



Conciseness: Methods of Eliminating Wordiness

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For practice editing sentences to make them more concise, see our exercises on this topic at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gl_conciseEX1.html

1. Eliminate unnecessary determiners and modifiers

Writers sometimes clog up their prose with one or more extra words or phrases that seem to determine narrowly or to modify the meaning of a noun but don't actually add to the meaning of the sentence. Although such words and phrases can be meaningful in the appropriate context, they are often used as "filler" and can easily be eliminated.

Wordy

Any *particular type of* dessert is fine with me.

Balancing the budget by Friday is an impossibility without *some kind of* extra help.

More Concise

Any dessert is fine with me.

Balancing the budget by Friday is impossible without extra help.

Here's a list of some words and phrases that can often be pruned away to make sentences clearer:

kind of sort of type of specific	really basically for all intents and purposes particular	definitely actually generally individual
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Wordy

For all intents and purposes, American industrial productivity generally depends on certain factors that are really more psychological in kind than of any given technological aspect.

More Concise

American industrial productivity depends more on psychological than on technological factors.

2. Change phrases into single words

Using phrases to convey meaning that could be presented in a single word contributes to wordiness. Convert phrases into single words when possible.

Wordy

The employee *with ambition* ...

The department *showing the best performance* ...

Jeff Converse, *our chief of consulting*, suggested at our last board meeting *the installation of microfilm equipment* in the department *of data processing*.

As you carefully read what you have written to improve your wording and catch small errors of spelling, punctuation, and so on, the thing to do before you do anything else is to try to see where a series of words expressing action could replace the ideas found in nouns rather than verbs.

More Concise

The ambitious employee...

The best-performing department...

At our last board meeting, Chief Consultant Jeff Converse suggested that we install microfilm equipment in the data processing department.

As you edit, first find nominalizations that you can replace with verb phrases.

3. Change unnecessary *that* , *who* , and *which* clauses into phrases

Using a clause to convey meaning that could be presented in a phrase or even a word contributes to wordiness. Convert modifying clauses into phrases or single words when possible.

Wordy

The report, *which was released recently* ...

All applicants *who are interested in the job* must...

The system *that is most efficient and accurate* ...

More Concise

The recently released report...

All job applicants must...

The most efficient and accurate system...

4. Avoid overusing expletives at the beginning of sentences

Expletives are phrases of the form *it + be -verb* or *there + be -verb*. Such expressions can be rhetorically effective for emphasis in some situations, but overuse or unnecessary use of expletive constructions creates wordy prose. Take the following example: "It is imperative that we find a solution." The same meaning could be expressed with this more succinct wording: "We must find a solution." But using the expletive construction allows the writer to emphasize the urgency of the situation by placing the word *imperative* near the beginning of the sentence, so the version with the expletive may be preferable. Still, you should generally avoid excessive or unnecessary use of expletives. The most common kind of unnecessary expletive construction involves an expletive followed by a noun and a relative clause beginning with *that* , *which* , or *who* . In most cases, you can create a more concise sentence by eliminating the expletive opening, making the noun the subject of the sentence, and eliminating the relative pronoun.

Wordy

It is the governor *who* signs or vetoes bills.

There are four rules *that* should be observed: ...

There was a big explosion, *which* shook the windows, and people ran into the street.

More Concise

The governor signs or vetoes bills.

Four rules should be observed:...

A big explosion shook the windows, and people ran into the street.

5. Use active rather than passive verbs

See our document on active and passive voice for a more thorough explanation of this topic. It is located at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/grammar/g_actpass.html

Wordy

An account *was opened* by Mrs. Simms.

Your figures *were checked* by the research department.

More Concise

Mrs. Simms opened an account.

The research department checked your figures.

6. Avoid overusing noun forms of verbs

Use verbs when possible rather than noun forms known as *nominalizations*. Sentences with many nominalizations usually have forms of *be* as the main verbs. Using the action verbs disguised in nominalizations as the main verbs--instead of forms of *be*--can help to create engaging rather than dull prose.

Wordy

The function of this department *is* the *collection* of accounts.

The current *focus* of the medical profession *is* disease prevention.

More Concise

This department collects accounts.

The medical profession currently focuses on disease prevention.

7. Reword unnecessary infinitive phrases

Some infinitive phrases can be converted into finite verbs or brief noun phrases. Making such changes also often results in the replacement of a *be*-verb with an action verb.

Wordy

The duty of a clerk is *to check* all incoming mail and *to record* it.

A shortage of tellers at our branch office on Friday and Saturday during rush hours has caused customers *to become dissatisfied* with service.

More Concise

A clerk checks and records all incoming mail.

A teller shortage at our branch office on Friday and Saturday during rush hours has caused customer dissatisfaction.

8. Replace circumlocutions with direct expressions

Circumlocutions are commonly used roundabout expressions that take several words to say what could be said more succinctly. We often overlook them because many such expressions are habitual figures of speech. In writing, though, they should be avoided since they add extra words without extra meaning. Of course, occasionally you may for rhetorical effect decide to use, say, an expletive construction instead of a more succinct expression. These guidelines should be taken as general recommendations, not absolute rules.

Wordy

At this/that point in time...

In accordance with your request...

More Concise

Now/then...

As you requested...

Here are some other common circumlocutions that can be compressed into just one word:

the reason for
for the reason that
owing/due to the fact that
in light of the fact that
considering the fact that
on the grounds that
this is why

=because, since, why

on the occasion of
in a situation in which
under circumstances in which

=when

as regards
in reference to
with regard to
concerning the matter of
where _____ is concerned

=about

it is crucial that
it is necessary that
there is a need/necessity for
it is important that
cannot be avoided

=must, should

is able to
has the opportunity to
has the capacity for
has the ability to

=can

it is possible that
there is a chance that
it could happen that
the possibility exists for

=may, might, could

Wordy

It is possible that nothing will come of these preparations.

She has the ability to influence the outcome.

It is necessary that we take a stand on this pressing issue.

More Concise

Nothing may come of these preparations.

She can influence the outcome

We must take a stand on this pressing issue.

9. Omit words that explain the obvious or provide excessive detail

Be sure always to consider your readers as you draft and revise your writing. If you find passages that explain or describe in detail what would already be obvious to readers, delete or reword them.

Wordy

I received your inquiry yesterday. Yes, we do have...

It goes without saying that we are acquainted with your policy on filing tax returns, and we have every intention of complying with the regulations that you have mentioned.

Imagine a mental picture of someone engaged in the intellectual activity of trying to learn what the rules are for how to play the game of chess.

Baseball, one of our oldest and most popular outdoor summer sports in terms of total attendance at ball parks and viewing on television, has the kind of rhythm of play on the field that alternates between times when players passively wait with no action taking place between the pitches to the batter and then times when they explode into action as the batter hits a pitched ball to one of the players and the player fields it.

More Concise

Yes, we do have...

We intend to comply with the tax-return regulations that you have mentioned.

Imagine someone trying to learn the rules of chess.

Baseball has a rhythm that alternates between waiting and explosive action.

10. Omit repetitive wording

Watch for phrases or longer passages in your writing in which you repeat words with similar meanings. Below are some general examples of unnecessary repetition contrasted with more concise versions, followed by lists and examples of specific redundant word pairs and categories.

Wordy

I would appreciate it if you would bring to the attention of your drafting officers the administrator's dislike of long sentences and paragraphs in messages to the field and in other items drafted for her signature or approval, as well as in all correspondence, reports, and studies. Please encourage your section to keep their sentences short.

The supply manager considered the correcting typewriter an *unneeded luxury*.

Our branch office currently employs *five tellers*. *These tellers* do an excellent job Monday through Thursday but cannot keep up with the rush on Friday and Saturday.

More Concise

Please encourage your drafting officers to keep sentences and paragraphs in letters, reports, and studies short. Dr. Lomas, the administrator, has mentioned that reports and memos drafted for her approval recently have been wordy and thus time-consuming.

The supply manager considered the correcting typewriter a luxury.

Our branch office currently employs five tellers, who do an excellent job Monday through Thursday but cannot keep up with Friday and Saturday rush periods.

Redundant Pairs

Many pairs of words imply each other. *Finish* implies *complete*, so the phrase *completely finish* is redundant in most cases. So are many other pairs of words:

past memories	terrible tragedy
various differences	end result
each individual	final outcome
basic fundamentals	free gift
true facts	past history
important essentials	unexpected surprise
future plans	sudden crisis

A related expression that's not redundant as much as it is illogical is *very unique*. Since *unique* means "one of a kind," adding modifiers of degree such as *very*, *so*, *especially*, *somewhat*, *extremely*, and so on is illogical. One-of-a-kind-ness has no gradations; something is either unique or it is not.

Wordy

Before the travel agent was completely able to finish explaining the various differences among all of the many very unique vacation packages his travel agency was offering, the customer changed her future plans.

More Concise

Before the travel agent finished explaining the differences among the unique vacation packages his travel agency was offering, the customer changed her plans.

Redundant Categories

Specific words imply their general categories, so we usually don't have to state both. We know that a period is a segment of time, that pink is a color, that shiny is an appearance. In each of the following phrases, the general category term can be dropped, leaving just the specific descriptive word:

large in size	of cheap quality
often times	honest in character
of a bright color	of an uncertain condition
heavy in weight	in a confused state
period in time	unusual in nature
round in shape	extreme in degree
at an early time	of a strange type
economics field	

Wordy

During that time period, many car buyers preferred cars that were pink in color and shiny in appearance.

The microscope revealed a group of organisms that were round in shape and peculiar in nature.

More Concise

During that period, many car buyers preferred pink, shiny cars.

The microscope revealed a group of peculiar, round organisms.

The following information must remain intact on every handout printed for distribution.

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