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Summary:

This resource will help you write clearly by eliminating unnecessary words and rearranging your phrases.

Conciseness

The goal of concise writing is to use the most effective words. Concise writing does not always have the fewest words, but it always uses the strongest ones. Writers often fill sentences with weak or unnecessary words that can be deleted or replaced. Words and phrases should be deliberately chosen for the work they are doing. Like bad employees, words that don't accomplish enough should be fired. When only the most effective words remain, writing will be far more concise and readable.

This resource contains general conciseness tips followed by very specific strategies for pruning sentences.

1. Replace several vague words with more powerful and specific words.

Often, writers use several small and ambiguous words to express a concept, wasting energy expressing ideas better relayed through fewer specific words. As a general rule, more specific words lead to more concise writing. Because of the variety of nouns, verbs, and adjectives, most things have a closely corresponding description. Brainstorming or searching a thesaurus can lead to the word best suited for a specific instance. Notice that the examples below actually convey more as they drop in word count.

Wordy: The politician talked about several of the merits of after-school programs in his speech (14 words)
Concise: The politician touted after-school programs in his speech. (8 words)
Wordy: Suzie believed but could not confirm that Billy had feelings of affection for her. (14 words)
Concise: Suzie assumed that Billy adored her. (6 words)
Wordy: Our website has made available many of the things you can use for making a decision on the best dentist. (20 words)
Concise: Our website presents criteria for determining the best dentist. (9 words)
Wordy: Working as a pupil under someone who develops photos was an experience that really helped me learn a lot. (20 words)
Concise: Working as a photo technician's apprentice was an educational experience. (10 words)

2. Interrogate every word in a sentence

Check every word to make sure that it is providing something important and unique to a sentence. If words are dead weight, they can be deleted or replaced. Other sections in this handout cover this concept more specifically, but there are some general examples below containing sentences with words that could be cut.

Wordy: The teacher demonstrated some of the various ways and methods for cutting words from my essay that I had written for class. (22 words)
Concise: The teacher demonstrated methods for cutting words from my essay. (10 words)

Wordy: Eric Clapton and Steve Winwood formed a new band of musicians together in 1969, giving it the ironic name of Blind Faith because early speculation that was spreading everywhere about the band suggested that the new musical group would be good enough to rival the earlier bands that both men had been in, Cream and Traffic, which people had really liked and had been very popular. (66 words)
Concise: Eric Clapton and Steve Winwood formed a new band in 1969, ironically naming it Blind Faith because speculation suggested that the group would rival the musicians' previous popular bands, Cream and Traffic. (32 words)

Wordy: Many have made the wise observation that when a stone is in motion rolling down a hill or incline that that moving stone is not as likely to be covered all over with the kind of thick green moss that grows on stationary unmoving things and becomes a nuisance and suggests that those things haven't moved in a long time and probably won't move any time soon. (67 words)
Concise: A rolling stone gathers no moss. (6 words)

3. Combine Sentences.

Some information does not require a full sentence, and can easily be inserted into another sentence without losing any of its value. To get more strategies for sentence combining, see the handout on Sentence Variety.

Wordy: Ludwig's castles are an astounding marriage of beauty and madness. By his death, he had commissioned three castles. (18 words)
Concise: Ludwig's three castles are an astounding marriage of beauty and madness. (11 words)
Wordy: The supposed crash of a UFO in Roswell, New Mexico aroused interest in
extraterrestrial life. This crash is rumored to have occurred in 1947. (24 words)
Concise: The supposed 1947 crash of a UFO in Roswell, New Mexico aroused interest in extraterrestrial life. (16 words)
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Eliminating Words

1. Eliminate words that explain the obvious or provide excessive detail

Always consider readers while drafting and revising writing. If passages explain or describe details that would already be obvious to readers, delete or reword them. Readers are also very adept at filling in the non-essential aspects of a narrative, as in the fourth example.

Wordy: I received your inquiry that you wrote about tennis rackets yesterday, and read it thoroughly. Yes, we do have... (19 words)
Concise: I received your inquiry about tennis rackets yesterday. Yes, we do have... (12 words)
Wordy: 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. (29 words)
Concise: We intend to comply with the tax-return regulations that you have mentioned. (12 words)
Wordy: 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. (27 words)
Concise: Imagine someone trying to learn the rules of chess. (9 words)
Wordy: After booking a ticket to Dallas from a travel agent, I packed my bags and arranged for a taxi to the airport. Once there, I checked in, went through security, and was ready to board. But problems beyond my control led to a three-hour delay before takeoff. (47 words)
Concise: My flight to Dallas was delayed for three hours. (9 words)
Wordy: 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. (77 words)
Concise: Baseball has a rhythm that alternates between waiting and explosive action. (11 words)
2. 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. (9 words)
**Concise:** Any dessert is fine with me. (6 words)

**Wordy:** Balancing the budget by Friday is an impossibility without some kind of extra help. (14 words)
**Concise:** Balancing the budget by Friday is impossible without extra help. (10 words)

**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. (26 words)
**Concise:** American industrial productivity depends more on psychological than on technological factors. (11 words)

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
- really
- basically
- for all intents and purposes
- definitely
- actually
- generally
- individual
- specific
- particular

3. Omit repetitive wording

Watch for phrases or longer passages which repeat words with similar meanings. Words that don't build on the content of sentences or paragraphs are rarely necessary.

**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. (56 words)
**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. (37 words)
Wordy: The supply manager considered the correcting typewriter an unneeded luxury.
(10 words)
Concise: The supply manager considered the correcting typewriter a luxury. (9 words)
Wordy: 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. (27 words)
Concise: 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.
(25 words)

4. Omit 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
- various differences
- each individual
- basic fundamentals
- true facts
- important essentials
- future plans
- terrible tragedy
- end result
- final outcome
- free gift
- past history
- unexpected surprise
- 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. (33 words)
Concise: Before the travel agent finished explaining the differences among the unique
vacation packages his travel agency was offering, the customer changed her plans. (23
words)
5. Omit 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
- often times
- of a bright color
- heavy in weight
- period in time
- round in shape
- at an early time
- economics field
- of cheap quality
- honest in character
- of an uncertain condition
- in a confused state
- unusual in nature
- extreme in degree
- of a strange type

Wordy: During that time period, many car buyers preferred cars that were pink in color and shiny in appearance. (18 words)
Concise: During that period, many car buyers preferred pink, shiny cars. (10 words)
Wordy: The microscope revealed a group of organisms that were round in shape and peculiar in nature. (16 words)
Concise: The microscope revealed a group of peculiar, round organisms. (9 words)
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Changing Phrases

1. Change phrases into single-words and adjectives

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... (4 words)
Concise: The ambitious employee... (3 words)
Wordy: The department showing the best performance... (6 words)
Concise: The best-performing department... (4 words)
Wordy: Jeff Converse, our chief of consulting, suggested at our last board meeting the installation of microfilm equipment in the department of data processing. (23 words)
Concise: At our last board meeting, Chief Consultant Jeff Converse suggested that we install microfilm equipment in the data processing department. (20 words)
Wordy: We read the letter we received yesterday and reviewed it thoroughly.
Concise: We thoroughly read the letter we received yesterday.
Wordy: 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. (53 words)
Concise: As you edit, first find nominalizations that you can replace with verb phrases. (13 words)

2. 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... (6 words)
Concise: The recently released report... (4 words)
Wordy: All applicants who are interested in the job must... (9 words)
Concise: All job applicants must... (4 words)
Wordy: The system that is most efficient and accurate... (8 words)
Concise: The most efficient and accurate system... (6 words)

3. Change Passive Verbs into Active Verbs

See our document on active and passive voice for a more thorough explanation of this topic.

Wordy: An account was opened by Mrs. Simms. (7 words)
Concise: Mrs. Simms opened an account. (5 words)
Wordy: Your figures were checked by the research department. (8 words)
Concise: The research department checked your figures. (6 words)

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Avoid Common Pitfalls

1. 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, concise sentences can be created 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. (9 words)
**Concise:** The governor signs or vetoes bills. (6 words)

**Wordy:** There are four rules that should be observed: ... (8 words)
**Concise:** Four rules should be observed: ... (5 words)

**Wordy:** There was a big explosion, which shook the windows, and people ran into the street. (15 words)
**Concise:** A big explosion shook the windows, and people ran into the street. (12 words)

2. 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. (10 words)
**Concise:** This department collects accounts. (4 words)

**Wordy:** The current focus of the medical profession is disease prevention. (10 words)
**Concise:** The medical profession currently focuses on disease prevention. (8 words)

3. Avoid 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. (15 words)
**Concise:** A clerk checks and records all incoming mail. (8 words)

**Wordy:** A shortage of tellers at our branch office on Friday and Saturday during rush hours has caused customers to become dissatisfied with service. (23 words)
**Concise:** A teller shortage at our branch office on Friday and Saturday during rush hours has caused customer dissatisfaction. (18 words)

4. Avoid circumlocutions in favor of 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... (2/4 words)
**Concise:** Now/then... (1 word)

**Wordy:** In accordance with your request... (5 words)
**Concise:** As you requested... (3 words)

Below are some other words which may simplify lengthier circumlocutions.

- "because," "since," "why" =
  - 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

- "when" =
  - on the occasion of
  - in a situation in which
  - under circumstances in which

- "about" =
  - as regards
  - in reference to
• with regard to
• concerning the matter of
• where ________ is concerned

• "must," "should" =
  • it is crucial that
  • it is necessary that
  • there is a need/necessity for
  • it is important that
  • cannot be avoided

• "can" =
  • is able to
  • has the opportunity to
  • has the capacity for
  • has the ability to

• "may," "might," "could" =
  • it is possible that
  • there is a chance that
  • it could happen that
  • the possibility exists for

Wordy: It is possible that nothing will come of these preparations. (10 words)
Concise: Nothing may come of these preparations. (6 words)
Wordy: She has the ability to influence the outcome. (8 words)
Concise: She can influence the outcome. (5 words)
Wordy: It is necessary that we take a stand on this pressing issue. (12 words)
Concise: We must take a stand on this pressing issue. (9 words)