THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS OF BAD WRITING

The Third Deadly Sin: Wordiness
Concise writing is the key to clear communication. Wordiness obscures your ideas and frustrates your reader. Make your points as succinctly as possible, and move on. As Strunk and White tell us in *Elements of Style*:

Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences….
This requires not that the writer make all sentences short, or avoid all detail and treat subjects only in outline, but that every word tell. (23)

Once you start searching for unnecessary words, you will find you can cut many without any loss of meaning. In fact, your writing will be crisper and more appealing. Remember: make “every word tell.”

**Strategies for eliminating wordiness:**

Use action verbs rather than forms of the verb *to be* (*is, are, was, were*).

wordy
The reason that General Lee invaded Pennsylvania in June, 1863, was to draw the Army of the Potomac away from Richmond.

revised (replace *was* with action verb *invaded*)
General Lee invaded Pennsylvania in June, 1863, to draw the Army of the Potomac away from Richmond.

Tip: As a first step in reducing wordiness, identify instances of *this is*, *there are*, and *it is* at the beginning of your sentences, and ask yourself whether you can eliminate them.

Make the real subject the actual subject of the sentence; make the real verb the actual verb.

wordy
In Crew’s argument there are many indications of her misunderstanding of natural selection.

revised (replace subject *there* with *argument*; replace verb *are* with *demonstrates.*)
Crew’s argument repeatedly demonstrates misunderstanding of natural selection.

**Common sources of wordiness:**

**Redundancies**
My personal opinion, at the present time, by means of, the basic essentials, connect together, for the purpose of, in close proximity

**Unnecessary phrases/clauses**
The reason why is that
This is a subject that
In spite of the fact that
Due to the fact that
in the event that
because of the fact that
until such time as
by means of

**Passive voice**
In most instances, it is better to put verbs in the active voice. Passive voice produces unclear, wordy sentences, whereas active voice produces clearer, more concise sentences.

wordy  In 1935 Ethiopia was invaded by Italy.

revised  In 1935 Italy invaded Ethiopia. (more concise and vigorous)