

Use these ideas to help your team members:

Avoiding Vagueness & Adding Clarity

I want you to use these ideas to revise your partners' responses for clarity.

First, beware certain words that lead a writer directly into generalizations that cannot be supported:

- Words that wave a **yellow** flag: common person/citizen, everyday, typical, ordinary, standard, average (others exist)
- Words that wave a **red** flag: everyone, never, always, all people, society, no one (others exist).

Flag them in your team members' responses.

You will find that ridding your work of such vagueness will, paradoxically, make your sentences more precise yet **add** words. This is the proper way to add length to an essay. The bad way would be to pad it with is/are/was/were forms, prepositional phrases (of/in/with/from), or summarize what your reader (me and your classmates) also read or saw.

Before:

"Traveling by plane was once considered a luxury only accessible to the wealthy of **society**"

Revised:

"Traveling by plane was once considered a groundbreaking luxury completely inaccessible to the **average person**, yet now we consider it common, as we grumble about leg-room and bad food."

Better Still:

"Flying was a groundbreaking luxury completely inaccessible to the travelers of modest means, yet now we consider it common, as we grumble about leg-room and bad food. It was only in the late 1940s, with the arrival of fast propeller-driven and early jet airliners, that air travel began to become a major industry" (Smith 102)."

Why:

Who was an "average person" in that old-time context? What made them "average" and thus unable to afford air travel? Note too I rid the sentence of the weak "was considered" (by whom?) moment. Hard to avoid the "was," however.

Yep. I made it shorter. That gives me room for examples and new claims, rather than padding. Note the example I added (imagine I did some research here from an author named Smith).

More Examples I Gave to an Earlier FYS Section:

Think about some other cases where students fell into this trap. “TV viewer of 1955” has more specificity than “common person of 1955,” or for Virgin Galactic, “would-be astronaut today” works better than “person today.”

We often, with a bit of planning and slowing down, can locate more precise choices. Most majors at UR want that sort of precision. I know that I demanded it in the technical, criminal-justice, and business writing classes I used to teach.

Imagine an imprecise chainsaw manual and the lawsuits that ensue from damage to equipment or severe injuries to customers.

Care with “Commonplaces”

Writing teachers sometimes teach how to employ “commonplaces” well. They are terms that, unlike jargon, mean something specific to a particular community.

Commonplaces use ordinary words to carry precise meanings, but only to a particular community that “gets” the definition. Consider “diversity and inclusion” in our university’s marketing and initiatives. Those words could mean something very different to Capitol One’s HR Department or in an online forum about politics.

Consider this example. What are some space-related commonplaces? “Contractor” is one that gets tossed around a lot in *First Man* and *Angle of Attack*. “Payload” is another. Let’s try some, as well as NASA jargon.

Vague:

NASA designers were concerned about the typical weight of their rockets and of the payload. For the Lunar Excursion Module (LEM), contractors worked until it was designed to be as light as possible, to the point where a typical event could compromise the design integrity of the LEM’s outer skin. (50 words)

Better: Commonplace used well, detail provided, sentences relate

NASA ordered contractors to make spacecraft lighter, even as the agency worked to reduce the overall weight for lunar payloads. Grumman dutifully made its Lunar Excursion Module (LEM) as light as possible. In the final design, the LEM’s outer skin

resembled thick aluminum foil. As a result, anything sharp might rip or puncture it during a mission, from micrometeorites to geology tools used on the Moon. (64 Words)

Note too how this writer varies the length of sentences and adds transitions so the writing “flows.” The one sentence about foil adds power by being short, with a vivid image. The reader stops and thinks about it, imagining landing on the Moon in something so fragile.

An Aside About Jargon:

- Consider NASA’s “Lunar Excursion Module” or even LEM instead of “lunar lander” or “moon lander” employed in some journalism.
- For abbreviations like LEM, I recommend spelling them out the first time, with the abbreviation cited. After that, alternate. Thus:
 - “We see how the Lunar Excursion Module (LEM) evolved during the later missions. The lander began as a one-day habitat; later LEMs housed astronauts for up to three days on the Moon.”