

Rubric Category	Language and Syntax
Grade/Score	Grade 6-12 / Scores 3 and 4
CCSS Writing Standards	L3, L5, L6
Argument Type	All arguments

Avoiding Overwriting

Students will work on avoiding overwriting to craft well-written and effective work.

Understanding the Expectations

As a writer, you must seek the balance between using elevated language without becoming overly complex, confusing, or muddled. In your evolution as a writer, you will discover that less is often more. An example from one university's writing website illustrates this idea with two sentences:

"A sentence, overly and perhaps overtly complexified, turgid with rarified language, gains the semblance of scholarship though it may indeed lack the capacity to communicate its import to any but a reader utterly dedicated in his attentions."¹

Confused? Let's put that sentence in other words:

"A complex sentence may seem scholarly but confuse casual readers."

¹ This example is borrowed from the website for Case Western Reserve University's Writing Guide.

In each of the quotes below, a famous author shares a thought about writing and word choice. Choose at least one of the quotes below, and in your literacy notebook, take five minutes to reflect on the quote in freewriting. You might explore what you believe the author is saying, think of examples, share your reactions, or respond in other ways as you write.

“The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter—’tis the difference between the lightning-bug and the lightning.” - Mark Twain

“The chief virtue that language can have is cleverness, and nothing detracts from it so much as the use of unfamiliar words.”- Hippocrates

“I believe more in the scissors than I do the pencil.” - Truman Capote

Share your thoughts with a partner or with the class, as appropriate. What are the authors’ points about writing?

Working with a partner, take 2-3 minutes to brainstorm a list of tips that writers may use to improve their writing by simplifying or “cleaning up” their prose.

Some questions to keep in mind are:

- What types of words are unnecessary?
- How do you make your writing vigorous?
- When is it appropriate to use uncommon language that the reader might not be familiar with?

Share your findings with the class.

Some possible conclusions are:

- Use concrete language that is comfortable for you.
- Avoid cluttered or overly ornate language.
- Omit unnecessary words such as qualifiers (very, really, extremely).
- Keep sentences in positive form; negations typically add unnecessary words.

- Use active voice.
- Never use two words when you can use one; never use a phrase when you can use a single well-chosen word.

Trying It Out

1. Using the list of writing tips compiled by your class, select a paragraph for revision from a work in progress.
2. Underline sentences, phrases, or words that might be either too wordy, overly complex, or too “thesaurus-y” for the writing.
3. Revise and rewrite the passages you marked. Sometimes this work might be as simple as removing unnecessary words or breaking a complex sentence into two simpler sentences. Other times, you may need to consider how you are explaining the idea to the reader.
4. Share with a partner. Exchange feedback.
5. What tips did you use? How is your writing different?

Writing It Up

If you are writing your rough draft or brainstorming still, try to be aware of keeping your prose clean and to the point. Are you using active voice and avoiding negations? If you are revising, work through one paragraph at a time to omit extra words and run-ons. Are there any sentences that are so long that you lose track of their meaning? Any negations or passive voice? Continue to create a mindfulness of these principles to develop a cleaner writing style.