

## “Junk” Words

While every word in the English language has a purpose—or why would English speakers have invented it?—the way that we place them can make them purposeless.

I’m talking today about “junk” words: words you can cut from a sentence without changing its meaning because they are repetitious or state an obvious point.

Let’s dive right in and look at some examples.

*Xenia hurled herself **down to the floor** as the man in black drew a bead on her forehead.*

*Sally gazed **up at the stars in the sky** and smiled. “Nice night for getting into trouble,” she told Xenia.*

*Xenia jumped **off of** the railing and landed in the bed of the truck trudging by **below under the bridge**.*

Let’s look at the junk words in each of these sentences.

In sentence one, we don’t need “down” because, barring some perversion of the laws of physics, floors are located in that direction. Likewise, the sky is above us and the stars are located in it. So in these sentences, Xenia need only hurl herself to the floor and Sally need only gaze at the stars.

In the third sentence, “under the bridge” is fine because the reader will already know the truck is beneath Xenia because she has just jumped into it. But what of “off of”? Well, in this case “off” means exactly the same thing, so we have no reason to add the second word.

What to Do about “That”?

*“I wish **that** you would listen to me,” Sally huffed, crossing her arms over her chest. “Then you’d realize **that** Dr. Chang was innocent all along. Corvus set him up!”*

Now, what of this sentence? *That* is a frequent offender in overwriting because we rarely need it in our writing. What changes when we delete it in this example?

*“I wish you would listen to me,” Sally huffed, crossing her arms over her chest. “Then you’d realize Dr. Chang was innocent all along. Corvus set him up!”*

Absolutely nothing. When editing, I typically only leave *that* in for three reasons: purposes of rhythm, when a sentence is unclear without it, or when removing it simply “sounds” awkward.

The last one is, of course, highly subjective and not at all the best prescription. Unfortunately, in over a decade of editing, I’ve struggled to find a reason I can explain better. In many ways, this really is just a matter of personal aesthetics.

Let’s look at a few examples. In this one, I would leave *that* alone because it sets up a rhythm.

*“I’m not going to give up,” Sally said, placing her hand on Xenia’s shoulder. “And neither should you. You’ve taught me so many things: **that** justice is important, **that** ethics are more than just nice ideas we pay lip service to, and **that** friendship isn’t some pleasant fiction we grow beyond after childhood.”*

Without the parallelism of “that,” I think Sally’s statement and this moment between her and our story’s other main character lose some of their drama and gravitas.

*“I’m not going to give up,” Sally said, placing her hand on Xenia’s shoulder. “And neither should you. You’ve taught me so many things: justice is important, ethics are more than just nice ideas we pay lip service to, and friendship isn’t some pleasant fiction we grow beyond after childhood.”*

This just sounds weaker to me. Perhaps, however, it doesn’t to you. Sometimes, the choice of whether to remove *that* just comes down both how it sounds to you, as well as the point and tone you’re trying to convey in the passage.

In the following case, I would leave *that* in because I think the sentence sounds strange without it.

*In hopes that she would hear from Xenia soon, Sally kept her cell phone on.*

To me, a word sounds as though it’s missing if we remove “that.”

*In **hopes she would** hear from Xenia soon, Sally kept her cell phone on.*

Sometimes, sentences can be confusing without “that.”

The note told Sally all she needed to know.

The note that told Sally all she needed to know.

These sentences have slightly different meanings that are changed by the addition of “that.” In the first, the words in the note tell Sally what she needs to know. In the second, we are referring to a kind of note Sally is reading rather than the note doing something.

You may have also noticed something interesting about the first sentence of the previous paragraph. If you remove the first “that,” the sentence becomes gibberish. “These sentences have slightly different meanings are changed by the addition of “that.”” This is because we need *that* to describe what kinds of sentences are changed by the addition of “that.”

Let’s look at another example.

*Sally had hinted more than once that she was down for committing a little crime for a good cause.*

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These sentences, again, have two different meanings. In the first, Sally has hinted more than one time that she’d be down for causing a little criminal mischief. In the second, she hints that she’s down to commit more than one crime. Plus, the second sentence just reads as awkward to me. If you wanted to go for the second meaning, I’d suggest changing to something like this:

*Sally had hinted that she was down for committing more than a few crimes for a good cause.*

Here’s a third example.

*“We both know that Carlos can’t be trusted,” Xenia hissed.*

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A reader may momentarily be confused by the next sentence, as Xenia seems to be saying at first that she and Sally both know who Carlos is, rather than both knowing he can’t be trusted.

Sometimes, you simply have to leave it when *that* is a noun.

*“He wanted that to happen,” Sally said.*

*“Of course you knew that was coming,” Xenia said.*

Without “that,” both sentences are meaningless.

Though you can memorize grammar rules to help you, an easy trick is simply to ask yourself if removing that makes the sentence sound odd, causes confusion, or takes out valuable information. If the answer is “yes” to any of the above, then leave it in. While this may run a risk of leaving you with a few sentences that could technically get by without a “that,” I suspect doing this this will solve the majority of your problems with the word.

If *that* is beginning to sound like gibberish to you now because we’ve said it so much, I completely sympathize. Let’s move on.

### **Implied Actions**

Words related to senses are often junk words you can eliminate. Let’s take a look at some examples.

*Xenia watched Sally dial 911.*

*Sally heard sirens in the distance.*

*Xenia smelled the pungent odor of gasoline.*

When we watch the action unfold through a character’s point of view, we see what they see, hear what they hear, smell what they smell, and so forth. Therefore, they are usually unnecessary because the fact the POV character mentions them already indicates they are experiencing them. So, providing we already know whose POV we’re in when we read these sentences, the following are solid rewrites.

*Sally dialed 911.*

*Sirens wailed in the distance.*

*The pungent odor of gasoline filled the car.*

However, sometimes sense verbs need to stay to avoid confusion.

*As Xenia’s head lolled to the left, she felt Sally shaking her shoulder.*

Removing the sense verb here creates confusion: is Xenia watching Sally shake her shoulder, or is she feeling it?

*As Xenia’s head lolled to the left, Sally shook her shoulder.*

Context won’t always save us, either. Although Xenia’s head is lolling, she could very well be watching Sally rather than feeling Sally’s hand rattling her shoulder. Ambiguity like this can be distracting to a reader and make them pause reading to figure out just what Xenia is actually doing here.

### **“Junk” descriptions**

Sometimes the junk can be in the description itself. This part of the lesson is so closely related to overdescribing that I thought about putting it in that one, but ultimately the length of that lesson made me move it here.

Let's take a look at some examples.

*Xenia reached out and shook Carlos's hand.*

*Sally turned the key and started the car.*

*Carlos parked the car, turned off the ignition, and got out.*

For Xenia to shake Carlos's hand, she'd have to reach out. This is part of the action of shaking a hand, and as such, you can delete it. Likewise, for Sally to start the car, she'd need to turn the key (or press a button if she has a newer model), so nearly all readers will already envision this part of the action.

The third sentence is a little different, since parking a car doesn't necessarily mean turning it off—for example, if the driver is waiting for the passenger to do a quick errand, such as getting out and dropping an envelope into a mailbox. In cases such as these, I would suggest mentioning the action only if it deviates from the standard pattern, such as in the case I just mentioned. So:

*Carlos parked the car and got out.*

but

*Carlos parked the car and left it running while he waited for Xenia and Sally.*

### **How to avoid the junk we haven't covered**

If we talked about all the "junk" words out there, we'd be here for several more lessons, and at some point all things must come to an end. If you're in a situation where you're wondering if you have junk words or descriptions, ask yourselves the following questions to see if you could do some deleting:

1. **Do I have an abundance of prepositions?** Like *off of* in a previous example, a sentence with a lot of prepositions will usually sound clunky, particularly if you keep repeating one. For example:

"You're going to take a lot of risks to get into the corporation headquarters to stop this conspiracy to release a virus in order to wipe out half the population," Sally said.

I got lost around the third to while writing this, no joke! Even though people can speak with more junk words in their sentence than there are mini candy bars at a romance conference, we should probably take some of these out.

"You're taking a lot of risks breaking into corporate headquarters to stop this conspiracy to release a virus that will wipe out half the population," Sally said.

Of course, this sentence is majorly exposition heavy and awkward even with the rewrite, but you get the idea.

2. **Do I have any words that describe an action, location, or direction, or other noun that the noun itself already indicates?** For example treetops described as being up, dirt described as being down, etc.
3. **Do I have any sensation words (see, hear, feel, touch, smell, taste)? Do I need them for clarity?**
4. **Am I describing something that is an obvious part of an action? If so, do I need to?** For example, does someone get out of a car without turning it off? Does someone leave a house without closing the door behind them? etc.

These four points should help you cut some junk food from your sentences' diet.