

# Word for Word

## Empty words: A very bad habit

Adjectives (words that modify nouns) and adverbs (words that modify verbs or adjectives) can help make writing clear. For example, in the phrase "patients with metastatic melanoma," the adjective metastatic gives the reader essential information about the patients' disease.

Some adjectives and adverbs, however, give the reader no additional meaning. Such "empty words" tend to slow the reader down. The most commonly used (or overused) empty words include *very*, *rather*, *really*, and *quite*.



Writing gurus William Strunk Jr and E.B. White added *pretty* (as in *pretty* big) and *little* (as in a *little* late) to the list of empty words. They wrote, "Rather, very, little, pretty--these are the leeches that infest the pond of prose, sucking the blood of words."<sup>1</sup> Just as leeches can weaken a host organism, empty words weaken sentences.

Theodore Bernstein, an editor for *The New York Times*, also advises writers to avoid empty words, especially *very*: "Inexperienced writers tend to use the word [very] too much. Often its use is self-defeating; the writer intends to intensify what he is saying but instead weakens it."<sup>2</sup>

### Examples:

Weak: Very few studies have explored this topic.

Better: Few studies have explored this topic.

Weak: The patient presented with a rather large tumor and reported feeling quite fatigued.

Better: The patient presented with a large tumor and reported feeling fatigued.

In many cases, an empty adjective or adverb can be replaced with a more precise term.

**Example:**

Weak: The study included patients with very large lung tumors.

Better: The study included patients with lung tumors larger than 7 cm.

References

1. Strunk W Jr, White EB. *The Elements of Style*, 3rd ed. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon; 1979:73.
2. Bernstein TM. *The Careful Writer: A Modern Guide to English Usage*. New York, NY: Atheneum; 1965:467.

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