

and changing into yang and vice versa." How can we translate this ~~abstract~~ idea into ~~daily~~ practice?

—from Deborah Tannen, *The Argument Culture*

A Particular Kind of Redundancy: Metadiscourse

Lesson 4 described METADISOURSE as language that refers to the following:

- the writer's intentions: *to sum up, candidly, I believe*
- directions to the reader: *note that, consider now, as you see*
- the structure of the text: *first, second, finally, therefore, however*

Everything you write needs metadiscourse, but too much buries your ideas:

The last point I would like to make is that in regard to men-women relationships, it is important to keep in mind that the greatest changes have occurred in how they work together.

Only nine of those thirty-four words address men-women relationships:

men-women relationships . . . greatest changes . . . how they work together.

The rest is metadiscourse:

The last point I would like to make is that in regard to . . . it is important to keep in mind that . . .

When we prune the metadiscourse, we tighten the sentence:

The greatest changes in men-women relationships have occurred in how they work together.

Now that we see what the sentence says, we can make it still more direct:

- ✓ Men and women have changed their relationships most in how they work together.

Some teachers and editors urge us to cut all metadiscourse, but everything we write needs some. You have to read with an eye to how good writers in your field use it, then do likewise.

There are, however, some types that you can usually cut.

Metadiscourse That Attributes Your Ideas to a Source Don't announce that something has been *observed, noticed, noted*, and so on; just state the fact:

High divorce rates **have been observed** to occur in areas that **have been determined to have** low population density.

- ✓ High divorce rates occur in areas with low population density.

Metadiscourse That Announces Your Topic The boldface phrases tell your reader what your sentence is "about":

This section introduces another problem, that of noise pollution. **The first thing to say about it is** that noise pollution exists not only . . .

Readers catch the topic more easily if you reduce the metadiscourse:

- ✓ **Another** problem is noise pollution. **First**, it exists not only . . .

Two other constructions call attention to a topic, usually mentioned at least once in the text previous to it:

In regard to a vigorous style, the most important feature is a short, concrete subject followed by a forceful verb.

So far as China's industrial development **is concerned**, it will take only a few years to equal that of Japan.

But you can usually work those topics into a subject:

- ✓ **The most important feature of a vigorous style** is a short, concrete subject followed by a forceful verb.
- ✓ **China** will take only a few years to equal Japan's industrial development.

Look hard at a sentence opening with a metadiscourse subject and verb that merely announce a topic:

In this essay, **I will discuss** the role of metaphor in style.

I write that kind of sentence when I have no idea where I am going, saying in effect, *I have this topic and hope I eventually think of something to say about it*. On the other hand, that kind of sentence in a professional journal promises to develop what it names.

Metadiscourse That Hedges and Intensifies Another kind of metadiscourse reflects the writer's certainty about what she is claiming. This kind of metadiscourse comes in two flavors, *hedges* and *intensifiers*. Hedges qualify your certainty; intensifiers increase it. Both can not only be redundant, but influence how readers judge your character, because they signal how well you balance caution and confidence.

Hedges These are common hedges:

Adverbs	<i>usually, often, sometimes, almost, virtually, possibly, allegedly, arguably, perhaps, apparently, in some ways, to a certain extent, somewhat, in some/certain respects</i>
Adjectives	<i>most, many, some, a certain number of</i>
Verbs	<i>may, might, can, could, seem, tend, appear, suggest, indicate</i>

Some readers think all hedging is not just redundant, but mealy-mouthed. This is:

There **seems to be some** evidence to **suggest** that **certain** differences between Japanese and Western rhetoric **could** derive from historical influences **possibly** traceable to Japan's cultural isolation and Europe's history of cross-cultural contacts.

On the other hand, only a fool or someone with massive historical evidence would make an assertion as flatly certain as this:

This evidence **proves** that Japanese and Western rhetorics differ because of Japan's cultural isolation and Europe's history of cross-cultural contacts.

In most academic writing, we more often state claims closer to this (and look at that for my own hedging; compare the more assertive, *In academic writing, we state claims like this*):

- ✓ This evidence **suggests** that **aspects** of Japanese and Western rhetoric differ because of Japan's cultural isolation and Europe's history of cross-cultural contacts.

The verbs *suggest* and *indicate* let you state a claim about which you are less than 100 percent certain, but confident enough to propose:

- ✓ The evidence **indicates** that some of these questions remain unresolved.
- ✓ These data **suggest** that further studies are necessary.

Even confident scientists hedge. This next paragraph introduced the most significant breakthrough in the history of genetics, the discovery of the double helix of DNA. If anyone was entitled to be assertive, it was Crick and Watson. But they chose to be diffident (note, too, the first person *we*; hedges are boldfaced):

We **wish to suggest a** [not *the*] structure for the salt of deoxyribose nucleic acid (D.N.A.) . . . A structure for nucleic acid has already been proposed by Pauling and Corey . . . **In our opinion**, this structure is unsatisfactory for two reasons: (1) **We believe** that the material which gives the X-ray diagrams is the salt, not the free acid . . . (2) **Some** of the van der Waals distances **appear** to be too small.

—J. D. Watson and F. H. C. Crick,
"Molecular Structure of Nucleic Acids"

Without the hedges, their claim would be more concise but more aggressive. Compare this (I boldface my stronger words, but most of the more aggressive tone comes from the *absence* of hedges):

We ~~wish to suggest~~ **state here a the** structure for the salt of deoxyribose nucleic acid (D.N.A.) . . . A structure for nucleic acid has already been proposed by Pauling and Corey . . . ~~In our opinion~~, [T]his structure is unsatisfactory for two reasons: (1) ~~We believe that~~ [T]he material which gives the X-ray diagrams is the salt, not the free acid . . . (2) ~~Some of~~ [T]he van der Waals distances ~~appear to be~~ **are** too small.

Intensifiers These are common intensifiers:

- | | |
|-------------------|--|
| Adverbs | <i>very, pretty, quite, rather, clearly, obviously, undoubtedly, certainly, of course, indeed, inevitably, invariably, always, literally</i> |
| Adjectives | <i>key, central, crucial, basic, fundamental, major, principal, essential</i> |
| Verbs | <i>show, prove, establish, as you/we/everyone knows/can see, it is clear/obvious that</i> |

The most common intensifier is the absence of a hedge. In this case, less is more. The first sentence below has no intensifiers at the blanks, but neither does it have any hedges, and so it seems like a strong claim:

_____ Americans believe that the federal government is
_____ intrusive and _____ authoritarian.

- ✓ **Many** Americans believe that the federal government is **often** intrusive and **increasingly** authoritarian.

Confident writers use intensifiers less often than they use hedges because they want to avoid sounding as assertive as this:

For a century now, **all** liberals have argued against **any** censorship of art, and **every** court has found their arguments so **completely** persuasive that **not** a person **any** longer remembers how they were countered. As a result, today, censorship is **totally** a thing of the past.

Some writers think that kind of aggressive style is persuasive. Quite the opposite: If you state a claim moderately, readers are more likely to consider it thoughtfully:

For **about** a century now, **many** liberals have argued against censorship of art, and **most** courts have found their arguments persuasive **enough** that **few** people **may** remember **exactly** how they were countered. As a result, today, censorship is **virtually** a thing of the past.

Some claim that a passage hedged that much is wordy and weak. Perhaps. But it does not come on like a bulldozer. It leaves room for a reasoned and equally moderate response.

QUICK TIP: When most readers read a sentence that begins with something like *obviously, undoubtedly, it is clear that, there is no question that*, and so on, they reflexively think the opposite.

Here's the point: You need some metadiscourse in everything you write, especially metadiscourse that guides readers through your text, words such as *first, second, therefore, on the other hand*, and so on. You also need some metadiscourse that hedges your certainty, words such as *perhaps, seems, could*, and so on. The risk is in using too many.

Exercise 7.3

Here are sentences that announce a topic rather than state a thesis. Delete the metadiscourse and rewrite what remains. Then decide whether the full statement makes a claim that readers would want to read about. For example:

In this study, I examine the history of Congressional legislation regarding the protection of children in the workplace.

First, delete the metadiscourse:

. . . the history of Congressional legislation regarding the protection of children in the workplace.

Then rewrite what is left into a full sentence:

✓ Congress has legislated the protection of children in the workplace.

That appears to be a self-evident, uninteresting claim.

1. This essay will survey research in schemata theory as applied to the pedagogy of mathematical problem solving.
2. I will analyze Frost's use of imagery of seasons in his longer poems published at the end of his career.
3. The methodological differences between English and American histories of the War of 1812 resulting in radically differing interpretations of the cause of the conflict are the topic of this study.
4. In this essay, I analyze the mistaken assumption underlying Freud's interpretation of dreams.
5. We will consider scientific thinking and its historical roots in connection with the influence of Egypt on Greek thought.
6. This article discusses needle sharing among drug users.
7. The relationship between birth order and academic success will be explored.
8. I intend to address the problem of the reasons for the failure and success of trade embargoes in this century.

Exercise 7.4

Edit these for both unnecessary metadiscourse and redundancy.

1. But on the other hand, we can perhaps point out that there may always be TV programming to appeal to our most prurient and, therefore, lowest interests.

2. In this particular section, I intend to discuss my position about the possible need to dispense with the standard approach to plea bargaining. I believe this for two reasons. The first reason is that there is the possibility of letting hardened criminals avoid receiving their just punishment. The second reason is the following: plea bargaining seems to encourage a growing lack of respect for the judicial system.
3. Turning now to the next question, there is in regard to wilderness area preservation activities one basic principle when attempting to formulate a way of approaching decisions about unspoiled areas to be set aside as not open to development for commercial exploitation.
4. It is my belief that in regard to terrestrial-type snakes, an assumption can be made that there are probably none in unmapped areas of the world surpassing the size of those we already have knowledge of.
5. Depending on the particular position that one takes on this question, the educational system has taken on a degree of importance that may be equal to or perhaps even exceed the family as a major source of transmission of social values.

Productive Redundancy

Learning by Writing Some teachers think any redundancy signals mental laziness. But we almost inevitably fall into redundancy when we write about a subject that we are just learning. We signal membership in a community by what we say and how we say it, but a surer sign is knowing what to leave unsaid—our community's common knowledge. Unfortunately, learning what not to say takes time.

Here, for example, is a paragraph by a good undergraduate writer (I checked). But he was writing his first paper in a new community, law school:

It is my opinion that the ruling of the lower court concerning the case of *Haslem v. Lockwood* should be upheld, thereby denying the appeal of the plaintiff. The main point supporting my point of view on this case concerns the tenet of our court system which holds that in order to win his case, the plaintiff must prove that he was somehow wronged by the defendant. The burden of proof rests on the plaintiff. He must show enough evidence to convince the court that he is in the right.

To his legal writing teacher, everything after the first comma was redundant: It is a given that if a court upholds a ruling, it denies the appeal; that the plaintiff can win only if he proves a defendant has wronged him; that the plaintiff has the burden of proof; that the plaintiff has to provide evidence. But at this early stage in his career, this writer was an outsider learning his community's obvious knowledge, and so could not resist rehearsing it.

Metadiscourse about Thinking Just as “belaboring the obvious” signals a writer new to a field, so does using metadiscourse to narrate one’s thinking. When we are comfortable thinking through familiar problems, we don’t have to narrate how we do it. But when we are inexperienced, we often feel compelled to tell a story about what we thought and did.

Look again at that paragraph by the first-year law student. Not only did he belabor the obvious, he recorded some of his thinking. I boldface metadiscourse and italicize the self-evident:

It is my opinion that *the ruling of the lower court concerning the case of Haslem v. Lockwood should be upheld, thereby denying the appeal of the plaintiff.* **The main point supporting my point of view on this case concerns** *the tenet of our court system which holds that in order to win his case, the plaintiff must prove that he was somehow wronged by the defendant. The burden of proof rests on the plaintiff. He must show enough evidence to convince the court that he is in the right.*

When we delete the narrative and the obvious, we are left with something leaner:

Haslem should be affirmed, because plaintiff failed his burden of proof.

QUICK TIP: Once you have drafted a paper, read it once simply to see whether you have organized it as a narrative of your thinking. Most readers aren’t interested in how you thought through an issue; they want to see the results of your having done it.

Concise, Not Terse

Having stressed concision so strongly, I must now step back. Readers don’t like flab, but neither do they like a style so terse that it’s all