

The WritersDiet Test: Using Online Writing Diagnostics to Develop Self-Editing Skills and Improve Writing

Because few academics receive formal training in how to write for their discipline, they might avoid attempting to teach their students to write. If faculty or student writers search for models of writing in published articles, they will encounter few examples worth emulating. Sword (2012) evaluated the prose of 1,000 articles (100 articles from each of 10 disciplines: medicine, evolutionary biology, computer science, higher education, psychology, anthropology, law, philosophy, history, and literary studies). All articles appeared in well-regarded peer-reviewed journals with high impact factor ratings. Sword found examples in every discipline in which writers engaged readers and wrote persuasive, compelling arguments in clear prose. She also found many examples of dense, jargon-laden, impenetrable prose.

Stylish academic writing provides good advice to faculty writers who hope to refine their scholarly prose. The book is written for professional academic writers, but graduate student writers can benefit from this advice. Sword hosts a free, online writing diagnostic (the WritersDiet Test). You can submit a sample of up to 1,000 words of text and receive feedback on whether your writing is *fit and lean* or *flabby*. The diagnostic will not identify errors in grammar. Instead, it rates five categories of language use: verbs, nouns, prepositions, waste words (it, this, that, there), and adjectives and adverbs. Use the feedback to reflect on and edit your writing.

Use the WritersDiet Test to improve student writing

Use the WritersDiet Test to help students improve and edit their writing. Sword (nd) advises instructors to assign a short assignment (2 or 3 paragraphs with at least 300 words) to give students practice with self-editing skills. Discuss how students should interpret the diagnostic feedback. Ask them to edit and resubmit their assignment to the WritersDiet Test and include copies of the diagnostic feedback from both diagnostic evaluations when they submit their final assignment for grading. You might require students to write a short reflection about what they learned about writing by using the WritersDiet Test.

Resources:

Sword, H. (2012). *Stylish academic writing*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Sword, H. (nd). Teaching with the Writer's Diet. <http://www.writersdiet.com/WT.php?resources>

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