

# STRATEGIES TO REDUCE DOCUMENT LENGTH



ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC SUPPORT

[www.mun.ca/writingcentre](http://www.mun.ca/writingcentre)

## BEFORE YOU START

- Do your research.
- Find out what is required.
- Question the length requirements – number of pages, word count, character limit, and countable appendix and bibliography
- Consider the audience.
- Relax for the first draft and build the

## STRATEGY ONE: Reducing Content

- Avail of course instructions and/or rubrics to identify irrelevant or nonessential content.
- Identify the thesis statement (main idea or core argument).
- Remove sections and/or paragraphs that do not support the thesis statement.
- Identify the topic sentence of each section or paragraph.
- Remove sections and/or paragraphs that do not support the topic sentence
- Remove any sentence, paragraph, and/or section that is unsupportive, unfocused, disorganized, or confusing.
- Address repetitive sentences, paragraphs, and/or sections because they do not offer something new.
- Avoid excessive use of long footnotes or endnotes whenever possible.

## STRATEGY TWO: Reducing Words

- Goal is to make individual sentences more efficient by omitting unnecessary words or by replacing multi-word phrases with precise language
- Be consistent across the document.
- Many changes to one page of a 10-page paper will draw attention to itself compared to a few consistent changes.
- Cutting words is not an excuse for bad grammar or missing information. Check the whole sentence each time you make a change. Be sure it is still clear and retains the same information.
- Use precise terms. Instead of adding modifying words like **very** and **quite**, replace the multi-word term with a more specific word.

**very happy** ⇒ **ecstatic**

**quite cold** ⇒ **freezing**

- Replace multi-word expressions for shorter synonyms.

**in order to** ⇒ **to**

**a lot of** ⇒ **many**

**such as** ⇒ **like**

**considered as** ⇒ **as**

- Remove redundant expressions.

**6 p.m. in the evening** ⇒ **6 p.m.**

**consensus of opinion** ⇒ **consensus**

- Switch from passive to active language (be aware that this will likely require changes to other sentences).

**The experiment was performed by the lab assistant**

⇒ **The lab assistant performed the experiment.**

- Check if **of** is necessary. It may be removable if the word order is changed.

**Government of Canada**  
⇒ **Canadian Government**

**circumstances of the experiment**  
⇒ **experimental circumstances**

- Remove unnecessary cases of **the**. Use an article flow chart (see resources for Article Flow Chart) or reference if needed.

**interpreting both the X and the Y axis**  
⇒ **interpreting both X and Y axes**

- Remove all non-essential adverbs (words that modify verbs and typically end in **-ly**) and adjectives (words that modify nouns).

**whispered softly** ⇒ **whispered**  
**overused cliché** ⇒ **cliché**

- Remove unneeded cases of **that**

**Results showed that workers that workers that operate machinery reported more injuries.**  
⇒ **Results showed workers operating machinery reporting more injuries.**

- Remove unneeded transitions such as **furthermore**, **indeed**, **in conclusion**, and **to sum up** from the beginning of sentences.

- Be deliberate about conjunctions (e.g., **and**, **but**, **however**). Consider breaking up longer sentences into shorter ones by omitting them.

**It was Tuesday and the sky was blue.**  
⇒ **It was Tuesday. The sky was blue.**

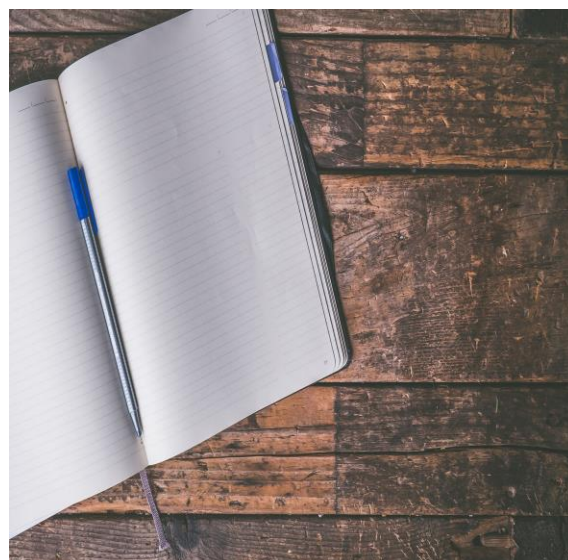
Conversely, repetition between sentences may be omitted by adding a conjunction.

**The test mice were given commercial feed. They were also given water.**  
⇒ **The test mice were given commercial feed and water.**

- Look for nouns that reappear in a given sentence or between consecutive sentences. If the context remains clear, a pronoun can be used.

**Dr. Smith** ⇒ **she**;  
**the experimental procedures** ⇒ **they**

- Acronyms for long terms can also help but unless they are common (e.g., **USA**), their meaning must be identified the first time they are used.



### STRATEGY THREE: Reducing Characters

- Occasionally, you may have to hit a specific character limit, such as for short answers on an application form.
- Determine if spaces are being counted as characters. If so, do not double space between sentences or words.
- If you can, use the techniques from **strategies one and two** first.

- Replace long words with shorter synonyms

*enormous* ⇒ *large*

*however* ⇒ *but*

*experiment* ⇒ *test*

Be careful of nuance changes; use a thesaurus or dictionary if you are unsure.

- While repeating the same word many times can be distracting, as a general rule, short words can be used more often than longer ones without seeming repetitive. For example, using **BUT** five times on a page is not as noticeable as using **HOWEVER** five times.
- Contractions can reduce character counts, but are considered informal and may not be appropriate.

*will not* ⇒ *won't*

*it is* ⇒ *it's*

Be consistent if you use contractions and check with the instructor guidelines.

- American spellings are often shorter than British/Canadian, but you must use a country's spelling conventions for the entire document (not just select words). Be consistent. This may also require punctuation changes such as the placement of commas and periods inside or outside quotation marks.
- If there are many lists, omitting the serial comma in front of **AND** or **OR**, may make a difference, but it can also increase confusion.



## STRATEGY FOUR: Formatting Changes

- Be extremely careful using this strategy.
- Many scholarships, employers, journals, university entrance committees, and other groups set specific formatting guidelines and expect you to follow them exactly. Any deviation may be seen as a failure to follow rules and cause your application to be rejected.
- Margins, indentations, paragraph spacing, line spacing, font type, font size, bolds, italics, and capitalization all have effects on the final page count.
- Referencing styles can also make a big difference to both word count and page count, especially when comparing bracketed (e.g., APA) to superscript styles (e.g., MHRA). However, style guides also have specific formatting guidelines that should be followed.
- Consider the number of headings and subheadings used carefully. Are there sections that can be merged? Check the rules of your style guide for heading requirements.
- Are all of the tables and figures necessary? Can multiple tables or figures be merged or resized? Alternatively, are there large passages that could be better summarized visually?

- Using numbered or bulleted lists may be more efficient than full sentences or paragraphs, but make sure the grammar is good and the information is clear.
- Pay attention to file format too. Length and layout may be altered when converting between different file types (e.g., from .docx to pdf).



(MLA 9<sup>th</sup> Edition)

Nichol, Mark. "50 Redundant Phrases to Avoid." Daily Writing Tips, 2007, <https://www.dailywritingtips.com/50-redundant-phrases-to-avoid/>.

Purdue Writing Lab, OWL. "Concision." Purdue Writing Lab, 2022, [https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general\\_writing/academic\\_writing/conciseness/index.html](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/academic_writing/conciseness/index.html).

Purdue Writing Lab, OWL. "Active versus Passive Voice." Purdue Writing Lab, 2022, [https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general\\_writing/academic\\_writing/active\\_and\\_passive\\_voice/active\\_versus\\_passive\\_voice.html](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/academic_writing/active_and_passive_voice/active_versus_passive_voice.html).

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