

## THE PARAMEDIC METHOD

1. Circle the prepositions.
2. Circle the "is" forms ("to be" verbs [is, am, are, was, were]).
3. Ask, "Where's the action?" — "Who's kicking who?"
4. Put this "kicking" action in a simple active verb (not compound).
5. Start fast — no slow windups.
6. Write out each sentence on a blank screen or sheet of paper and mark off its basic rhythmic units with a "/".
7. Mark off sentence lengths in the passage with a big between sentences.
8. Read the passage aloud with emphasis and feeling.

### NOTES:

1. You don't have to eliminate all prepositional phrases, but eliminate those that clutter.
2. The passive voice is okay if your emphasis is on the object.
3. Short Sentences are most often used for emphasis and/or transitions.
4. Long sentences usually contain more complex thoughts.
5. Eliminate vague modifiers; make up for deletions with concrete words/specific details

## 12 Ways to Cut Clutter from Your Writing

**Clutter** is words, phrases, or sentences that take up space but do no needed work—they contribute little if anything to the message of the piece. It’s a common problem for anyone who writes but one that’s easily solved by learning to recognize twelve of the most common symptoms of **clutter**:

1. **Don’t draw excessive attention to the writer.** Using expressions like ...

“I saw... an old man in a tattered coat leaning into the wind”

Or, similarly, the following “lead ins” for such a sentence:

“I noticed...” “I spotted...” “I observed...” “I could see...”

...takes the reader’s attention away from what should be most important—the old man—and puts it on the narrator or the writer. When you say something about the old man, you imply that you “noticed,” “spotted,” “saw,” “observed,” or “could see” him since there’s no other way you could know those things about him. Since the “seeing” announcement is unnecessary, we can simply revise the **sentence** like this:

“An old man in a tattered coat leaned into the wind.”

2. **Don’t use verbs that require helping verbs, if a simpler form will do.**

Be especially suspicious of forms of “be” and “would” when they precede an action verb.

Instead of this	Write this
The cooks <i>were preparing</i> pea soup last night.	The cooks <i>prepared</i> pea soup last night.
Sara <i>would take</i> all the criticism.	Sara <i>took</i> all the criticism.
I will <i>have eaten</i> the chips before the game.	I will <i>eat</i> the chips before the game.
Jose <i>was slaughtering</i> the dragon.	Jose <i>slaughtered</i> the dragon.

3. **Never start an independent clause with the word “There.”**

When you do, you usually end up with a helping verb—most commonly a form of the verb “be”—immediately after the word “There.” As you know, action verbs are better and more visual, and the “there” construction is more wordy. Notice in the two following sentences how avoiding “there” makes the **sentence** both more concise and more active.

(a) There was a rhinoceros charging across the road.

(b) A rhinoceros charged across the road.

However, students usually don’t think about using an action verb (charged) instead of “there was” and so would probably write, “A rhinoceros was on the road.” Now compare this to **sentence** (b) above, and the improvement without the “there” is even more obvious. Remember: simply avoid “there,” especially when you’re inclined to start a **sentence** with it.

4. **Never start an independent clause with the word “It.”**

If you do, a helping verb or the weak verb “seems” usually follows “It.” Try to use action verbs or more concise ways of saying the same thing. Consider this example:

Instead of this	Write this
It was a cold night when the cows broke out.	<i>On</i> a cold night the cows broke out.

In this **sentence** one preposition can take the place of three words (“It,” “was,” and “when”).

Or consider this example:

Instead of this	Write this
It’s too bad they lost the game.	<i>Unfortunately</i> they lost the game.

Here, one word again replaces three (“It’s too bad”).

And remember, in order to make your writing vivid and memorable, you need to focus on what things are or what they’re doing rather than on how they seem:

Instead of this	Write this
It seemed that Grandma was prepared for the worst.	Grandma was prepared for the worst.

In this example the writer has two choices: either it’s obvious that Grandma was prepared, in which case the writer should have said what’s suggested above.

Or it’s not obvious that Grandma was prepared, in which case concrete details about Grandma’s preparedness should be included:

A stack of firewood stood in the corner, and jars of canned fruit, vegetables, and meat covered the pantry shelves.

5. **Don’t use two or more action verbs when only one is needed to make your meaning clear.**

Instead of this	Write this
Nate began to cry when his dog died.	Nate <u>cried</u> when his dog died.

The moment at which Nate *began* to cry is not all that important; as long as the reader understands he *was* crying, the reader will know that he began. Consequently, the writer could use just one action verb (cry) rather than two (began, cry).

We can use similar reasoning to revise the following sentences:

Instead of this	Write this
Mom started to holler after Gloria broke the vase.	Mom <u>hollered</u> after Gloria broke the vase.
With the wolf close on my heels, I continued running through the woods.	With the wolf close on my heels, I <u>ran</u> through the woods.

6. **Cut the adverb implied in the verb.**

Adverbs modify verbs, adjectives, and other adverbs—and usually end in –ly. (The word “usually” in the previous **sentence** is an adverb, describing the verb “end.”) Often students mistakenly assume that adverbs produce better description; however, notice in the following sentences how choosing a precise, active verb makes the adverb [in brackets] unnecessary:

She **sprinted** [rapidly] after the bus. (*Is there any other way to sprint?!*)

Grandpa **stumbled** [clumsily] over the cat. (*Stumbling usually is done clumsily.*)

With rain falling in sheets, the hobo **ambled** [slowly] down the railroad tracks. (*One almost never ambles quickly, or even at a normal gait.*)

Mary **cried** [sadly] because Bambi’s mother died. (*The circumstances make it clear that Mary was not crying happily.*)

7. **Use the short word rather than the long one when they mean the same thing.**

Instead of this	Write this
numerous	many
facilitate	ease
remainder	rest
initial	first
Sufficient	enough
Attempt	try

8. **Always be suspicious of “that.”**

Whenever you use the word “that,” try reading the **sentence** without it; if the **sentence** still makes sense, cut it.

Instead of this	Write this
He thought that he was late.	He thought he was late.
I’m certain that he went home	I’m certain he went home.

9. **Use the active voice rather than the passive.**

Whenever a verb shows the subject of the **sentence** *doing something*, the **sentence** is in the active voice:

Instead of this	Write this
The porch was swept by Kate.	Kate swept the porch.

Whenever the subject does not act but is *acted upon*, the **sentence** is in the passive voice:

Notice that in the active voice we can say exactly what we said in the passive voice without using either “was” or “by.”

10. **Don't use phrases that add words, but not increased meaning.**

instead of this	Write this
due to the fact that	because.
in the event that	if.
with the possible exception of	except.
at the present time	now.
the reason why he went to the store is because	he went to the store because.

11. **Avoid using qualifiers.**

Qualifiers are adverbs that make distinctions in quality, quantity, or degree. For example, in this **sentence**—He was very tired—“very” explains to what degree he was tired. However, the distinctions made by qualifiers are usually either (a) unimportant or (b) made by using a more precise word without the qualifier. If a is true for the above **sentence**, “He was very tired,” write this instead:

He was tired.

If *b* is true, write this:

He was exhausted.

Qualifiers like “rather,” “very,” “a little,” “pretty,” “somewhat,” “sort of,” etc., kind of try to make some rather pretty little and somewhat unimportant distinctions.

12. **State your opinions or beliefs directly, without labeling them as belonging to you.**

Since you are the writer and all other information or opinions from outside sources will be documented, it will be apparent that any opinions or beliefs you state *without* documentation do, in fact, belong to you. Therefore, don't write,

I think...

I feel... that automatic weapons should be outlawed.

I believe...

I realize...

Instead, be direct, and don't qualify your opinions:

Automatic weapons should be outlawed.

**VOICE:****The Action of the Verb with Respect to the Subject****Passive Voice Q & A:****Q: What is passive voice?**

A: Passive voice means the subject of the sentence is receiving the action rather than doing the action. To get technical, the direct object becomes the subject of the sentence. For example:

*The paper was written by Bob.*

This sentence is passive because the *paper* isn't doing anything even though it's the grammatical subject of the sentence. If you type that sentence into Word, it will be underlined because the program recognizes it as passive.

**Q: Why is passive voice "wrong"?**

A: While legal and scientific disciplines often require passive voice, overuse robs writing of energy and flow. Also, passive voice can lead to dangling modifiers—that is, the passive voice itself might not be "wrong," but may make it easier to commit other types of errors.

**Q: How do I recognize passive voice?**

A: Sentences with passive voice don't just contain one verb; there will **always** be a form of the verb *be* + a past participle (*-en* or *-ed*) verb. For example, *was* + *written* in the sentence above.

Many times, the word *by* is a clue. It isn't always there, for example:

*The paper was written.*

This sentence is still passive even though the sentence doesn't tell us *by whom* the paper was written.

**Q: How do I change passive voice to active voice?**

A: To make a passive sentence active, follow these steps:

1. Ask yourself *who* is doing the action.
2. Make that the subject of the sentence.
3. Take out the form of *be* and change the main verb to past tense (*-ed*).
4. Say *what* the subject did (direct object).

In the example above, Bob wrote the paper, so we make him the subject. Then we take out *was*, change *written* to *wrote*, and say *what* he wrote:

*Bob wrote the paper.*

**Q: Is it ever okay to use passive voice?**

A: Sure, but you have to know *why* you're using it.

You might choose to use passive voice if the *doer* is unknown or unimportant. For example, writing "A study was conducted" is okay if it doesn't matter *who* conducted it. If the *doer* is important or relevant, however, it's better to make that *doer* the subject and say "The FBI conducted a study" rather than "A study was conducted by the FBI."