

Drastic Revision May Be Needed

The main purpose of the first draft of a manuscript is to expand the outline into sentences and paragraphs. First drafts are often called “rough drafts.” They are rough because authors should not be concerned about writing good sentences at the first draft stage. Subsequent revision will make the sentences readable.



Lack of concern for good sentence structure is appropriate in the first draft. However, authors should be aware of a problem that this approach can cause. When revising a sentence, we tend to retain its basic structure. If the original sentence was awkward, the revised version may be improved, but still awkward. It may have to be completely restructured.

Following are examples of poor sentences that can be improved by revising within the original structure, but are much better when drastically restructured.

Original: The first step consisted of looking for methods by which the losses that occurred in yield of the crop might be eliminated. (22 words)

Improved without changing basic structure: The first step consisted of looking for methods of eliminating the losses in yield of the crop. (17 words)

Greatly improved by restructuring: Seeking methods of eliminating losses in crop yield was the first step. (12 words)

Original: It should be expected that, in repetitions of the same treatments in a series of experiments, variations in results from one experiment to the next would occur. (27 words)

Improved without changing basic structure: It should be expected that, when repeating the same treatments in a series of experiments, results would vary from one experiment to the next. (24 words)

Further improved by partial restructuring: Results among experiments can be expected to vary when the same treatments are repeated in a series of experiments. (19 words)

Greatly improved by drastic restructuring: Results may vary when treatments are repeated in a series of experiments. (12 words)

Any hard-to-read sentence that is long and complex should be examined for the possibility of improvement by drastic revision. This approach is appropriate, whether revising one’s own rough draft, or when reviewing another persons’s manuscript.

Remember:

A sentence, when first it is written,
may be cumbersome, awkward, and long.
Such a sentence, with drastic revision,
can become clear, concise, and strong.

J. H. Dawson,
Weed Scientist, Prosser, WA 99350