Style Tips: Words to Avoid

■ **"THINGS" and "STUFF"**

VAGUE: Unemployment <u>does terrible things</u> to the economy. (WHAT things?)
SPECIFIC: Unemployment <u>can cause an economic downward spiral: unemployed people have less buying power, and when sales of goods and services decrease, fewer employees are needed and more people can be laid off</u>.

■ **OTHER VAGUE LANGUAGE**

VAGUE: The film <u>has many strengths</u>.
SPECIFIC: <u>The film showcases engaging characters, elaborate sets, and compelling cinematography</u>.

VAGUE: <u>A lot of people</u> gathered to search for the missing girl.
SPECIFIC: <u>More than a hundred people</u> gathered to search for the missing girl.

■ **"ALL OR NOTHING" WORDS ("hyperbole")**
(always, never, everywhere, nowhere, everything, everyone, nothing, etc.) Avoid using absolutes or extremes—also known as "hyperboles"-- because they are usually untrue..

HYPERBOLE: <u>Everyone</u> loves pizza. (Not true—exaggeration)
BETTER: Pizza is a popular dish.

■ **PERSONAL JUDGEMENT WORDS**
(good, better, best, great, wonderful, bad, worse, worst, terrible, etc.) These words are vague and depend on your personal taste, which your reader might not know.

VAGUE: *The Sixth Sense* is <u>a great movie</u>.
MORE PRECISE: *The Sixth Sense* is a <u>pulsating thriller with vivid characters</u>.

■ **UNNECESSARY INTENSIFIERS (very, really, truly, etc.)**

REDUNDANT: The film is <u>really</u> slowly paced..
CORRECTED: The film is slowly paced.

■ **REDUNDANCY AND OBVIOUS LANGUAGE**

REDUNDANT: <u>Today,</u> people <u>in contemporary society</u> seem to be in love with gadgets.
CORRECTED: People seem to be in love with gadgets.

■ **BLAND ACTION WORDS**
(do, did, have done, go, went, have gone, put, have put, etc.) Use vivid action words.

BLAND: The painting <u>has</u> three colors.   VIVID: The painting <u>features</u> three colors.
BLAND: Ella <u>put</u> her clothes in the closet.   VIVID: Ella <u>hung</u> her clothes in the closet.
BLAND: The man <u>went</u> to the store.   VIVID: The man <u>drove</u> to the store.

■ **SLANG**
Use language that is appropriate for your audience and goals. In many writing modes, standard English is required, so you should know how to avoid slang when necessary.

SLANG: The accused embezzler says he <u>hung out</u> with a notorious gang.
STANDARD: The accused embezzler <u>claims ties</u> to a notorious gang.

■ **CLICHÉS**
Clichés are vague and tired language.

CLICHÉ: She was <u>pretty as a picture</u>.
UNIQUE: Her eyes were <u>like two deep rivers</u>.

■ **THERE ARE / IT IS** (and any variations in tenses)
Stop yourself if you begin to use these phrases unthinkingly, especially at the beginnings of sentences. They are boring, bland and lazy. Instead, begin the sentence with a different word.

LAZY: <u>There are</u> twelve pine trees on the avenue.
CORRECTED: <u>Twelve pines flank</u> the avenue.

LAZY: <u>It is</u> always an adventure to drive to the beach.
CORRECTED: <u>Driving</u> to the beach is always an adventure.

■ **WORDINESS**

WORDY: Paul <u>gets a lot of things done in a short period of time</u>.
CONCISE: Paul <u>is efficient</u>.

■ **PASSIVE VOICE: To use or not to use?**

We usually avoid passive voice in writing because it's more vivid to have the subject commit the action.

WEAK: The BabyWave infant monitor <u>was purchased by</u> thousands of mothers.
STRONG: <u>Thousands of mothers purchased</u> the BabyWave infant monitor.

■ **SPLIT INFINITIVES**

It's advisable to keep infinitives (to+verb) together, rather than inserting words in between. "To boldly go'" is a common example of a split infinitive from Star Trek. It's more correct to say "to go boldly" or "boldly to go," depending on the context.

■ **OVERNOMINALIZATION**

Repeating sentences that begin with subject/verb (also known as nominative case) can be monotonous. Vary your sentence structures instead. For example, you might join sentences or begin some with descriptive phrases/clauses.

OVERNOMINALIZATION: The <u>baby cries</u>. The <u>mother tries</u> to console him. The <u>grandmother falls</u> and breaks her hip.

VARIED SENTENCE STRUCTURES: As the mother tries to console her crying baby, the grandmother falls and breaks her hip.

■ **USE OF "I" AND "I THINK"**

Traditional essay style avoids first person and adheres to third person point of view. However, when the author is an important subject in the story, and when the assignment allows it, first person can be effective (for example, in a travelogue). Even so, only use "I" when it's meaningful to insert yourself (e.g., when you're telling a personal story). It's usually poor form to use "I think . . . " in an essay. Similarly, second person ("you") is usually inappropriate.

POOR FORM: <u>I think John Smith is</u> the most knowledgeable Republican candidate.
IMPROVED: <u>John Smith seems to be</u> the most knowledgeable Republican candidate.

ALL HANDOUTS:

<u>Worksheet</u> (Grammar & Style)

Millennial Speak (making corrections) 🔽 PDF

Juliet's Style Tips ("Words to Avoid") 🔽 PDF | ▶ Videos

Juliet's Grammar Tips 🔽 PDF | ▶ Videos

OPTIONAL: Juliet's Proofreading Marks: 🔽 PDF | ▶ Video