Exercises
The Writer's Diet

We have compiled these exercises and classroom activities to encourage students to become more self-reflective, confident, and critical writers when using grammar- and style-checking tools.

Some exercises have been designed with a specific tool in mind, while others are more generic. Most can be adapted for use with any other writing tool, as long as the two tools fulfil similar functions. Some activities may work better as individual student tasks; others as small group exercises, or even class-wide discussions. Again, feel free to adapt the format to match your needs.

NB! Because students typically misunderstand what The Writer's Diet does and why, make sure to introduce them to the tool, its purpose, functionality, and the rules guiding its work before trying out any class activities. The tool's About page is a good place to start.

Reflecting on one's own writing

individual 👤 classroom 👥

Ask your students to feed a piece of their writing through The Writer's Diet and to reflect on the result. What have they learned about their tendencies in writing? What psychological, pedagogical or rhetorical reasons might be behind their choices? Are these tendencies a weakness or a strength? In what contexts might they be weaknesses or strengths?

The purpose of this activity is to encourage self-reflection, not judgement. Some students might discover that they rely too much on adverbs and other modifiers because they lack the confidence to commit to clear statements. Others might find their writing is cluttered with abstract "waste words" (it, this, that, and there) because their thinking is still murky. Still others might notice how many prepositions they use because they think academic writing should be wordy and consist of long, convoluted sentences.

Learning about parts of speech (adverbs, adjectives)

group 👥 classroom 👥

Invite your students to use the test results (of their own or someone else's prose) as a starting point for a discussion on the role of different parts of speech in writing (e.g., the function of adjectives and adverbs, and their co-relation with nouns and verbs). How does the genre, discipline and text type affect the use of these word groups? Does the writing topic also influence word choice? Students can work in groups to brainstorm and discuss, before sharing their ideas and examples with the rest of the class.

Using the tool in peer review to improve concision and clarity

individual 👤 group 👥 classroom 👥

Use The Writer's Diet in the peer review process, focussing specifically on concision and clarity. Ideally, have each student's draft reviewed by the tool as well as by another student. If there is time left at the end, ask some students to share the results of this task with the class.

Make sure that your students understand that simply removing the problematic word or replacing it with an equally abstract or redundant one is not a great solution. You may have to do a sample demonstration of such revision before the students can independently embark on this exercise.

Rethinking and challenging the conventions of academic writing

classroom 👥

Ask your students what they think constitutes proper academic writing and whether it is the same as good writing? Does one exclude the other? Can proper academic prose that deals with complex and sometimes abstract ideas also be clear, concise, readable, and engaging? Let students work in small groups before sharing their insights with the rest of the class.

As a conversation starter, use The Writer's Diet to run tests on writing samples from various disciplines, such as this sample from a proper academic article or an excerpt from one of The Bad Writing Contest winners. To continue the discussion, you may address the purpose and effect of jargon in various disciplines and in academia in general.

Exploring engaging writing

individual 👤 group 👥 classroom 👥

The Writer's Diet can also be used to help students think about audience, readerly engagement, creativity and personal voice in various types of writing. What makes one text more engaging than another? Does engaging writing necessarily have to be simple and concise? For this discussion, ask students to bring a digital fragment (~500 words in length) from a favourite fiction or non-fiction text to class. Ask them to feed it through The Writer's Diet and observe the result. Students can work individually at first and then in pairs or small groups to figure out what rules of engaging writing the author has observed or broken in each case, and to what effect.

In the second half of the lesson, students can present their case studies to the rest of the class.