

Avoiding Wordiness: Writing with Concision and Brevity

“Concision is brevity relative to purpose” (Kane, 1988, p. 281).

Writing with concision focuses on eliminating *wordiness*, which occurs when more words than necessary are used to express a thought. Excessive modifiers, unnecessary phrases, redundancy, clichés, jargon, flowery writing, and useless wording result in wordiness that can distract the reader. The revision stage of the writing process allows for pruning of these excess words. **Concise writing delivers a clear message to the reader.** However, be careful not to mistake brevity for conciseness. Simply because it is short, a sentence would not be considered concise if it lacks the necessary words to convey the intended message. During revision, examine sentence structure for ways to condense the phrasing and eliminate unnecessary words. For example, lengthy clauses and phrases separating your subject and verb tend to weaken your sentence structure and meaning.

“To achieve conciseness, you must ask whether every word you write is doing its work, carrying its proper load of meaning, and helping its neighbors with their loads (Kierzek & Gibson, 1977, p. 394). Vary your sentence lengths to introduce variety into your writing that will engage and maintain the reader’s attention. Eliminating wordiness improves the clarity, fluency, and precision in your written communication. Identify those words that add essential meaning to the sentence and prune those words that are “fillers.” As you revise the draft, apply the strategies below for eliminating wordiness in sentence structure.

Writing Strategies to Eliminate Wordiness and Make Sentences More Concise

- Use active rather than passive verbs to simplify sentence structure.
 - Example: The accounting prospectus **was submitted by** the auditor last week.
 - Revised: The auditor submitted the prospectus last week.
- Eliminate lengthy interrupting phrases and clauses separating subjects from verbs.
 - Example: Time management, **which tends to be overlooked by students who attempt to complete too many assignments at once, especially toward the end of a term**, becomes an even more critical tool when balancing school and work schedules.
 - Revised: Often overlooked by students juggling multiple assignments, time management becomes even more critical when balancing school and work schedules.
- Reword unnecessary infinitive phrases.
 - Example: The duty of the student ambassador **is to greet** all incoming freshmen.
 - Revised: The student ambassador greets all incoming freshmen.
- Avoid the use of expletives (it is, there are, etc.) at the beginning of sentences.
 - Example: **It is** the professor who establishes the grading rubric for the course.
 - Revised: The professor sets the course grading rubric.

- **Eliminate unnecessary modifiers.**
 - Example: Kevin cannot manage that without **some sort of** additional help.
 - Revised: Kevin cannot manage that without additional help.
- **Revise wordy phrases as single words.**
 - Example: The sprinter **who runs fastest** will receive a spot on the team.
 - Revised: The fastest sprinter will receive a team spot.
- **Revise unnecessary relative clauses (starting with *that, who, which*) as phrases.**
 - Example: The announcement, **which was** released just yesterday, was devastating.
 - Revised: The announcement released yesterday was devastating.
- **Avoid redundancy: Omit repetitive wording, or words that provide excessive detail.**
 - Example: Visualize a mental image of someone engaged in the musical pursuit of learning to master the fundamentals of playing the violin.
 - Revised: Picture someone learning to play the violin.
- **Delete empty words and phrases that serve as “fillers” or “monologues.”**

Examples of unnecessary words and phrases to delete include the following: *generally, apparently, basically, particularly, really, I believe, I feel, virtually, needless to say, certainly, obviously, it has been noted that, according to most measures, as we have seen, what others have called, for the most part, in a very real sense*, etc. **Such words and phrases unnecessarily complicate the sentence.** Avoid phrasing that references other people’s thinking or reactions (*some might say, many also believe*) that can lead to generalities. Instead, communicate the intended meaning through source citation.

Eliminate “public-speaking fillers” in your writing. Public speakers will sometimes choose to fill in the gaps of silence with such words and phrases as “so, well, next, then, all in all, now, um, uh, etc.” Transitional words and sentences can be used effectively in shifting to a new topic in your writing; however, words and phrases that are used to fill the gaps must be eliminated to avoid wordiness and a conversational tone to your writing. Also, avoid defining what would be considered common knowledge or spelling out what is clearly implied by other words in the sentence: “The counselor’s client was tall *in height*.”

- **Revise wordy phrases as single words. Examples:**
 - appear to be > appear
 - completely finished > finished
 - at this point in time > now
 - had an effect upon > influenced
 - the purpose of > for
 - until such a time > until
 - due to the fact that > because
 - a majority of > most
 - as a consequence of > consequently
 - in close proximity > near
 - in order to > to
 - in the event that > if

➤ **Change verb phrases to single active verbs.** Examples:

- is a reflection of > reflect
- make an investigation of > investigate
- take into consideration > consider
- make a compilation of > compile

➤ **Eliminate clichés and flowery writing (excessive adjectives and adverbs).**

Wordiness results from redundancy, empty words/phrases, and overly expressive writing that often uses repetitive adjectives and adverbs. Unless part of a direct quote, clichés must be deleted during the revision stage as a basic rule of diction. Style guides advise the writer to eliminate all clichés in academic writing. Excessive wording weakens the strength of the sentence and dilutes the message. As you revise your draft, strive to eliminate every word that serves no purpose in the sentence. Delete adverbs that convey the same meaning as the verbs they modify and adjectives that serve no function other than repeating another noun modifier already in the sentence.

While we might be attached to our words or the sound of our phrasing, clarity and brevity are pillars of writing that help convey the essential meaning to the reader. In the fourth edition of their classic, *The Elements of Style*, Strunk and White (2000) put it this way:

Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all sentences short, or avoid all detail and treat subjects only in outline, but that every word tell. (p. 23)

Practice

Revise the following sentences to eliminate wordiness. (Suggested revisions appear following the sentences below.)

1. Regardless of time of day, whenever anyone called for someone to help in doing some certain thing, Karen was always the very first person to volunteer her precious time and lend her much needed help for the cause at hand.
2. This spirit of cooperation is entirely essential and completely necessary for anyone to have in order to get along with other people and fellow citizens, and this is a particular quality that Christy possessed in amply supply and abundance.
3. Jonathan found his neighbor who happened to live next door to him to be quite possibly one of the most helpful and caring humans that he had ever encountered in his life.
4. Although they were basically several in number at the period of time when the specific research was conducted, the authors that were part of the research team generally felt that they could have quite possibly used several more researchers to fully and adequately complete the study.
5. It is highly unlikely and actually very unusual to find someone who has rarely, or quite possibly never, told a deliberate lie on purpose.
6. Mark was really late to his English class due to the fact that he had to finish his very lengthy math test.


7. According to most measures, the specific subjects that are considered the most important by college students are those subject areas of study that have been shown to be especially useful to them beyond the time following their graduation from colleges and universities.
8. Jake willingly provided a detailed and thorough explanation of the unique problem to his grandfather whose name is Jerry.
9. It is fully expected that the new revised schedule will be announced by the administration within the course of the next few days.
10. If you go to the store, you will see that the store is closed on Sunday due to the fact that the storeowner likes to go to church.
11. Terrible and unspeakable tragedy might be caused when people willingly and without hesitation disobey rules that have been established by the governing authorities who are in charge for the safety of all people under their jurisdiction.
12. During the period of time when I lived in the great state of Ohio, it was my clear intention to go to college in Texas.

Suggested Revisions: [Note: The proposed revisions are suggestions for eliminating wordiness. You may choose to rephrase with other sentence constructions that accomplish the goal of writing concisely without sacrificing the intended meaning.]

1. Whenever anyone called for help, Karen was always the first to volunteer.
2. Christy had the spirit of cooperation required to get along with people.
3. Jonathan found his neighbor to be helpful and caring.
4. Though several authors researched the topic, they felt more researchers were needed for a thorough study.
5. Finding someone who has never deliberately lied is rare.
6. The long math test made Mark late to English class.
7. College students consider the most important courses to be the ones that prove the most useful after graduation.
8. Jake explained the problem to his grandfather Jerry.
9. Administration is expected to announce the revised schedule in a few days.
10. The store is closed Sundays because the owner goes to church.
11. Tragedy may result when people disobey government rules.
12. When living in Ohio, I intended on going to a Texas college.

References

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- Strunk, W., Jr., & White, E.B. (2000). *The elements of style* (4th ed.). Pearson Education.

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