

Conciseness: Methods of Eliminating Wordiness

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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

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
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.

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
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.
- 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.