Loser Sentences
(adapted from Professor Annmarie Drury)

We need to train ourselves to spot loser sentences—sentences that don't deliver or that deliver awkwardly—and to revise these sentences. As some of you have suggested in class, one secret to revising sentences is to read your prose out loud: if your sentences can pass "the conversation test," you're doing okay. When you rewrite, ask yourself what you're trying to say, then work at saying it.

Here are some common problems:

- o word order or syntax
- o imprecision or word choice—using words that don't mean what the writer means
- o abstract subject (so the reader can't grasp the meaning; "this" as a noun instead of an adjective is one harbinger of this problem)
- o passive voice or weak verbs – especially, over-reliance on forms of the verb "to be"
- o lack of clarity, often generated by over-reliance on abstract nouns or by use of a vague term when the essay's job is precisely to assign a specific characterization to a concept important to the discussion
- o verbosity (wordiness), lack of concision
- o official style (too much high diction, ponderous nouns, weak verbs, strings of prepositions)
- o inanity, superficiality, cliché
- o grammatical and punctuation mistakes
- o compression—two sentences smashed into one

When you rewrite, ask yourself what the writer is trying to say, then just say it!

Can you characterize the problems in the following sentences? Can you suggest ways of rewriting them?

The obvious contrast between the clothing of the females in two portraits by the same artist reflects on the differing attitudes towards the sexuality of young women versus that of older women.

Presented with a literary cloud, obscuring crucial information such as historical facts coerced the Europeans to study the language to even greater depths. Everything in sum, with both similarities and differences of literatures alluded to consistently in Victorian works on Sanskrit, it makes no sense that interest in the language would extend only as far as interest in practical uses for the resulting power knowledge of it would bring.