

CONCISE WRITING

What is Conciseness?

Sentences that use fewer words and connect ideas together clearly make it easier for your reader to understand your message. Being concise ensures that the focus of your writing is on your ideas.

Strategies for Concise Writing

Use Action Verbs/Avoid Passive Voice: Passive voice uses a “to be” verb combined with an action verb and turns the subject of the sentence into the object. This makes it harder to determine who is doing the action of the sentence. It also adds unnecessary words. Instead, shorten the sentence by removing “to be” and just use the action verb. See our handout on Passive Voice to learn more.

Example: Nguyen’s misuse of information **is exposed** by the facts.

Revision: The facts **expose** Nguyen’s misuse of information.

Make the Actor of the Sentence the Subject: The person or thing taking or doing the action should be the subject of the sentence. This makes the writing more concise and the action described clearer.

Example: **Usner’s work** is an attempt at revision of orthodox historiography.

Revision: **Usner** attempts to revise orthodox historiography.

Avoid Unnecessary but Common Phrases: Many common phrases are not necessary for clarity and make writing less concise. A few of these are: this shows that, this serves as a way to, this is an example of, the reason why is, because of the fact, due to the fact, in the event of, by means of, etc.

Example: Successful globalization depends **on factors that** involve culture more than economics.

Revision: Successful globalization depends more on culture than economics.

Use Fewer Prepositions: Prepositions – such as in, of, at, under, with, etc. – are necessary in some sentences but can be overused and make the meaning of a sentence less clear. Look out for a string of prepositional phrases in a row.

Example: **One of the** most important indications **of the** sensorimotor period is the development **of** object permanence.

Revision: The development of object permanence is a key indicator of the sensorimotor period.

Remove Redundant Phrases: Writers sometimes use redundant phrases that make their writing less concise. Some examples include: my personal opinion, at the present time, the basic essentials, connect together, etc.

Example: Saeed’s research **merges together** the disciplines of performance art and machine learning.

Revision: Saeed’s research **merges** the disciplines of performance art and machine learning.

Don’t Sacrifice Style

Being concise should make your writing shorter and clearer – not remove your voice, style, and identity. If your writing no longer sounds like something you would say, feels dry or uninteresting, or does not communicate ideas in a way that is authentic to you, take the time to reintroduce your style and identity to the work.

Example: I was born on a Friday and when the clock struck twelve, I began to cry simultaneously.

Revision: To begin my life with the beginning of my life, I record that I was born (as I have been informed and believe) on a Friday, at twelve o'clock at night. It was remarked that the clock began to strike, and I began to cry, simultaneously.

This example is by Charles Dickens, well known for being both a great author and a long-winded one.

Dickens, C., & Tambling, J. (2014). David Copperfield. Revised edition. London, Penguin Classics.

Adapted from prior Writing Center Resource “Eliminating Wordiness”

By Laura Widman, Writing Center Assistant Director

Copyright 2024

Nesbitt-Johnston Writing Center, Hamilton College

Hamilton.edu/writing