

Filler & Filter Words

Two Rules. Each traces to a legitimate craft observation. Each has been corrupted into an absolute prohibition that costs writers more than it saves them.

The Source

Filler Words: William Zinsser's *On Writing Well* (1976) and the broader plain-English movement argued that clutter buries meaning. Words like "just," "very," "really," and "that" often add nothing and can be cut without loss. Zinsser was writing about expository prose — journalism, essays, non-fiction — and his point was that accumulation of qualifiers and throat-clearing words dilutes clarity. Sound advice, specific to its context.

Filter Words: Deep point-of-view instruction, developed primarily in romance and genre fiction teaching, observed that verbs like "felt," "saw," "noticed," "heard," and "realized" create a layer between the reader and the character's experience. "She felt cold" tells. "Cold bit through her coat" shows. The instruction was to remove perceptual filter verbs in favor of direct sensory experience, pulling the reader into immediate immersion. Legitimate technique for a specific POV strategy.

The Morph

Each observation follows the same corruption path: contextual advice becomes a category prohibition, and the category prohibition becomes mechanical deletion.

Filler Words: Zinsser never said "just" is always wrong. He said accumulation of clutter should be interrogated. The workshop echo chamber turned interrogation into prohibition. Editing software now flags every instance of "just," "very," and "really" as errors, training writers to delete on sight rather than read for function. The morph:

1. Zinsser criticizes accumulated clutter in expository prose
2. Becomes "cut filler words"
3. Becomes "never use just, very, really, or that"
4. Becomes automated deletion of flagged words regardless of function
5. Writers remove words that are carrying meaning, register, or rhythm

Filter Words: The deep-POV instruction is a technique suited to a specific POV strategy in specific genres. It escaped its context. Workshop leaders began applying it universally — to literary fiction,

omniscient narration, first-person memoir voice — where it has no business being applied at all. The morph:

1. Deep POV technique developed for romance and genre immediacy fiction
2. Becomes "cut filter words"
3. Becomes "never use felt, saw, noticed, heard, realized"
4. Applied regardless of POV strategy, narrative distance, or genre
5. Writers lose the tools of interiority, reflection, and mediated experience

The Reality

"Just" is often filler. It is not always filler.

1. "She just looked at him" — "just" means simply, only, with nothing more. Remove it and the sentence loses its dismissiveness.
2. "I just wanted to say thank you" — the word carries conversational softness and emotional qualification. Remove it and the character sounds formal or stiff.
3. "He just stood there" — temporal and emotional emphasis. "He stood there" is flatter and different.

"Very" can be intensifier-noise. It can also be the point.

1. "She was very nearly dead" — "very" modifies "nearly," not "dead." It means she was closer to dead than "nearly" alone conveys. Cut it and the sentence changes.
2. "It was very quiet" — sometimes the degree of quiet is what matters. "It was quiet" is not the same sentence in a scene built on suffocating stillness.

Filter words exist on a spectrum and their value depends entirely on POV strategy and genre.

1. "She felt nothing" — felt is the content. There is no sensory experience to substitute for the absence of sensation. The filter is the point.
2. Henry James built a career on narrators who filter and mediate experience. Stripping filter words from James would not improve him. It would erase him.
3. Toni Morrison uses "she felt" and "she noticed" because her narrators are reflective and interior. The filter is not a defect. It is the strategy.
4. Cormac McCarthy uses "he could see" throughout *The Road*. McCarthy chooses his verbs deliberately. The filter constructions are there on purpose.

What Works: FILLER WORDS

Cutting FILLER words works when:

1. The word adds no meaning and the sentence reads identically without it
2. Accumulation has made the words invisible and collectively deadening
3. The qualifier has collapsed into noise: "It was just really very beautiful" — the modifiers have piled up past meaning

What Fails: FILLER WORDS

Blanket FILLER word deletion fails when:

1. "Just" is carrying conversational register, emotional softening, or limiting meaning
2. "Very" is modifying a word that genuinely requires degree qualification
3. "Really" is doing rhetorical work inside a character's voice or dialogue
4. "That" is providing necessary syntactic clarity in a complex clause
5. Automated deletion replaces editorial judgment with mechanical flagging

What Works: FILTER WORDS

Cutting FILTER words works when:

1. Deep, immediate POV is the strategy and the genre convention supports immersive first-person or close-third experience
2. The filter is genuinely redundant because context already establishes who is perceiving
3. Sensory directness is what the scene requires and the filter interrupts it

What Fails: FILTER WORDS

Blanket filter-word deletion fails when:

1. The POV strategy is mediated, reflective, or omniscient rather than deep-immediate
2. The filter is the content — absence of sensation, uncertainty of perception, delayed realization
3. Genre convention or narrative voice depends on interiority markers
4. The rule imported from genre deep-POV teaching is applied to literary or omniscient fiction where it has no basis

The Actual Principle

Every word should be doing work. That is the principle behind all three rules on this list. Not "never use just." Not "cut all filter words." Not "two words is always worse than one." The actual principle is: read your sentences and ask whether each word is earning its place.

Filler words that add nothing can go. Filter words that create distance where you want immediacy can go. Genuine tautologies can go. Words doing real work — carrying meaning, register, rhythm, grammatical precision, or emotional qualification — stay.

Or more simply: Know what each word is doing. Cut it only when it isn't doing anything.

Why This Corruption Matters

These three rules represent a pattern of craft instruction that takes a legitimate observation, removes its context, converts it into a prohibition, and then arms writers with a deletion criterion. The damage accumulates in predictable ways:

1. The filter-word prohibition applied to literary fiction strips away the tools of interiority and reflection that define the mode and separate it from genre fiction's different aims
2. Filler-word automation teaches writers to substitute software judgment for editorial reading, which is the opposite of developing craft

3. Writers learn to distrust natural English rather than developing judgment about when natural English is serving them and when it isn't
4. The focus shifts from meaning to metrics — word count, flag count, rule compliance — and away from whether the prose is doing what the story needs

Each of these craft observations, stated with its context intact, is worth knowing. Interrogate your qualifiers. Consider whether filter verbs are serving your POV strategy.

The problem is not the observation. The problem is the prescription. Once advice becomes a rule, writers stop reading their sentences and start counting their sins. That is where craft instruction turns into craft damage.