the better you can get your message across. So bad sentences are roadblocks to effective communication.

In fact, this is what I love most about English grammar: It affords a mechanical understanding of how sentences perform — some of them like expertly engineered race cars, others like AMC Gremlins. So when a sentence is stalling and sputtering and straining, grammar is the toolbox you draw from as you get under the hood to fix it.

Here's an example of the sentence structure I just learned to hate: "There are lye-based products that clear debris out of pipes."

You may not see anything odious about that perfectly common sentence structure. But when you compare it to a version that's been revised by a professional editor, the problem becomes clear. Here's the edited version: "Lye-based products clear debris out of pipes."

Looking at the two versions, you immediately see that "there are" is unnecessary. Just extra words. Worse, these words force you to add one more word: "that." Instead of saying the products clear out debris, you must say these are products "that" clear out debris. So the structure creates a wordier-than-necessary sentence.

True, shorter sentences aren't always better. But they usually are. They make the best use of readers' time and attention, wasting none of it on unnecessary words.

But needless words aren't the only problem with the longer sentence. A closer look at the syntax reveals deeper problems.

In our revised version, the main clause has a tangible subject: lye-based products. Tangible subjects have a sensory effect on readers, evoking images, sounds or smells. Lye evokes burning and stinging and danger and a certain power. Even pairing it up with a bland, vague noun like "products" doesn't diminish its effect on readers.

In the original sentence, the subject was the pronoun “there.” Technically, this is called the “existential there,” which is just a structure we use to say something exists. As a subject, “there” is a real yawner — as devoid of specificity as a word can be.

Existential “there” always uses a form of the verb “be,” in this case “are.” Forms of “be” are among the least-dynamic verbs you’ll find. Being is always less action-packed than doing. Yes, sometimes “there are” is the best wording, especially when your main point is that these things exist. But often, it’s a weak choice — much weaker than a motion-oriented verb like “clear” in “clear debris.”

But perhaps the worst thing about this sentence structure is that, through the use of “that,” it demotes the verb phrase “clear debris” to the status of an adjective. That’s the nature of relative clauses.

A relative clause is any clause hinged on one of the relative pronouns — that, which, who or whom — and used to modify a noun. As you already know, that’s what adjectives do. They modify nouns. So relative clauses are adjective clauses. Consider “The car that I drove is in the parking lot.” The relative clause “that I drove” isn’t about driving, really, it’s about specifying which car you’re talking about. So it’s basically an adjective.

“Clear debris” by itself is a verb phrase, but when you put “that” in front of it, the phrase is just modifying the noun “products.” So our original sentence turns a dynamic, sensory action into a static adjective.

If you want to keep your readers awake, avoid sentences that start with “there is” or “there are” — especially if a “that” clause comes later in the sentence. Instead, consider making the noun the subject of the sentence and taking out “that” to make the relative clause into a true verb.

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