

PAINLESS Writing

Jeffrey Strausser

If you think writing essays and other school papers is difficult and dull, open this book — and think again!



Really. This isn't going to hurt at all . . .

The thought of writing long essays and making them grammatically correct once turned brave students into cowards . . . but no more!

This book will show you how to make your writing lively with vivid images, and how to smooth out sentences, avoid grammatical mistakes, add rhythm to your essays —and do it painlessly!

BARRON'S

PAINLESS
Writing



Jeffrey Strausser
illustrated by Denise Gilgannon



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To Beth, Katie, and Matthew

INTRODUCTION

What this book will do for you

Many students admit that their writing detracts from their hard work, rather than complements it. They realize that when they write with an uninteresting and mechanical style, they compete at a disadvantage. Unfortunately, these students sometimes become confused about how to improve their faulty writing style. Does your writing hurt you? If you think that it does, can you improve your writing? Absolutely! Can you improve your writing quickly? Absolutely! However, you must know how to go about it.

Developing a good writing style is similar to learning to play a sport or a musical instrument because writing well also requires mastering specific techniques. Did you ever notice how great athletes and musicians make what they are doing look natural? Yet we know athletes and musicians must learn their specific skills. Similar to sports and music, writing improvement comes from first separating the techniques, then studying the techniques, and finally, permanently incorporating them into your writing style. This book presents **powerful and easily applied techniques to make your writing clear, interesting, and concise**. Employing these techniques will immediately transform your writing style so that you can write better with less time and effort—and your grades will improve as your writing improves.

The good news is that you will not need to memorize endless lists of vocabulary words, or diagram sentences, or conjugate verbs before you can make these techniques work for you. These focused techniques will require only a small amount of time to master.

This book explains nine **Painless Techniques** that will dramatically improve your writing. Each technique has its own chapter that describes and demonstrates the technique through straightforward examples. Practice makes permanent; each chapter contains **writing exercises** to help you make these techniques a permanent part of your writing style. Finally, for the **Internet** surfers, each chapter contains sections where you can surf through the Internet to read additional information about

INTRODUCTION

topics discussed in the chapter. It is not necessary to refer to these sites, as each Painless Technique is concisely but thoroughly explained within the pages of the chapter. However, if surfing through the ocean of cyberspace is fun for you, just look for the *Surf's up* box and check out the web pages listed there.

Does dramatically improving your writing and improving your grades appeal to you? If so, grab the reins and take control of your writing. It is never too late to develop a clear, interesting, and concise writing style. The sooner you begin, the sooner it will happen. **It's painless!**

Web Addresses Change!

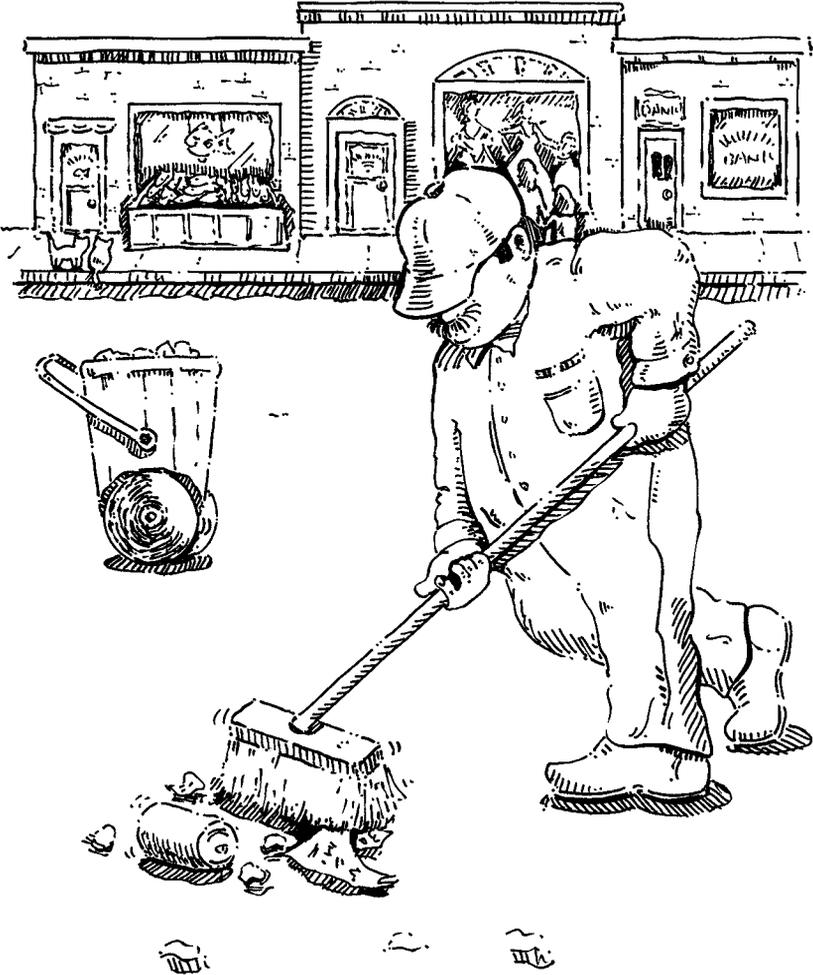
You should be aware that addresses on the World Wide Web are constantly changing. While every attempt has been made to provide you with the most current addresses available, the nature of the Internet makes it virtually impossible to keep abreast of the many changes that seem to occur on a daily basis.

If you should come across a web address (URL) that no longer appears to be valid, either because the site no longer exists or because the address has changed, don't panic. Simply do a **key word search** on the subject matter in question. For example, if you are interested in finding out more about prepositional phrases and the particular address appears to be invalid, do a search for various words related to **prepositional phrases**. These are the key words. A key word search for this topic might include, for example, **noun phrases**. If an initial key word search provides too many potential sites, you can always narrow the number of choices by doing a second key word search that will limit your original search to only those sites that contain the terms from both your first and second searches.

WARNING: Not every response to your search will match your criteria, and some sites may contain adult material. If you are ever in doubt, check with someone who can help you.

CHAPTER ONE

Clean Up Preposition Clutter



PREPOSITION OVERUSE RUINS YOUR STYLE

Overusing prepositions and their accompanying phrases not only creates boring writing, but writing that is usually hard to understand. Let's see if we can figure out why this happens. Have you ever read something where the writer used too many words to describe what was happening or to describe something? Remember growing increasingly frustrated until you said, "Enough, already!" and started skimming, or worse yet, you just quit reading? Many times, a writer using multiword, vague prepositional phrases rather than one-word descriptive adjectives or prepositions causes wordy writing because he or she uses many words when only a few are needed. Unfortunately, the problems do not stop there because many students substitute prepositional phrases throughout their writing where verbs would have been the better choice. This writing fault leaves them with a passage that is now not only wordy, but also dull. This wordiness and dullness causes readers to skim, and once they begin skimming, they are not going to fully appreciate the work that you put into your assignment.

Look at some of your writing. Be honest. Is it wordy . . . dull . . . hard to understand? Maybe you are writing with too many wordy and vague prepositional phrases. If you are, don't worry! This common writing fault can be easily corrected. All you have to do is use the Painless Technique presented in this chapter and you will soon be

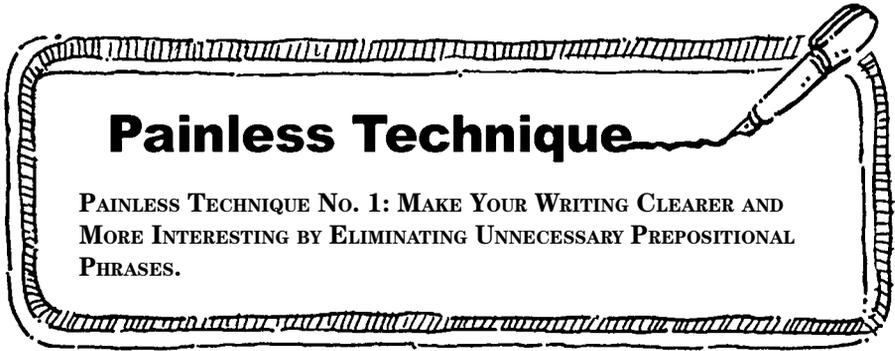
ELIMINATING UNNECESSARY PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES.

Don't use too much of a good thing

Do not eliminate all prepositions from your writing because prepositions and prepositional phrases are essential to writing. We need prepositions to communicate our ideas, but the problem is that many writers overuse them because dropping in preposition after preposition seems easier than trying to write concisely or find active verbs that keep the reader's interest. However, you will soon learn that this is not the case. Overusing prepositions is a common fault, which left unattended develops

CLEAN UP PREPOSITION CLUTTER

into a bad habit that leads to wordy and dull writing. Therefore, eliminate all *unnecessary* prepositions and their accompanying wordy baggage. The first Painless Technique will help you eliminate this dull baggage from your writing. Let's start by stating this first technique.



IDENTIFYING PREPOSITIONS

Make sure you can identify prepositions and their phrases

A *preposition* is a word used to link a noun to a sentence, and in so doing, relates the noun to either another noun or a verb. Below are some common prepositions that we use all the time in our writing.

by	because
under	during
for	from
near	like
about	over
on	in
against	until
to	across
with	above
next	toward
inside	outside

A *prepositional phrase* consists of a preposition and a noun acting as the preposition's object. Within this phrase, the preposition depicts a relationship to the noun. Some prepositional phrases are shown below.

on the beach

near the desk

against the wind

from the beginning

under the table

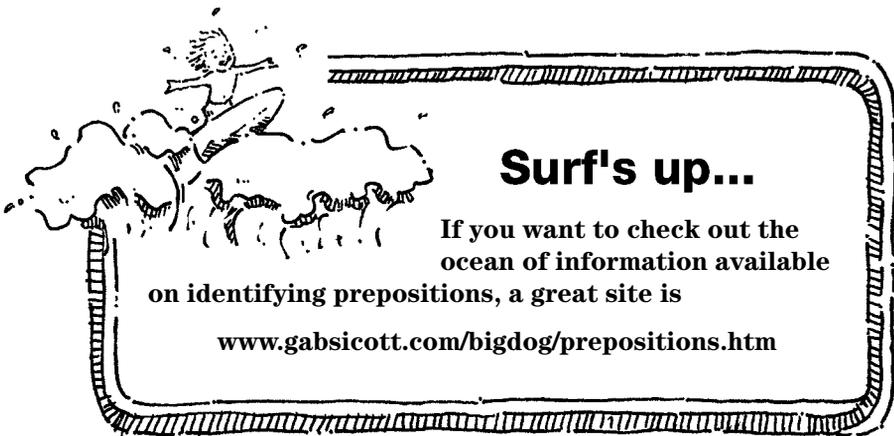
off the cuff

during his speech

across the continent

toward the end

until the last



Now that we can identify prepositions and their accompanying phrases, we have to ask

HOW MANY PREPOSITIONS ARE TOO MANY?

Unfortunately, there is no easy rule to apply that will clearly tell you whether you have overloaded your writing with prepositions. However, if your sentences contain only a few verbs, especially verbs in the passive voice, and many prepositions, your report or essay is probably wordy and confusing. (In Chapter Three we talk more about what happens to your writing when you use the passive voice.) Alternatively, if you are a numbers type person, a reasonable rule of thumb is that if your writing contains 20 percent to 25 percent prepositions, you probably have used too many prepositions.

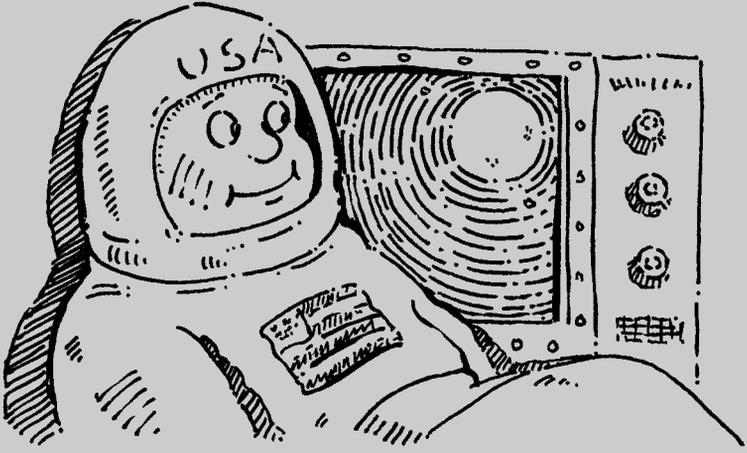


Too many prepositions

Unnecessary prepositions and their wordy baggage, as well as passive voice sentences, riddle the following paragraphs. Notice how difficult the passage is to follow. Imagine several pages of this!

Exploring Mars

At this point in time, Mars is the target of the modern astronaut. By reason of its relative closeness to Earth, Mars is being studied by scientists for the purposes of a future mission. In a manner similar to the earlier study of the Moon by scientists, a probe is planned to be sent by NASA to within the immediate vicinity of the planet with a view toward collecting data with respect to the atmosphere of the planet. NASA plans to send in excess of one dozen of these probes during the course of the next five years.



From the point of view of a nonscientist, this proposed expenditure of billions of dollars for the purpose of studying an inhospitable planet appears to be a waste of money and human effort. At this point in time, our own planet and its inhabitants are in need of attention, particularly with regard to the environment. However, on the basis of what I have seen thus far, this concern will not be addressed at this point in time or at a point later into the future.

We must not succumb to this attack of viciousness on our common sense. Of course, I am writing in reference to the concerted effort of the community of scientists, the politicians, and the groups with special interests. We must persevere in our quest to bring this question of social importance to the attention of the public.

This essay is an extreme example of preposition overuse. Use the exercise below to see how the writer overuses prepositions and their accompanying phrases. Remember that any amount of preposition overuse puts you at risk of losing your reader's attention.



BRAIN TICKLERS

Set # 1

Underline the prepositions and their accompanying prepositional phrases in the *Exploring Mars* essay.

(Answers are on page 213.)

Beware of long sentences containing many prepositions

Wordiness and dullness can occur when you write with long, preposition-filled sentences because long sentences containing several prepositions and only a few verbs are nearly impossible to understand. Take another look at *Exploring Mars*, and this time notice the preposition-filled next-to-last sentence of the first paragraph. The writer makes the sentence even more difficult to read by making it a long sentence laced with unnecessary prepositions and their wordy baggage.

THE PREPOSITION-FILLED LONG SENTENCE

In a manner similar to the earlier study of the Moon by scientists, a probe is planned to be sent by NASA to within the immediate vicinity of the planet with a view toward collecting data with respect to the atmosphere of the planet.

The good writer strives to be clear, concise, and interesting, which means that long preposition-filled sentences such as this one will lose your reader's interest.

The real test is in the reading

The preposition-to-total-words ratio aside, the real test to determine whether you have used too many prepositions is in the reading. If you find yourself reading a dull passage, or skimming over words, perhaps the writing is suffering from preposition overload. As you become more aware of this common, and curable, writing fault, it will become second nature to you to look at your writing and ask yourself



WILL ELIMINATING SOME PREPOSITIONS IMPROVE THIS WRITING PIECE?

If you suspect prepositions often clutter your writing, apply the technique of this chapter by using the following **five-step process** to reduce preposition clutter.

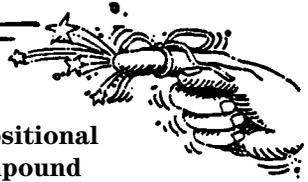
FIVE STEPS TO ELIMINATING UNNECESSARY PREPOSITIONS

Let's see how you can eliminate the unnecessary prepositions and their wordy baggage from your writing. We'll start by tackling one of the greatest causes of clutter and dullness: the compound prepositional phrase.



STEP ONE

Examine your writing for compound prepositional phrases. Once identified, replace each compound prepositional phrase with a simple preposition.



Identify and eliminate compound prepositional phrases

A *compound prepositional phrase* is a series of prepositional phrases that act like a single preposition. Many writers ignore simple, powerful prepositions such as *on* and *of*. Instead, they select wordy compound prepositional phrases because they think this makes the writing style appear more sophisticated. However, the opposite is true because it is the unsophisticated and lazy writer who opts for the compound prepositional phrases rather than taking time to select the proper verb and preposition.