MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY

Faculty of Engineering and Applied Science

CONCISENESS

Concision is required when there is a stipulated maximum length for a document. Even when there are no length restrictions, writing concisely decreases the cognitive load on the reader. Concise writing is therefore more easily understood and more likely to be read completely. This document explains some strategies for keeping written documents as concise as possible.

WHEN CONCISENESS IS IMPORTANT

In technical and professional writing, word limits are often imposed on writers. This is true for some reports, especially those written for academic coursework. Within these types of documents, summaries/abstracts and other sections may have specified lengths as well. Standard forms might also have word or even character limits. In all of these situations, one must be mindful of the words that are included.

WHEN TO BE CAREFUL

In some situations, attempting to be concise might have a negative effect. For instance, when describing an experimental procedure, there must be enough detail for the process to be repeated in the same conditions. Focusing on reducing word count might lead to certain details being omitted, making exact replication of the procedure impossible. Additionally, when using numerical information or calculations, ensure that numbers are not approximated when precision is important.

HOW TO BE CONCISE

By using these nine strategies[1], sentences and paragraphs can be shortened with no perceivable change in meaning or function. When writing, it is recommended to use as many of these as possible.

Avoid empty words and phrases	Avoid expletive constructions	Avoid passive voice
Avoid repeating ideas	Avoid redundant descriptors	Combine shorter sentences
Shorten clauses	Use verbs instead of longer phrases	Use verbs instead of verb-derived nouns

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[1] Adapted from Simon & Schuster Handbook for Writers, Fifth Canadian Edition, By Lynn Quitman Troyka and Douglas Hesse, 2009

1. AVOID EMPTY WORDS AND PHRASES
Consider the meaning of each word in a phrase before using it. Some words or phrases that might sound familiar sometimes have much shorter alternatives. In some cases, the word or phrase might not hold any real meaning in the sentence, so it should not be used.

Don't say this	Say this instead
Because of the fact that	Because
A majority of	Most
Are of the same opinion	Agree
If conditions are such that	If
In my honest opinion	Ø
Always	Ø

2. AVOID EXPLETIVE CONSTRUCTIONS
Ideally, sentences that begin with "There is/are" should be rare. These words, plus the word "that/who" could often be removed from the sentence with no change in meaning.

Ex. ~~There are~~ many students ~~who~~ have received letters of commendation.

3. AVOID PASSIVE VOICE
Using passive will cause at least one extra word. Use active when possible, but remember that technical writing often employs the passive to avoid personal pronoun use or to avoid mentioning an unimportant or unknown subject. When the true subject is unimportant or unknown, the by-phrase is usually not needed. It is required when the true subject is a specific person/group or is not easily guessable.

Ex. The previous observation facility was destroyed by a wildfire.

Ex. A wildfire destroyed the previous observation facility.

Ex. A new observation facility was built ~~by carpenters~~ in 2021.

4. AVOID REPEATING IDEAS
Make sure that ideas in a sentence are not stated multiple times.

Ex. The breaking of the shear pin was caused by a rock that hit the pin, which snapped it in half.

Ex. A rock hit the shear pin, snapping the shear pin in half. [Snapping in half implies it was broken]

5. AVOID REDUNDANT DESCRIPTORS
Some words in phrases are redundant: their meaning is contained in a nearby word.

Ex. They introduced a ~~new~~ controller that ~~completely~~ eliminated the input lag in the ~~already~~ existing device.

Other phrases with redundancies include mix together, still persists, currently underway, basic fundamentals, and empty space.

6. COMBINE SHORTER SENTENCES

Writing a series of short sentences is not considered acceptable in most cases. Doing so makes the writing sound less sophisticated and less fluent.

>   Ex. The ship sunk in 1998. Before the ship sunk, it was used as a ferry. The ferry took passengers between Fogo and Carmanville. [23 words]

>   Ex. Before the ship sunk in 1998, it was used as a passenger ferry between Fogo and Carmanville. [17 words]

7. SHORTEN CLAUSES

In some cases, clauses can be reduced to shorten sentences. A common way to do this is by using reduced adjective clauses or appositives.

>   Ex. Iceland, ~~which is~~ known for its hot springs, is the ninth-largest producer of geothermal power. [reduced adjective clause]

>   Ex. Eyjafjallajökull, ~~which is~~ a large, Icelandic volcano, erupted in 2010, disrupting air traffic for six days. [appositive]

8. USE VERBS INSTEAD OF LONGER PHRASES

Some phrases have single verb counterparts. The verb should be used instead.

>   Ex. They were in agreement with the proposal.

>   Ex. They agreed with the proposal.

9. USE VERBS INSTEAD OF VERB-DERIVED NOUNS

Some nouns come from verbs. In most cases, using the noun requires the addition of a verb plus other function words. Using the verb form would minimize word usage. Some common endings for verb-derived nous are –tion, -ance, and –ment.

>   Ex. The team decided that they should begin a reconfiguration of the prototype.

>   Ex. The team decided to reconfigure the prototype.

IMPORTANT NOTE

Conciseness is often thought of as an exercise done *after* one has finished writing. However, the most efficient way to write concisely is through planning *before* writing and through conscious effort *while* writing. Although paring down what has already been written will lead to a concise document, it would require less effort to not have written unnecessary words and ideas in the first place.