



# Better Read Than Dead



## Avoid Deadwood in Your Writing

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“Clutter,” says William Zinsser, “is the disease of American writing.” Like dead wood on a tree, words that serve no useful function can sap the strength of your prose. Deadwood in writing can take the form of bloated phrases or needless repetition or “throat-clearing.”

Once you learn to recognize these constructions it is easy to eliminate them.

### WORDY PHRASES

I came to the realization that  
She is of the opinion that  
Concerning the matter of  
During the course of  
For the period of a year  
In the event that  
In the process of  
Regardless of the fact that  
Due to the fact that  
For the simple reason that  
Inasmuch as  
If the case were such that  
It is often the case that  
I made contact with  
At that point in time

### EDITED VERSION

I realized that  
She thinks that  
About  
During  
For a year  
If  
During, while  
Although  
Because  
Because  
Since  
If  
Often  
I called, wrote  
Then

### NEEDLESS REPETITION

She was in a depressed state of mind.  
They are connected together.  
They have many traits common to both.  
The houses are in close proximity.  
He has no emotional feelings.  
Each and every person should come.  
round in shape  
tall in stature  
red in color  
basic fundamentals  
very unique  
true fact  
the reason why is because

### EDITED VERSION

She was depressed.  
They are connected.  
They share many traits.  
The houses are nearby.  
He has no feelings.  
Everyone should come.  
round  
tall  
red  
basics  
unique  
fact  
the reason is that

### THROAT-CLEARING (introductory phrases like “it is” or “there are” can usually be pruned)

There are walls surrounding the town.  
It was on December 7, 1941, that Pearl Pearl Harbor was attacked

Walls surround the town.  
Pearl Harbor was attacked on December 7, 1941.



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Try editing these sentences, eliminating any deadwood without altering the meaning of the original.

1. The reason why she hesitates at this point in time is for the simple reason that she is afraid.
2. He disliked me due to the fact that my investigation proved conclusively that he was lying throughout the entire trial.
3. There have been many complex and complicated plans that have been put forward and suggested for helping the city regain financial monetary stability.
4. There are a number of flavors I love.
5. Dressed in a conservative type suit, he moped dejectedly in the corner when the committee totally failed to accept his plan.
6. There will be an evaluation of the program by us in order to achieve greater accountability on the part of the staff.
7. It is a fact that there has been a great increase in terrible violence on television.
8. There is no periodical newspaper that has a better reputation in countries all over the world than the *New York Times*.
9. No one who has a child of his or her own cannot help but enjoy and appreciate the delightful charm of this story.

Here are some possible revisions of these sentences (although others are possible):

1. She hesitates because she is afraid.
2. He disliked me because I proved that he was lying during the trial.
3. Many complex plans have been proposed for helping the city regain financial stability.
4. I love many flavors.
5. Dressed in a conservative suit, he moped in the corner when the committee failed to accept his plan.
6. We will evaluate the program to help the staff become more accountable.
7. Violence on television has skyrocketed.
8. No newspaper has a better international reputation than the *New York Times*.
9. No parent can fail to appreciate this charming story.

Many of these examples and exercise sentences involve a change from passive to active voice.

If you're not sure what active and passive sentences are, or how or whether to change one to the other, see the CTL handout "Lost Your Voice? Maybe You're Too Passive."