

WHAT I WAS TRYING TO SAY WAS. . .

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On Wordiness, Flow (SVO), Conciseness, Succinctness, Specifics, Unclearness, and other vague and unspecific phrases used by composition teachers.

The following sentence is not a run-on but has terrible flow, empty words, redundancy, and lack of a clear, significant meaning.

**What he was trying to explain was that there are many things we do that are common every day things that everyone should know.**

Let's start with Wordiness, by eliminating a few unnecessary words. If we eliminate **what**, then one of the **was** also falls out. This is better.

**He was trying to explain that there are many things we do that are common every day things that everyone should know.**

Use the present tense: Whether or not the author referred to is still alive, it is more appropriate to refer to an author's writings in the present tense. This way we can replace the rather dull "was trying to explain" phrase. How do we do that? By using an *active* verb, instead of 'was'. We should also insert the author's name.

**Hirsch claims that there are many things we do that are common every day things that everyone should know.**

Ok, it's getting better; but there is more we can do. Let's work on the second part of the sentence: 'there are many **things** we do that are common every day **things** that everyone should know.'

Here we can reduce repetition (things) and replace unspecific words (again, 'things') with specific ones. Since "things that we do" is awkward and simply means "actions"--

**there are many actions that are common every day things that everyone should know.**

But now "actions that are common every day things" doesn't make sense, because actions are not things. What should we do? Maybe the writer means this:

**there are many common every day things that everyone should know.**

Redundancy: Notice that **common** and **everyday** are virtually synonymous, hence redundant.

Eliminate "everyday" because it is less formal, and "common" is more precise. Thus:

**there are many common things that everyone should know.**

Specify vague words: What things? Forks, toilets, trees? Specifying words like "things" and "stuff" produces more clarity. We aren't exactly sure what "things" refers to, but I happen to know, from the context, that the author, Hirsch, is talking about common knowledge. So:

**there is much common knowledge that everyone should know.**

Notice we had to change the verb and adjective to agree with the (mass) noun replacing "things."

For several reasons, this sentence is still strange. The next thing to do is get rid of **there is**, which is an empty or "dummy" verb phrase. So,

**there is much common knowledge that everyone should know.**

becomes

**common knowledge should be known by everyone.**

Notice that eliminating the dummy phrase forces us into a passive construction. But we can fix that, too:

**Everyone should know common knowledge.**

We now have a stylistically clear sentence—which doesn't seem to *mean* anything. What does it mean to say that everyone should know common knowledge? Part of the problem is that “**know common knowledge**” doesn't make much sense. Another problem is that “**everyone**” is actually very unspecific. A big problem is the semantic ambiguity of **should**. Does “should” mean that everyone *ought* to know this common knowledge, or, does it mean that everyone *probably* knows? And how do we know which is meant? We would have to consult the context. If we have read Hirsch, we know that he thinks that for a culture to thrive it needs to share a core base of “common knowledge.” And since we do not *have* such a core base, we *ought* to have it.

**Hirsch claims that**

**a culture ought to share a core base of common knowledge.**

Notice what happened here. We got rid of the vague “everyone,” and we got rid of the strange redundancy of saying “know common knowledge,” and we clarified the meaning of should.

Thus, the semantic uncertainties and ambiguities have been cleared up. We can go one step further, by recognizing that “share a core base” and “common” mean roughly the same thing, so:

**Hirsch claims that a culture ought to share a core base of knowledge.**

Now, why does this sentence *flow* better than any other? The answer is not simply because the semantics are more clear, but because it follows the normal syntactic order of English sentences: Subject, Verb, Object (SVO). It flows because when a sentence follows the normal pattern of English, it is easier to comprehend. You don't have to do perform mental gymnastics to understand it. Go back and read the original sentence.

Wait! There is more. The key word is ELABORATE:

Hirsch claims that, for a culture to thrive, it must share a core base of knowledge. This core base enables us to communicate more efficiently. The more knowledge we share the better we understand each other. Therefore, schools must teach this core base of knowledge. The problem, however, is how to decide what this core base should consist of.