Two Words For One

Student writers who aim for more sophisticated writing generally swap one word for another: "walk" becomes "perambulate;" "happy" becomes "ecstatic:" and "dog" becomes "canine." But without overall sophistication, those choices feel conspicuous rather than organic to the work.

Multi-Word Phrases

A subtler and more effective way to increase sophistication is to replace multi-word phrases with a single word. Unfortunately, no easy tool (like a thesaurus) exists for this task, but words that come from the students' own minds are better because they reflect students' ability level and voice.

The most easily replaced multi-word phrases are a simple verb followed by a preposition. These phrases appear throughout students' writing; they feel comfortable in conversation but wordier in writing.

Examples

1. The movement's founder points to religion as a primary motivation for members' involvement.
2. He insisted that members give up their faith in order to become more fully attuned to social and political goals.
3. Eventually, he set down these principles in writing, which allowed members to think about them before joining the group.

How It Works

To lessen reliance on two-word phrases, students must first identify them. When students cannot look up the word, they must search their own minds for familiar words and reflect on the meaning they genuinely intend.

In the first sentence, "points to" can be replaced with "identifies," "classifies," "articulates," or "highlights." Each has different connotations, so students can consider what they mean and choose a replacement word accordingly.

In the second sentence, "give up" lessens the formality of the sentence and can be switched with "abandon," "relinquish," "sacrifice" or "surrender."

The third sentence includes two such phrases: "set down" and "think about." The first could benefit from a full rewriting -- "he wrote these principles" or "he produced written copies of these principles" – or the phrase could be replaced with "committed these principles to writing," leaving only one preposition ("to") instead of two ("down" and "in"). The second two-word phrase, "think about," can be traded for "consider," "ponder," "study," or "contemplate."

The Meta Version

English contains many such phrases. In fact, I began my draft of the previous sentence by writing "English is full of such phrases" and changed my diction to avoid the "to be" verb as well as the phrase "full of."

I also wrote, a couple of paragraphs above, that these phrases "appear" in students' writing instead of my initial impulse to write that these phrases "show up in" students' writing. In other places, though, I retained the two-word phrases, including "replaced with" and "benefit from," because single-word substitutes sounded stilted or overly formal.