Economy in Writing

Note: This document should only be used as a reference and should not replace assignment guidelines.

Wordiness inhibits clarity by distracting the reader from your main ideas. Concise writing, by contrast, generally improves clarity and can be achieved through rewriting.

Writing Concise Sentences
To write clear and concise sentences, avoid nonessential phrases and clauses in the following ways.

Limit Modifying Phrases
Eliminate phrases that modify the noun but do not clarify the meaning of the sentence.

WORDY: My sister, who's allergic to cats, has a puppy.
CONCISE: My sister has a puppy.

The phrase “who’s allergic to cats” distracts from the main idea of the sentence.

Minimize Prepositional Phrases
Avoid unnecessary prepositional phrases (preposition plus a noun).

WORDY: The assignment on writing is due next Friday by 5:00 p.m. on my desk, in my office.
CONCISE: The writing assignment must be on my office desk next Friday by 5:00 p.m.

Avoid Unnecessary Relative Clauses
Relative clauses begin with “that,” “who,” and “which.” When possible, change these clauses into single words, short phrases, or eliminate them altogether.

WORDY: The man who ran for president was a Democrat.
CONCISE: The presidential candidate was a Democrat.

Reword Infinitive Phrases
Eliminate infinitive phrases (“to” plus a verb) by using another form of the verb.

WORDY: The shortage of sale items in stock has caused customers to become dissatisfied.
CONCISE: The shortage of sale items in stock has dissatisfied customers.

Modify Other Phrases
Change wordy phrases into single words or direct expressions when possible.

WORDY: At this point in time, the ceremony will begin.
CONCISE: The ceremony will now begin.

Use Active Voice
Avoid passive-voice phrases by changing them to active voice.

WORDY: An account was opened by Mrs. Johns last week.
CONCISE: Mrs. Johns opened an account last week.
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Using Concise Words

Use Precise Words
Use one word that captures the main idea instead of multiple words that approximate it.

WORDY: The view was pretty, nice, and interesting.
CONCISE: The view was breathtaking.

The word “breathtaking” conveys the message more powerfully than the three words “pretty,” “nice,” and “interesting.”

Eliminate Extra or Empty Words
Avoid using extra or empty words to describe or introduce something. Empty phrases such as “It seems that” or “This paper will now” distract from your main point.

WORDY: It has been said that students who do their homework do better in school.
CONCISE: Students who do their homework do better in school.

“It has been said” is an empty phrase because it contributes no additional meaning to the sentence.

Avoid Inflated Writing
Use common and precise language whenever possible. Using overly academic language to impress readers often makes writing sound inflated.

WORDY: My sanguineous professor disesteemed my election of grandiloquent words.
CONCISE: My wise professor disliked my choice of big words.

Avoid Nominalization
Nominalization occurs when the action of a sentence is assumed by a noun. To avoid it, choose strong action verbs.

WORDY: The function of this handout is to improve wordy writing.
CONCISE: This handout improves wordy writing.

Omit Redundant Word Pairs
When using word pairs, look to see if both words are necessary.

WORDY: My very favorite class is photography.
CONCISE: My favorite class is photography.

The following are examples of redundant word pairs:

- free gift  terrible tragedy  added bonus
- various differences  end result  sudden crisis
- each individual  clearly evident  unexpected surprise
- future plans  final outcome  same identical
- true facts  completely finish  basic fundamentals
- important essentials  past memories  repeat again

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