THE GREAT ADVERB HUNT

Editing modifiers without sanding away your voice

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An adverb is not a small grammatical offence wearing an "-ly" hat.

Adverbs modify verbs, adjectives, other adverbs and sometimes whole clauses. Many end in "-ly," but words such as "often," "here" and "very" can also function as adverbs. Meanwhile, "friendly" is commonly an adjective. Searching for an ending is a convenient way to find

candidates for inspection. It is not a reliable way to identify every adverb, much less every weak sentence.

The useful question is what a modifier contributes. Does it clarify the meaning, create an effect or repeat something the sentence already says?

BEGIN WITH THE VERB

"Jon walked slowly across the room."

Perhaps Jon "crept," "ambled" or "shuffled." Each gives a different movement. Creeping suggests caution or secrecy; ambling suggests ease; shuffling suggests a particular gait. None is a neutral replacement for the others.

Decide what you mean before reaching for the livelier word. If Jon is crossing a room slowly because he is trying not to wake a baby, "crept" may help. If he is practising a rehabilitation exercise, it may imply the wrong thing. "Walked slowly, testing his weight on each foot" could serve better.

A strong verb is an accurate, useful verb in context. It does not have to arrive carrying a thesaurus and a small trumpet.

TEST FOR DUPLICATION

"She whispered quietly" usually repeats an idea already in the verb. Try "She whispered." If nothing useful disappears, the extra word can go.

But "She whispered fiercely" combines low volume with force of feeling. Deleting "fiercely" changes that meaning unless the surrounding language supplies it.

Compare:

"Don't touch it," she whispered quietly.

"Don't touch it," she whispered fiercely.

"Don't touch it." She caught his wrist before he reached the wire.

The last version replaces the modifier with action and changes the pacing. It might suit a tense physical scene. The middle version may be better when both characters must remain still. Revision offers choices, not a competition to produce the sentence with the fewest words.

NOTICE VAGUE INTENSIFIERS

Words such as "very," "really" and "extremely" can emphasize without telling us much. "The room was very unpleasant" leaves readers to furnish the unpleasantness themselves.

If the room matters, choose the relevant detail: "Rainwater dripped into a saucepan beside the bed." Now we have something to experience. If the room is incidental, "The room was unpleasant" may be enough.

In dialogue or a close narrative voice, however, "It was a really, really bad idea" might be exactly how this person thinks. A frightened teenager need not describe danger with the restraint of an insurance report.

Look beyond a single sentence. Repeated intensifiers can make everything equally emphatic. Save emphasis for moments that benefit from it.

CHECK ADJECTIVES WHILE YOU ARE THERE

Modifiers include more than adverbs. A noun dragging a line of adjectives may need the same attention: "the huge, enormous, massive iron gate."

Choose details that add different information. "A rusted iron gate" tells us material and condition. "A gate twice her height" gives scale through the character's experience. Three synonyms for large mainly tell us that the author wants us to admire the gate.

Do not strip description until every room contains a chair and a weather condition. Texture, specificity and rhythm belong in prose. The aim is purposeful detail.

PROTECT THE NARRATOR'S HABITS

Imagine a narrator who observes, "The apology arrived remarkably early, considering the offence was only six years old."

"Remarkably" contributes to the comic judgement. The sentence loses something if you remove it simply because a search highlighted the ending.

Before a modifier pass, choose a paragraph that sounds unmistakably like your book. Note what creates that voice: understatement, exuberance, formal precision, conversational emphasis or something else. Use it as a reference when deciding whether revisions improve the writing or merely make it more uniform.

Voice can still benefit from restraint. A comic narrator who qualifies every observation may become tiring. Preserve the pattern where it works, and give it room by reducing weaker repetitions nearby.

A PRACTICAL THREE-CHOICE PASS

Search for a few words you suspect you overuse, or inspect a manageable section. For each highlighted modifier, choose one response:

- Keep it because it changes the meaning or strengthens the intended voice.
- Delete it because the sentence already supplies its information.
- Rewrite the sentence because the underlying action or description is vague.

Read the paragraph after each change. Rhythm lives beyond the highlighted word. Keep a version you can compare, and stop when your attention becomes mechanical.

Do not use "replace all" to purge a category. The same word can be necessary in one passage and dispensable in the next.

GET HELP WITH THE PATTERN

This is a line-level self-editing exercise. A critique partner can identify where the prose feels padded; a professional line editor can assess how language works across the manuscript. Editing software may locate repeated words, but its suggestions still require judgement.

If your budget only allows a limited sample edit, study the reasoning and apply it thoughtfully elsewhere. A sample is instruction, not certification of the entire book.

Before moving on, compare the revised passage with the original. Keep the version that conveys the intended meaning and sounds right for this narrator. A lower modifier count is only useful when the writing benefits.

SOURCE NOTE The explanation of adverb functions was checked against Cambridge Dictionary, English Grammar Today, 'Adverbs: functions': https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/grammar/british-grammar/adverbs-functions . The editing exercises are practical judgement tools, not rules banning a word class.

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