

The ID Writing Cheat Sheet

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This is the companion sheet to my article on writing for instructional designers. I condensed the banned-word swaps, the 10-point self-edit checklist, and the rewrite pairs onto a few pages you can print and keep next to your storyboard. Run every draft through it before you ship.

The banned-word swap table

These words and phrases show up in almost every corporate course I review. Each one makes your writing slower, vaguer, or less human. Swap them on sight.

Word or phrase	Why it fails	Write this instead
utilize	A three-syllable way to say "use." Adds length, adds nothing.	use
leverage	Business jargon that hides the actual action.	use, or name the specific action
in order to	Three words doing the job of one.	to
prior to	Stiff and formal. Nobody says this out loud.	before
ensure	Policy-manual language.	make sure
upon completion of this module	Reads like a compliance memo, not a person talking.	by the end of this module
the learner will be able to	Talks about the reader in third person. Distancing.	you'll be able to
it is important to note that	If it matters, say it. The preamble delays the point.	Cut it. State the point directly.
delve into	Vague and inflated. What are you actually doing?	cover, explain, walk through
comprehensive	An empty promise word.	Cut it, or list what the course actually covers.
seamless	Marketing filler. It describes nothing observable.	Describe what actually happens, step by step.
unlock	Vague metaphor for an outcome you should name.	Name the concrete outcome.
best practices	Names a category instead of a behavior.	Name the specific practice.
a variety of / a number of	Fake precision. How many? Which ones?	Give the number or the list, or cut it.

facilitate	Abstract verb that blurs who does what.	help, run, lead
robust	Filler adjective. Robust how?	Cut it, or state the specific strength.

Tip

the pattern behind every swap is the same. Prefer the short word, the concrete noun, and the verb a real person would say out loud.

The 10-point self-edit checklist

Print this page and run it against every storyboard draft. Check each box only when the draft actually passes, not when you intend to fix it later.

- ☐ **Conversational tone.** It reads like something I would say to a colleague, not like a policy manual.
- ☐ **Active voice.** The subject of each sentence does the action. "You submit the form," not "the form is submitted."
- ☐ **Show, don't tell.** Every abstract claim is backed by a concrete example the reader can picture.
- ☐ **Simple language.** No word the reader would need to look up, and no jargon without a plain definition.
- ☐ **Correct commas.** Every comma marks a real pause, and none of them splice two full sentences together.
- ☐ **Second person.** I write to "you," not to "the learner" or "employees."
- ☐ **No filler.** Every "in order to," "it is important to note," and "as previously mentioned" is gone.
- ☐ **Short sentences.** Anything over 25 words is split or cut.
- ☐ **One idea per screen.** Each screen makes one point, and the point comes first.
- ☐ **Read aloud.** I read the final draft out loud and fixed every spot where I stumbled.

The read-it-aloud test

Read every screen out loud before you ship it. If you run out of breath, stumble, or hear something you would never say to a real person, rewrite that line. Then paste the draft into a readability checker and aim for grade 8 or below. Lower reading levels serve every audience, including experts.

Before and after rewrites

Four rewrites from the article, condensed. Each one shows a checklist item applied to a real line of course copy.

Rewrite 1: passive to active

Before	After
The safety form must be completed by all employees prior to the commencement of the shift.	Complete the safety form before your shift starts.

Rewrite 2: compliance memo to plain promise

Before	After
Upon completion of this module, the learner will be able to utilize the escalation framework to ensure timely resolution of customer issues.	By the end of this module, you'll know when to escalate a customer issue and who to send it to.

Rewrite 3: telling to showing

Before	After
Poor communication can have a significant negative impact on team performance.	Maria's handoff note never reached the night shift. The client waited three days for an answer and then called her boss. That is what one missed handoff costs.

Rewrite 4: bloated to simple

Before	After
This comprehensive course will delve into a variety of best practices for leveraging effective feedback conversations.	This course teaches you how to give feedback your team will act on.

Tip

when a rewrite feels risky, test it on one person from your actual audience. If they understand it faster than the original, ship it.

Have any questions? Email me at devlin@devlinpeck.com