Making Repetition Count

THE ART OF USING THE SAME WORD TWICE

CDT Ava Lusskin (’22)

How many times can you repeat a word in the same sentence before it is redundant? what about in the same paragraph? in the same paper?

Trick question! There is no right answer, but every writer faces this dilemma. Deciding when repetition is effective or necessary versus when it actually turns into redundancy is a perpetual challenge.

Fortunately, there are concrete ways of thinking about this that can help. First, think about effective repetition as coming in three different forms: syntactic repetition (the form of your sentences), lexical (individual words), and conceptual (your ideas). On the other hand, you can use these same frameworks to spot redundancy, that is, repetition that is unintentional or simply ineffective. Specifically, this guide will walk you through different examples of lexical and conceptual redundancy in terms of spotting redundant pairs, modifiers, and categories.

Knowing when to use repetition as an effective argumentative and stylistic choice as well as when to switch it up to avoid redundancy are valuable skills. Let’s get started...

Basic Definitions

How do redundancy and repetition differ? How can you recognize each in your writing? Here are some working definitions:

Redundancy is often unintentional, a by-product of going fast and not adequately revising. Eliminating redundancy will strengthen your writing by making it more exact, concise, and readable. Some common kinds of redundancy:

◊ Redundant pairs: two words with the same meaning used in a row
◊ Redundant modifiers: two words used together, but the one (the noun) already implies the other (the adjective or modifier)
◊ Redundant categories: one word signals a category that makes the other word redundant

Repetition, on the other hand, is all about being purposeful. Usually you’ll use repetition for emphasis—to make points stick for your reader. The key frameworks here are:

◊ Syntactic repetition: using the same sentence structure/signposting, often to link different concepts
◊ Lexical repetition: using the same word throughout a section, often to build momentum
◊ Conceptual repetition: repeating the same idea in various ways to give texture and aid in coherence
Speaking vs. Writing

A lot of times the issue of how to use repetition in valuable ways comes down to whether you are speaking or writing.

All of us can improve our formal and informal speech by using strategic repetition. For instance, you can use repetition to draw your listeners’ attention to the parts of a speech that you want to highlight. Just as you adjust the tone of your voice to make others follow, repeat certain words or structures to do the same.

Whether giving a presentation at work, conducting a job interview, or simply engaging in an intellectual conversation, you have the power to guide the conversation!

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In writing too—whether an email, memo, or scholarly article—repetition can help draw attention to what you want to highlight. Using patterns and conceptual repetition makes the job of the reader easier, which strengthens the reception of your message.

Two tips: practice with patterns by using similar structures interspersed with unique ones; play with either directly or indirectly repeating ideas from top to bottom of your writing. Both will enhance the impact of your words.