Essay First Aid

Writing IS Rewriting. Its not the glamorous, inspiration driven image our culture perpetuates of artists. Writing is a discipline, and learning to rewrite well and to become a good editor of our own work takes time, but here are some tools to help your essay SOUND and READ better right now.

1. Look for repetitions. Do you rely on beginning sentences with the same word? Don’t. Do multiple sentences have the same subject? Combine them and cut the now unnecessary words.

2. Circle every instance of “to be”-- IS, ARE, AM, etc. “To Be” is a lazy verb. It has no real action, and sentences should contain an action. Good action verbs help the reader to visualize what we’re writing about. They also help establish a tone.

3. Underline every preposition--to, in, toward, etc. We’re not going to get rid of all of these, but frequently we create wordy constructions and hide the subject of our sentence. In every sentence, Something needs to DO Something. Underlining prepositions will help us find those somethings.

4. Ask “What is the ACTION?” Sometimes, our verb choice didn’t include an action. Don’t tell the audience that Jill is going to the store.” Jill drove to the store.

5. Which covers this step, change the action to a simple verb. Cut the helping verbs if you can. For most things, prefer the simple past tense. If writing an analysis of a work of art, use the simple present tense.

6. Put the DOER in the subject position. Don’t let it hide somewhere in the middle or at the end of your sentence.

7. If something can be written with fewer words, write it with fewer words.

This might take some time, but the rewards are great. You can cut down on confusing, monotonous, and clunky expressions that lead to an overall negative reception of what you’ve written.
Some EXAMPLES
(“to be” and prepositions underlined)

1. The point I wish to make is that the employees working at this company are in need of a much better manager of their money.

Revised: Company employees need a better money manager.

(It cuts all the filler and the Do-er, the employees, are in the subject. It also cuts the first person... we didn’t need to tell the audience that we’re trying to make a point. That’s what writing is, trying to make a point. You can easily cut out all references to personal point of view.)

2. In today’s society, there are many things needed by students if they are going to be able to afford going to the school of their choice.

Revised: To successfully navigate the escalating costs of education, today’s student requires better financial guidance.

(Its not a lot shorter, but the action is more clearly stated and there aren’t as many grammatical fillers. I can make it shorter yet, but we need to remember to look for better nouns and verbs. Its not only about cutting down a word count. Its about eliminating filler and being less vague).

You try:

1. It is common sense that the politicians in Washington are already in cahoots with big business for a long time now.

2. After taking several classes at HACC, and after being in the workplace for a number of years, I think there are some things missing in the curriculum that would help students to make themselves better prepared to become successful candidates in their job searches.