

Conciseness: Methods of Eliminating Wordiness

Purdue University Online Writing Lab

1. Eliminate unnecessary determiners and modifiers

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.

Some words and phrases that can often be pruned away to make sentences clearer:

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

- 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

- 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, find nominalizations that you can replace with verb phrases.

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

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

Do not use phrases in the form it + be-verb or there + be-verb. While these expressions can be rhetorically effective for emphasis in some situations, overuse or unnecessary use of expletive constructions creates wordy prose. The most common 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

- 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

- 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 often results in 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

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

REPLACE WITH – because, since, why

on the occasion of
in a situation in which

under circumstances in which

REPLACE WITH – when

as regards
in reference to
with regard to

concerning the matter of
where XXX is concerned

REPLACE WITH– about

it is crucial that
it is necessary that
there is a need/necessity for

it is important that
cannot be avoided

REPLACE WITH– must, should

is able to
has the opportunity to

has the capacity for
has the ability to

REPLACE WITH– can

it is possible that
there is a chance that

it could happen that
the possibility exists for

REPLACE WITH– 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

If there are passages that explain or describe in detail what would already be obvious to readers, delete or reword.

- 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

- 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.

Avoid Redundant Pairs

past memories	basic fundamentals	future plans
various differences	true facts	terrible tragedy
each individual ____	important essentials	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.

Avoid Redundant Categories

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.