

The Paramedic Method

“An evaluation of the effect of Class C fly ash and ground granulated blast furnace slag (GGBFS) on the properties of ternary mixtures for use in concrete pavements was undertaken and is presented in this paper.”

This sentence is difficult to read for several reasons: readers have to wade through 26 words and an acronym before they get to the sentence’s main verb, it uses the passive voice, and it has 7 prepositional phrases.

How can we fix sentences like this one? The paramedic method! Developed by Richard Lanham, the paramedic method is a set of clear steps for analyzing and revising wordy sentences. Writers use the paramedic method to improve clarity and readability so that they communicate concisely and effectively. Basically, the paramedic method helps make confusing syntax comprehensible.

- 1) *Underline the prepositional phrases in the sentence.* (Prepositions are words that indicate relationships between nouns and pronouns. Words like *at, in, on, of, to, about, around, below, above, from, into, near, since, through, against, after, and outside* are prepositions.)

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- 2) *Circle the ‘to be’ (am, is, are, was, were) verbs.*

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- 3) *Put a box around nominalizations and (thus) identify the primary action.* Nominalization are words that have been changed from adjectives or verbs into nouns

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- 4) *Write the nominalization/primary action as a simple verb.*

Our example sentence has one nominalization that could potentially serve as the primary verb: *evaluation*. When we transform the nominalization, evaluation becomes *evaluate* or *evaluates*.

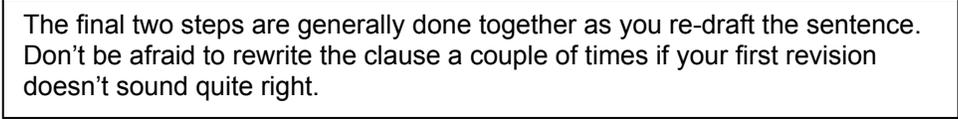
- 5) *Ask, “Who or what performs the action?” Then write the new base clause with the agent in the subject position. Use the simple verb form from step 4.*

“ *for use in concrete pavements is presented in this paper.*”
(agent)

becomes

This paper evaluates . . .
(agent) (action)

- 6) *Keep the base clause near the beginning of the sentence, if possible.*
- 7) *Eliminate unnecessary words and phrases.*



The final two steps are generally done together as you re-draft the sentence. Don't be afraid to rewrite the clause a couple of times if your first revision doesn't sound quite right.

Your final product should look something like this:

This paper evaluates the effect of Class C fly ash and ground granulated blast furnace slag (GGBFS) on the properties of ternary mixtures in concrete pavements. (26 words)

The paramedic method has helped us reduce our sentence to 26 words from 36, a 28 percent reduction. That means that 28 percent of our original sentence was excess (Lanham calls it "lard content"). If you apply the paramedic method to all of your sentences, your writing can't help but be clearer and more concise.

Sentences for practice:

- 1) As a means of providing scientists with appropriate tertiary data, the conference is intended to serve as a communication medium for everyone involved in the manipulation and dissemination of research findings.
- 2) The decision by the managers was that the committee for road improvement would cease its activity for the duration of the term.
- 3) From the beginning, the writing of this research article was marked by reluctance.