

**Things to Eliminate
in Your Writing:**

Sucking Up to the Author

Part I: What is it?



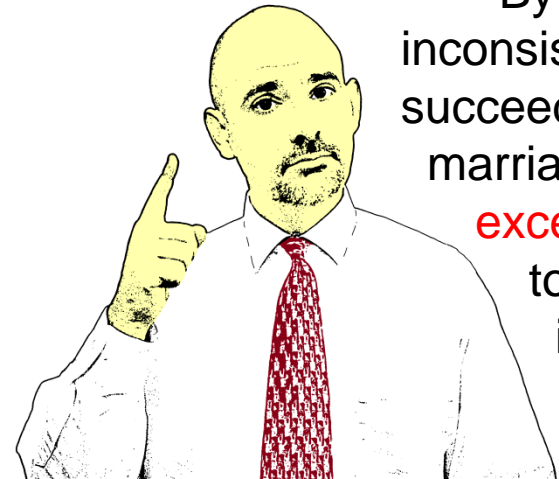
This is what happens when students start writing as if they were going to get some kind of brownie points for praising the author or the handling of the text.

Here's an example of this sort of thing from an intro and conclusion taken from a student essay for the 2003 Q2 Essay (concerning a selection from Mavis Gallant's "The Other Paris"):

Gallant's "The Other Paris" provides a **brilliant** social commentary through satire, irony, **glorious** characterization of the two soon-to-be married fools, and thinly veiled tone of underlying contempt. Every action of the two "lovers" is what society dictates, though they would both surely intend otherwise. The entire passage ridicules the awkward and misplaced (not to mention ludicrous) stress society and culture places on proper marriage.

[three very solid body paragraphs are cut]

By illustrating these ironies, inversions, follies, inconsistencies, circular logic, and downright stupidity, Gallant succeeds in crafting a **delicious** mockery of not the institution of marriage, but the institution surrounding marriage. The **exceptional** character development and **witty**, biting tone serve to blast holes the size of Iowa into that poor, misguided institution.



This is by no means a particularly egregious example (the essay in question is actually quite good as a whole), but it's the sort of thing students imagine academic writing to be like without having actually read much (if any) academic writing. Even academic book reviews (as opposed to popular book reviews in mass market publications) tend to stick to a more-or-less objective description of what is or is not happening in the text in question.

In general, editorializing about the quality of the writing is best left to those who are actually qualified to do so. A high school kid's judgment (no matter how talented the student) as to what is "brilliant," "glorious," "delicious," "exceptional," and "witty" is (sorry to say) not worth a lot.

A cousin to this sort of thing is when students start inserting editorializing adjectives and adverbs when introducing the text's use of a particular literary element. If I had a nickel, for instance, every time I read a student essay describing "strong" diction (whatever that means) I wouldn't quite be able to retire, but I bet could afford a really nice dinner.

Part II:
Why is this a problem?



Problem One: It Adds Nothing to Your Argument

Gallant's "The Other Paris" provides a **brilliant** social commentary through satire, irony, **glorious** characterization of the two soon-to-be married fools, and thinly veiled tone of underlying contempt. Every action of the two "lovers" is what society dictates, though they would both surely intend otherwise. The entire passage ridicules the awkward and misplaced (not to mention ludicrous) stress society and culture places on proper marriage. [...]

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Was the assignment to write a book review? No, it was to describe how narrative voice and characterization develops social commentary. Why, then, is the writer inserting his or her personal views about the quality of the writing?

You are being scored by how well you address the topic at hand-- not by how well you lard up your writing with extraneous adjectives. Even if part of the task were to evaluate the writing, the essay certainly isn't developing why the text is "brilliant," "glorious," etc., and if you're not going to develop an idea: drop it. It's not doing anything for you. The author is not going to be flattered by your kind words and help you out.

What do mean
Mavis Gallant
isn't going to
read this and
bump up the
grade?

Problem Two: It Misunderstands Your Role

Gallant's "The Other Paris" provides a **brilliant** social commentary through satire, irony, **glorious** characterization of the two soon-to-be married fools, and thinly veiled tone of underlying contempt. Every action of the two "lovers" is what society dictates, though they would both surely intend otherwise. The entire passage ridicules the awkward and misplaced (not to mention ludicrous) stress society and culture places on proper marriage. [...]

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This is related to the last objection insofar as you are not being tasked with writing a review of the writing. More than being off-topic, however, you are simply not qualified to write a review.

You have not read widely enough to make an informed judgment about the relative quality of one text to another within the same writing tradition. Even if the former two statements were untrue, you lack the academic credentials for why anyone would care about your value judgments in the first place.

I'm not saying you can't have an opinion, but an academic review is a lot more than one person's subjective "take" on what's good or bad about a work. When there is an evaluative claim, it is in context of the kind of aforementioned knowledge that you lack, lent weight by the voice of academic expertise.

Part III: What to do Instead



This one's easy: don't do this crap.

In general, you should be eliminating extraneous adjectives and adverbs anyway, so this is an easy way to eliminate dead wood that is bogging down your writing. Better yet, save yourself the hand cramp and don't include it in the first place.

This also means eliminating references to things like “strong” diction or a “masterful” use of irony. If your writing about a literary element, any adjective that is not a tone word is already extremely suspect. It is simply out-of-place when it is your subjective opinion about the quality of the writing.

Part IV: Conclusions



Conclusions

Your job is to analyze, not editorialize.

For this reason, adjectives and adverbs that describe the quality of the writing are misplaced. This is not your job, and you're not qualified enough for anyone to care about your opinion about the writing anyway.

This also includes descriptions of literary elements that aren't tone words. That means no more "strong" diction, "vivid" imagery, etc. This is what kids imagine academic writing looks like. Pro tip: it isn't.