

## Reducing Wordiness

When writing in conventional Western academic style, say what you have to say and be done. No fluff, no repetition; just clear, concise sentences.

Of course you have to pour it all out during the brainstorming and discovery stages, but, when it's time to really edit, aim for clarity and focus on the sentence level.

You probably know when your sentences are too wordy, so here you'll find lots of suggestions for crafting focused sentences. Pick the ones that work for you, practice them, and experience delight when it becomes automatic.

### General Guidelines

- Try not to use **I** and **we** in a formal paper. The paper is obviously yours, so delete phrases such as **I think, I believe, in my opinion, it seems to me**, etc.

Wordy: *It seems to me that concise sentences are easier to read than convoluted ones.*

Concise: *Concise sentences are easier to read than convoluted ones.*

- Avoid using **it is, there is, or there are** (weak expletives) at the beginning of sentences.

Wordy: *There are way too many people crowding around the exit.*

Concise: *Too many people are crowding around the exit.*

Wordy: *It is expensive to rent a limousine.*

Concise: *Renting a limousine is expensive.*

- Change **is** or **was** to an action verb.

Wordy: *A new shade is needed for the living room window.*

Concise: *The living room window needs a new shade.*

- Change **is** or **have** with an **-ing** verb to a simple present or past tense verb whenever possible.

Wordy: *They were leaving before the second intermission.*

Concise: *They left before the second intermission.*

- Replace passive verbs with active verbs.

Wordy (passive): *The old movies were ruined in the fire.*

Concise (active): *The fire ruined the old movies.*

Consult the "Active & Passive Voice" handout for more thorough guidance.

- Change **which is** or **was**, when possible, to a past verb or **-ing** form.

Wordy: *The movies, which average 45 to 50 minutes, are black and white.*

Concise: *The movies, averaging 45 to 50 minutes, are black and white.*

- Omit **this** from the beginning of a sentence by joining it to the preceding sentence with a comma. (You may need to change the wording slightly.)

Wordy: *The director fired the cast. This resulted in a delay of the opening night.*

Concise: *The director fired the cast, resulting in a delayed opening night.*

(Notice how the prepositional phrase **of the** was replaced by an adjective?)

Even more concise: *The director fired the cast, delaying opening night.*

- Remove **should**, **would**, or **could** when possible and use a definite verb.

Wordy: *They could see the problem.*

Concise: *They saw the problem.*

- Change **-sion** and **-tion** words to verbs whenever possible.

Wordy: *I submitted an application for the job.*

Concise: *I applied for the job.*

- Whenever possible, use a colon after a statement and eliminate the beginning words of the sentence.

Wordy: *The theater has three main technical areas. These areas are costumes, scenery, and lighting.*

Concise: *The theater has three main technical areas: costumes, scenery, and lighting.*

- Combine two closely related short sentences by omitting part of one.

Wordy: *Ms. Petty is the director of this play. She decided not to play the scene that way.*

Concise: *Ms. Petty, the director, decided not to play the scene that way.*

- Change a phrase or clause to an adjective.

Wordy: *The director is concerned about problems that may occur with the lighting, sound, and props.*

Concise: *The director is concerned about the technical problems.*

- Never say the same thing twice. Do not repeat yourself. Don't be repetitive. Stop saying the same thing over and over and over and over and ...

These small changes may not reduce your word count much, but they can make your sentences much more readable—and cumulatively they can make a big difference in your writing's length.

## Practice Sentences

Would you like to give it a try? Check out these sentences and try to reduce the word count by at least 50%.

1. I truly believe that joining a carpool has advantages in this world of ours today. Two of these advantages are that a carpool saves on gas and that a carpool cuts down on polluting emissions in the air.
2. The movie was outstanding for several reasons. One reason why it was outstanding is because everything like the music and the plot had a meaning and a context.
3. It seems that juvenile delinquency among children and teenagers is expanding and growing at an ever-increasing rate in this modern day and age of the twenty-first century.
4. The guerillas kidnapped the hostage at gun point by holding a gun to his head. The next thing they did was to put a blindfold around his eyes. Then they put handcuffs on his wrists and forced him into a car.
5. Women who have jobs and also have children have many problems. These women have little time for recreation. Often these women don't get enough sleep.
6. We couldn't decide if we should go skiing in our nearby park or drive to the ski resort in Wisconsin and ski.
7. I got up at seven. Then I bathed and I ate a quick breakfast. It was about 7:45 when I left for work.
8. The letter to the editor was written by someone who did not sign his name.

## Possible Revisions

Now, here are some possible revisions. No peeking until you've tried some yourself!

1. Carpooling saves gas and reduces air pollution.
2. The outstanding movie had meaningful music and a contextualized plot.
3. Juvenile delinquency is increasing exponentially.
4. The guerrillas kidnapped the hostage at gunpoint, blindfolded and handcuffed him, and forced him into a car.
5. Working mothers get little sleep and have no time for recreation.
6. Should we ski at Como Park or drive to the ski hill in Hudson, Wisconsin?
7. Getting up at seven, I bathed, ate breakfast, and left for work at 7:45.
8. The letter to the editor was anonymous.

Notice that these possible revisions are shorter but sometimes change the meaning of the original sentences. You often have room for more detail when you are more concise, however. Give it a try!