

Reduce Unnecessary Words In Your Writing

Many students think that academic writing requires lengthy sentences with obscure vocabulary. On the contrary, effective academic writing is clear and concise. Thomas Jefferson wrote that “the most valuable of all talents ... is never using two words where one will do.”¹ In *Elements of Style*, Strunk and White further reduce this idea to three words: “Omit needless words.”² Achieving concise writing does not mean that a writer crafts short sentences and employs common vocabulary. It does mean that every word contributes to the precise meaning of every sentence. The first step to clear and concise writing is to use strong subjects and verbs (see BU Writing Centre handouts *Use Strong Subjects in Your Writing* and *Use Strong Verbs in Your Writing*). The next is to weed your text for unnecessary words. If a word can be removed from a text without changing its meaning, it should be struck.

How to reduce wordiness

1. Remove unnecessary modifiers

Many modifiers, particularly adverbs (very, quite, actually, really, etc.), add little meaning to the words they modify and can be removed. If the modifier is necessary, you can often find a precise adjective to convey the same meaning.

- a *very* important decision → an important decision → a key decision
- *really* happy → happy → ecstatic
- *quite* concerned → concerned

2. Remove redundant pairs

- a *free* gift (Aren't all gifts free?)
- *future* plans (Aren't all plans for the future?)
- *terrible* tragedy (Aren't all tragedies terrible?)

3. Remove redundant categories

- during this period of time → during this time, during this period
- soft to the touch → soft
- the game of football → football

4. Never use two or more words when fewer will do

- due to the fact that → because
- despite the fact that → though
- in the event that → if

5. Remove language that includes you as author

As you are the known author of the text, phrases such as the following should be eliminated.

- *In my opinion*, brownies are better than cake. → Brownies are better than cake.
- *I think/believe that* Bishop's is the best. → Bishop's is the best!
- *In this paper, I am going to argue that* understanding biochemistry is the key to understanding life. → Understanding biochemistry is the key to understanding life.

6. Avoid announcing your topic

Essays, paragraphs and sentences cannot explain, discuss or introduce anything. These are your jobs as author.

- *This paragraph introduces* the process of cell division, nature's way of producing two genetically identical daughter cells. → Cell division is nature's way of producing two genetically identical daughter cells.

7. Change negatives to positives

- The book is *not long*. → The book is *short*.
- The exam rules *do not allow* cell phones in the exam rooms. → The exam rules *prohibit* cell phones in the exam rooms.
- The Sherbrooke bus *does not often* pass here. → The Sherbrooke bus *rarely* passes here.

8. Remove nominalizations (the noun form of a verb)

Using the noun form of a verb in a sentence increases the number of words used. Avoid this type of construction (nominalizations are italicized).

- A *reexamination* of the essay led the professor to a *reconsideration* of the student's grade. (15 words) → The professor reconsidered the student's grade after reexamining their essay. (9 words)
- The students reached the *conclusion* that their biology lab results were off by 20%. (14 words) → The students concluded that their biology lab results were off by 20%. (12 words)
- The students organized a *demonstration* against the use of animal testing in the science lab. (15 words) → The students demonstrated against the use of animal testing in the science lab. (13 words)

Material quoted from:

¹ <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/art-writing-what-did-thomas-jefferson-really-say-richard-bloch>

² https://www.gutenberg.org/files/37134/37134-h/37134-h.htm#Rule_13

Resources:

Williams, J.M. & Bizup, J. (2014). Lesson 9 Concision. In *Style lessons in clarity and grace* (11th ed., pp. 126-142). Pearson Education.

