

Case Study: Ivy League Business Publication

Phase 1: Simplify

What happens when you marry the worst of business writing and academic writing? You get a lot of abstractions, buzzwords, and meandering off the point. With the right tools, you can spot these problems and fix them. Consider the following example from a management school at an Ivy League school. The subject of the case study is a Norwegian energy company called Statoil.

The original passage	A quick critique
<p>Internationalization represented something of a break with Statoil's traditional mission to be an instrument in the exploitation of the oil finds on the Norwegian Continental Shelf. To be sure, the company had engaged in significant international operations before the late 1990s, as the company sold its wares on the global market. But as the decade came to a close, Statoil began to also compete for new leases across the globe. Observers argued that the move represented a new understanding of the company's identity. Rather than being just a tool to develop a particular oil field, one historian of the company noted that Statoil "saw itself first and foremost as a technology company, driven primarily by the purpose of mastering, developing, and deploying technological and operational competences." Supporters argued that allowing this technological expertise to wither away as Norway's national oil fields depleted would be wasteful. Furthermore, it would harm those enterprises in Norway that had developed to support the oil industry.</p>	<p>Internationalization: Unclear buzzword. something of a break: This is a needless hedge. Is it a break or not? Also, it's not clear right away what "break" means. to be an instrument: Vague and passive. Sounds as if the company were selected (by God?) to exploit the oceans. in the exploitation: Vague and loaded term. To be sure: Unnecessary use of an emphatic. had engaged in: Vague. What does "engage" mean? significant international operations: Vague summary phrase sold its wares: "Wares" is usually used in a different way. as the decade came to a close: The 1990s? If so, it's redundant. began to also compete: Compete with whom? You mean: <i>bid for oil leases</i>? Rather than just being a tool: This states the company as a passive instrument. A tool is an object used by someone. one historian of the company: With the previous phrase, this is a hanging modifier. to develop a particular oil field: the company operated in kore than one "field" driven primarily: Passive, vague, and hedging. "Primarily" suggests a singular focus, but this sentence lists more. Supporters argued: Who? Shareholders? Customers? The government? to wither away: Passive description. Furthermore, it: What's "it" in this sentence? What's the antecedent? those industries in Norway that had developed: Vague about "those industries." Also, "that had developed" is unnecessary.</p>

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To see how we might clarify this passage, turn to the next page

Phase 1: Simplify (Cont.)

The original passage	The revised passage
Internationalization represented something of a break with Statoil's traditional mission to be an instrument in the exploitation of the oil finds on the Norwegian Continental Shelf. To be sure, the company had engaged in significant international operations before the late 1990s, as the company sold its wares on the global market. But as the decade came to a close, Statoil began to also compete for new leases across the globe. Observers argued that the move represented a new understanding of the company's identity. Rather than being just a tool to develop a particular oil field, one historian of the company noted that Statoil "saw itself first and foremost as a technology company, driven primarily by the purpose of mastering, developing, and deploying technological and operational competences." Supporters argued that allowing this technological expertise to wither away as Norway's national oil fields depleted would be wasteful. Furthermore, it would harm those enterprises in Norway that had developed to support the oil industry.	After years developing oil off the coast of Norway, Statoil expanded its operations across the world. All along, Statoil sold oil to global markets. In the late 1990s, Statoil bid to develop leases globally. This move shifted Statoil's identity. Now, as one expert noted, Statoil was a technology company. If Statoil failed to deploy its technical capacity, its greatest asset would wither. At the same time, Norwegian industries would lose business.

This is the most important work of our revision: cutting vague passages, clutter, and redundancies.

The old version is 161 words in seven sentences, or 23 words per sentence. The new version is 71 words and seven sentences, about 10 words per sentence.

Just by simplifying the passage, we start to see what matters most—and we can discern a story. But we still have some work to do.

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Phases 2 and 3: Clarify and Storify

The revised passage	Ideas about the passage's essential point
After years developing oil off the coast of Norway, Statoil expanded its operations across the world. All along, Statoil sold oil to global markets. In the late 1990s, Statoil bid to develop leases globally. This move shifted Statoil's identity. Now, as one expert noted, Statoil was a technology company. If Statoil failed to deploy its technical capacity, its greatest asset would wither. At the same time, Norwegian industries would lose business.	<i>Now, for the sake of clarity, we need to ask: what's the most important concept here?</i> <i>From what we can see here, it's that global operations turned Statoil into a technology company.</i> <i>Let's see how we can reflect that focus—and storify this point.</i>

If you read closely, you can see the beginnings of a point: that globalism caused Statoil to become more than an oil company. It was now a technology company.

Why does that matter? A later passage in the study notes that technology could also be used to develop wind farms off the coast of Norway.

We might think of the story like this:

Global operations → Greater focus on sea-based technology → capacity for wind farms

Let's see how that plays out in one more revision of the passage.

With these changes, the passage now tells a story. We see Statoil transform from a regional oil company to a global firm based on technology, which gave it the ability to embrace green energy.

One final point

Did we lose some important ideas as we ruthlessly cut and revised this passage? Maybe. But now that we have cut the clutter and identified the essence of the passage, we can add new materials.