

How to Tighten Sentences Without Losing Your Voice

Problem: Your main character's superpower is creating a fortress of lengthy sentences. Connecting ideas with words like so, and, for, of, and but are this character's trademark. It's your favorite character, too, with a voice that holds tension in a flurry of thoughts. However, this character could slow readers down. How do you cut excess words, without cutting the tension? Without ruining your character's voice?

A program like ProWritingAid can help you determine which words to cut and which ones to save, for your character's sake. Running an "improve document" report shows you which sentences would slow readers down. Then, you can decide what you want to cut to maintain the voice or mood you're after.

In fact, you can request a free trial of ProWritingAid, by clicking on this link here: <https://prowritingaid.com/en/App/RequestTrial> The free trial allows you to run a report on a document of 500 words. As you read the sections below, you could try uploading examples given later on in this article, in one document, to ProWritingAid to see how it works.

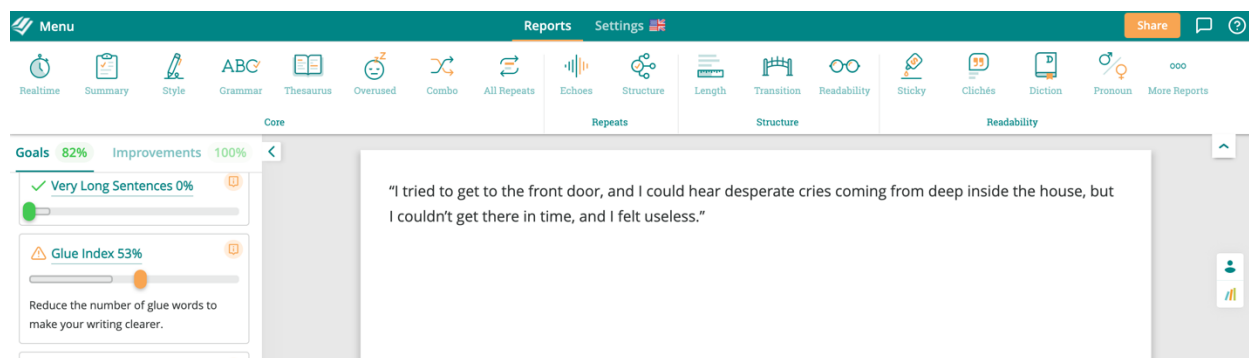
Sticky Sentences: What Are They? How Do They Slow Readers Down?

Sticky sentences have too much glue. "Glue" in a sentence includes words like so, and, for, the, of, and but. They're often the most used words in the English language.

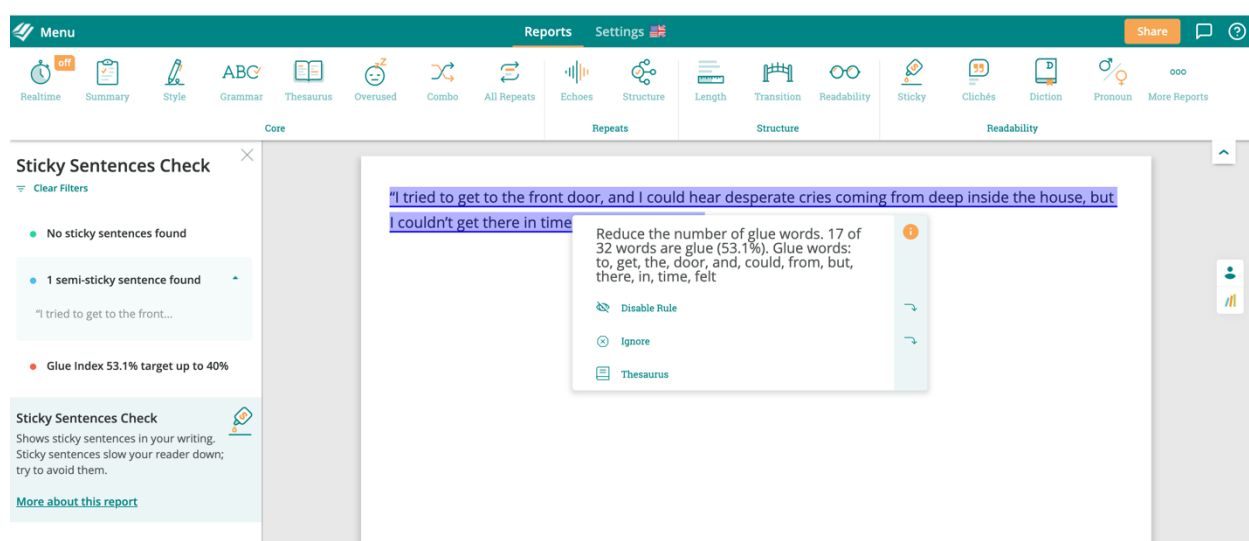
- If you use too many of them, your reader gets stuck.
- Eliminating glue words, where possible, is a flash fiction writer's best strategy for getting that word count down and driving the action forward.

Perhaps the character you've created sounds like this during an intense moment: "I tried to get to the front door, and I could hear desperate cries coming from deep inside the house, but I couldn't get there in time, and I felt useless.

The breathless nature of this sentence communicates suspense. However, there are seventeen "glue" words in here that detract from stronger images and verbs. If you run a report on ProWritingAid, you can see that this sentence is flagged as a "sticky sentence:"



If you click on the “Glue Index” report on the left, ProWritingAid will give you examples of glue words to eliminate, as indicated in this screenshot below:



Weaker words, such as to, get, the, door, and, could, from, but, there, in, time, and felt, take away from stronger word choices. Revising the sentence to reduce the amount of glue words allows strong word choices to define the character’s voice instead.

Possible Revision: Desperate cries rang out from deep inside the house. I felt useless, unable to reach the front door.

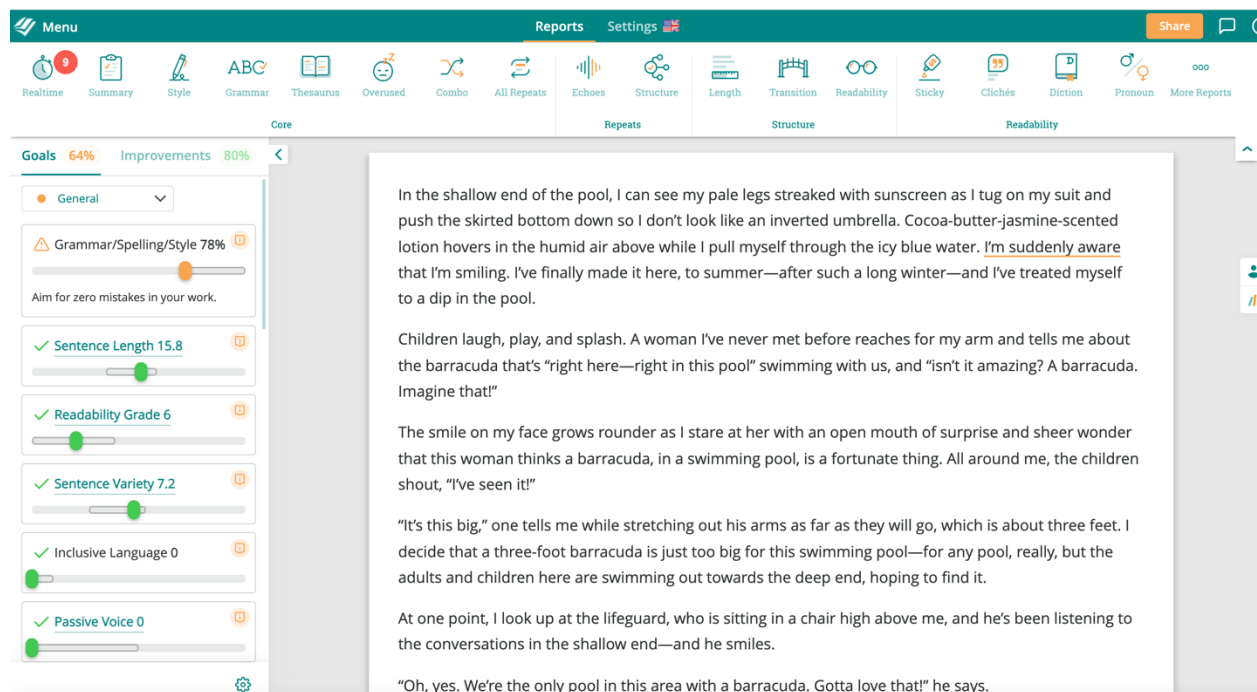
Though the revision breaks the sentence in two, some of the glue words disappear. Here, there are four or five, instead of thirteen instances of glue words. Breaking the sentence in two also helps with rhythm and comprehension. The reader sees the desperate cries first, then the house, then the character, who recounts the memory. The “desperate cries” ring out in a longer breath. The second sentence sets up a shorter, more staccato rhythm that communicates the ineffective results. That sense of urgency and uselessness isn’t exactly lost.

How to Identify Sticky Sentences in a Draft

Once you've drafted your story, you could upload it to a program like ProWritingAid and hit the "Improve Document" option. On the left-hand side of the screen, you'll see various scores for grammar, sentence length, dialogue tags, and more.

Below, you will see screenshots of scores for "Barracuda in the Pool," (<https://flashfictionmagazine.com/blog/2019/08/05/the-barracuda-in-the-pool/>) a *Flash Fiction Magazine* story I wrote, which ran in 2019 before I became a staff member of this magazine. I'm still happy with this story, but I think it doesn't hurt to explore other tools for revision I didn't know existed when I first wrote and submitted.

Screenshot 1: The report below indicates that grammar/spelling/style can be improved. The bulk of this score for this story identifies passive voice and wordiness, as well as "style." Here, the character created is anxious, so the "style" allows for some breathless sentences connected with glue words. Searching through the reports and scores a little more can help authors pinpoint when to tighten sentences and when to leave characters alone.



Screenshot 2: The scores indicate that "The Barracuda in the Pool" uses conjunctions to start sentences:

"So maybe that was my one brush with death—and I'd lived."

For formal essays and reports, writers are discouraged from using conjunctions to begin a sentence, but characters might use this technique in dialogue to reflect the ways in which people speak. An author might not choose to address this issue. Instead, the "Glue Index" score may be worth exploring.

Clicking on the “Glue Index” report reveals several sentences that are “sticky.” An author might ask: Are there any sentences that could be tightened to help readers and preserve my character’s voice? Are there sentences I want to leave alone?

The screenshot displays the Hemingway Editor interface. The top navigation bar includes 'Menu', 'Reports', and 'Settings'. Below this is a toolbar with various icons for editing and analysis. The main workspace is divided into three sections: 'Core', 'Repeats', and 'Readability'. The 'Core' section on the left shows a 'Goals' bar at 64% and 'Improvements' at 80%. Below this are several metrics: 'Conjunction Starts 9%' (with a slider), 'Slow Pacing 0%', 'Very Long Sentences 1%', 'Glue Index 46%' (with a slider and a note to 'Reduce the number of glue words to make your writing clearer.'), and 'Emotion Tells 0%'. The 'Repeats' section in the middle shows a list of sentences with some underlined in blue. The 'Readability' section on the right shows a list of sentences with some underlined in blue. The 'Glue Index' report is currently selected, showing a list of sentences with some underlined in blue. The sentences are: 'In the shallow end of the pool, I can see my pale legs streaked with sunscreen as I tug on my suit and push the skirted bottom down so I don't look like an inverted umbrella. Cocoa-butter-jasmine-scented lotion hovers in the humid air above while I pull myself through the icy blue water. I'm suddenly aware that I'm smiling. I've finally made it here, to summer—after such a long winter—and I've treated myself to a dip in the pool.', 'Children laugh, play, and splash. A woman I've never met before reaches for my arm and tells me about the barracuda that's "right here—right in this pool" swimming with us, and "Isn't it amazing? A barracuda. Imagine that!"', 'The smile on my face grows rounder as I stare at her with an open mouth of surprise and sheer wonder that this woman thinks a barracuda, in a swimming pool, is a fortunate thing. All around me, the children shout, "I've seen it!"', '“It's this big,” one tells me while stretching out his arms as far as they will go, which is about three feet. I decide that a three-foot barracuda is just too big for this swimming pool—for any pool, really, but the adults and children here are swimming out towards the deep end, hoping to find it.', 'At one point, I look up at the lifeguard, who is sitting in a chair high above me, and he's been listening to the conversations in the shallow end—and he smiles.', and '“Oh, yes. We're the only pool in this area with a barracuda. Gotta love that!” he says.'

Screenshot 3: (Sticky sentences are underlined in blue.)

Children laugh, play, and splash. A woman I've never met before reaches for my arm and tells me about the barracuda that's "right here—right in this pool" swimming with us, and "isn't it amazing? A barracuda. Imagine that!"

The smile on my face grows rounder as I stare at her with an open mouth of surprise and sheer wonder that this woman thinks a barracuda, in a swimming pool, is a fortunate thing. All around me, the children shout, "I've seen it!"

"It's this big," one tells me while stretching out his arms as far as they will go, which is about three feet. I decide that a three-foot barracuda is just too big for this swimming pool—for any pool, really, but the adults and children here are swimming out towards the deep end, hoping to find it.

At one point, I look up at the lifeguard, who is sitting in a chair high above me, and he's been listening to the conversations in the shallow end—and he smiles.

"Oh, yes. We're the only pool in this area with a barracuda. Gotta love that!" he says.

I don't respond. I just stand there with my mouth still hanging open, so he continues.

"They don't hurt you. People really aren't on the menu. They swim fast—that's their defense. You couldn't even catch it if you wanted to."

But I really want to know what it's doing in chlorinated water and how it's surviving—and if it's even legal to keep a barracuda in a community swimming pool, but the people around me are so incredibly happy that I just don't have the heart to ruin everything, so I try to relax and swim.

How to Fix Sticky Sentences

The screenshot below identifies the first sticky sentence that ProWritingAid found in the Glue Index report:

A woman I've never met before reaches for my arm and tells me about the barracuda that's "right here—right in this pool" swimming with us, and "isn't it amazing?"

If you've downloaded the free version of ProWritingAid, try typing the sentence above into the document space. If you are able to run an "Improve Documents" report, you could scroll down to the "Glue Index" report, which would underline, in blue, the sticky sentence. If you hover over the underlined portion, a message shows up, as in this screenshot below:

Screenshot 4:

In the shallow end of the pool, I can see my pale legs streaked with sunscreen as I tug on my suit and push the skirted bottom down so I don't look like an inverted umbrella. Cocoa-butter-jasmine-scented lotion hovers in the humid air above while I pull myself through the icy blue water. I'm suddenly aware that I'm smiling. I've finally made it here, to summer—after such a long winter—and I've treated myself to a dip in the pool.

Children laugh, play, and splash. A woman I've never met before reaches for my arm and tells me about the barracuda that's "right here—right in this pool" swimming with us, and "isn't it amazing?" A barracuda. Imagine that!"

The smile on my face grows rounder as I stare at her with an open mouth of surprise and sheer wonder that this woman thinks a barracuda, in a swimming pool, is a fortunate thing.

"It's this big," one tells me, pointing at the barracuda. I decide that a three-foot-long barracuda is a reasonable size for a pool. Adults and children here are swimming out towards the deep end, hoping to find it.

Reduce the number of glue words. 17 of 33 words are glue (51.5%). Glue words: a, woman, never, before, for, and, about, the, that, right, here, in, this, with, is

 Disable Rule

 Ignore

 Thesaurus

with of surprise and sheer wonder that this woman thinks a barracuda, in a swimming pool, is a fortunate thing. All around me, the children

will go, which is about three feet. I decide that a three-foot-long barracuda is a reasonable size for a pool. Adults and children here are swimming out towards the deep end, hoping to find it.

Out of thirty-three words, seventeen are "glue words."

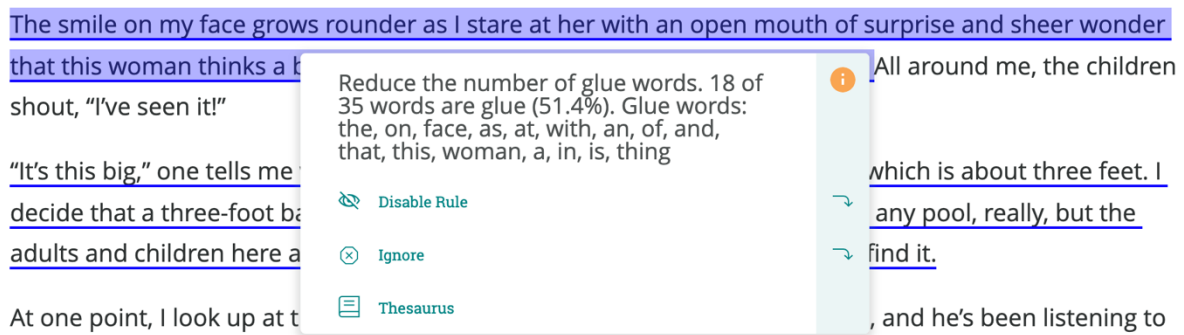
This sentence could be revised to maintain urgency but reduce unnecessary or empty words.

Possible Revision: A woman grabs my arm and points at the barracuda "right here—isn't it amazing?"

The revision not only reduces glue words, but also the word count, which is absolutely essential for flash fiction. Redundancy is reduced as well. For instance, we can assume that the barracuda is "in this pool, swimming with us." I might consider a revision like this one, since it emphasizes stronger images and verbs and maintains the woman's excitement, through the narrator's wide-eyed gaze.

Screenshot 5: The next "sticky sentence" contains some opportunities to reduce word count:

"The smile on my face grows rounder as I stare at her with an open mouth of surprise and sheer wonder that this woman thinks a barracuda, in a swimming pool, is a fortunate thing."

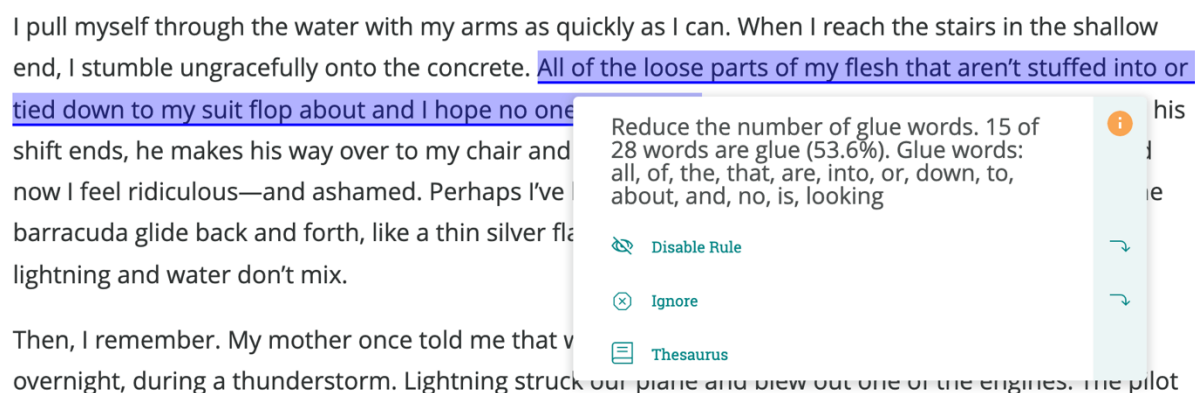


Possible Revision: My smile turns to open-mouthed shock. This woman thinks a barracuda, in a swimming pool, is a fortunate thing.

In the revision above, “smile on the face” is not necessary since a smile typically can be found on someone’s face. “Growing rounder” is an idea that repeats “open mouth,” and “surprise” and “sheer wonder” are similar. However, the next sentence does not eliminate many glue words. In this case, I might choose to leave the sentence as is in order to convey sarcasm. Combinations of cutting, splitting sentences in two, and leaving some sentences “as-is,” can lead to effective results.

Screenshot 6: This next example of a “sticky sentence” contains fifteen glue words out of twenty-eight words total: “All of the loose parts of my flesh that aren’t stuffed into or tied down to my suit flop about and I hope no one is looking.” (Glue words include all, of, the, that, are, into, or, down, to, about, and, no, is, looking.)

Here is the message you can see, if you hover over the blue lines:



Possible Revision: Loose flesh that isn’t stuffed inside my suit flops about, and I hope no one notices.

Not all glue words can be eliminated, but in this case, stronger words convey the message, and it doesn't take the reader as long to encounter them. Pushing images and verbs closer together moves the story along, and the word choices define the character's outlook, experience, and voice.

Summary:

- Glue words connect more meaningful word choices and verbs, but if there are too many, readers can get stuck.
- Some dialogue and narratives may call for rhythms that string together glue words, but tightening sentences drives the action in a story and helps the reader.
- Using programs like ProWritingAid can help authors easily identify sticky sentences containing too many glue words.
- Identifying sticky sentences empowers authors to determine which sentences to tighten, break in two, or keep, without ruining a character's voice.
- Combinations of cutting glue words, reducing wordiness, and breaking sentences in two can lead to effective revisions.

Your Turn: Have you been working on a story that maybe needs just a little more polishing? Dust it off and scrub it for unnecessary "glue words." If you have a program like ProWritingAid, you can run the "Improve Document" report and check the "Glue Index." If not, you can type common words like articles (a/the), prepositions (in/into), and conjunctions (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) into the search bar in Word.

You could use the following questions to guide your revision:

- How many glue words come up in your draft?
- Which ones can be eliminated to create stronger sentences?
- Which word choices help clearly define your character or narrator?
- Which ones detract from it?

When you are finished, don't forget to submit your story to *Flash Fiction Magazine* for more advice from editors.

Cheers!

