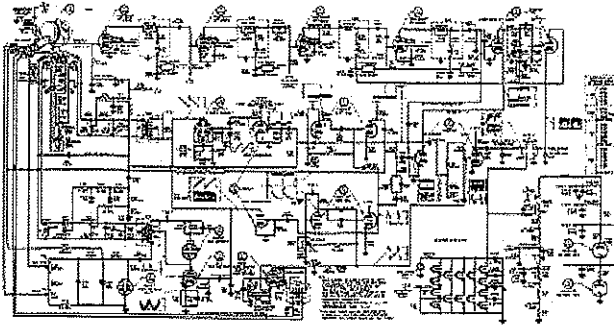


Trim the Fat: Making Your Writing Concise



“Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.” — William Strunk, Jr. □, *Elements of Style*

Let’s discuss ways to pare down paragraphs by eliminating redundant, inflated, unfocused phrases and sentences and *making every word “tell.”*

Stage:

- Sentence-level revision

Target:

- Wordiness

Materials:

- Paper draft - Pen - Ruthlessness

“Concise writing does not always have the fewest words, but it always uses the strongest ones.” — Purdue OWL, Conciseness

SEVEN DEADLY SINS OF WORDINESS:

1. **Redundancy:** *You already said it.*
Ex: Currently at this time there are no available seats freed up.
Rx: Cut to the chase: All seats are currently taken.
2. **Clichés:** *Too many people already said it.*
Ex: Eliza heard it through the grapevine that John was head over heels in love.
Rx: Take ‘em out: Eliza heard that John was in love.
3. **Preamble lead-ins:** *Just get to what they said, already.*
Ex: It is here in the third act that Hamlet says the following quotation: “To be, or not to be: that is the question.”
Rx: Provide real context and leave the rest to a parenthetical citation: While Polonius and Claudius hide within earshot, Hamlet reflects, “To be, or not to be: that is the question” (3.1.58).
4. **Abuses of the verb “to be”:** *(Expletives and the passive voice)*
Ex: Here is the easiest way to help ensure forest fires are prevented: Don’t leave your campfire unattended.
Rx: Eliminate constructions of *Here, There, It + To be* and switch to active voice: To prevent forest fires, tend your campfire.
5. **Vagueness:** *What are you really saying?*
Ex: The major points in Fred’s speech were the most interesting observations on global civil strife I’ve ever encountered.

Rx: Get specific: In my opinion, Fred's innovative proposal will improve communication between the two warring groups.

6. **Academese:** *Again, what are you really saying?*

Ex: "Community is descriptive and prescriptive, local and global, spatially bound or boundaryless, public or private, organic or mechanical, intentional or accidental, purposive or aimless, oppressive or liberating, functional or dysfunctional" (Fernback 2007).

Rx: Keep it simple: "Community means too many things."¹

7. **Adverbs:** *"The road to hell is paved with adverbs"—Stephen King*

Ex: I really and truly believe that Santa Claus actually is real.

Rx: Instead of resorting to intensifiers, use stronger verbs: I'm convinced Santa Claus exists.

Questions to ask: Is this word/phrase necessary? Does the meaning change in important ways if I eliminate it? Am I just trying to fill space? Can I combine these sentences? Do I talk like this?

EXERCISE: Take a look at the wordy paragraph below. How much can you cut and/or rewrite without altering the overall meaning?

Psychologists have identified a number of techniques which are aimed at helping people to persuade others of something. One of these techniques is the "foot-in-the-door" technique. The idea behind the "foot-in-the-door technique" is that if you get someone to do something small for you, they will be more likely to do something bigger for you than if you had started with the request for the bigger thing first. In a pioneering study, researchers went door-to-door and pretended to be members of a non-profit service organization. The researchers asked two groups of people to put a large ugly unattractive sign which said "Drive Carefully" in their front yards. Members of one of the groups of people had been approached previously by different researchers who asked them to perform one of a number of lesser tasks. For example, they were asked to sign a petition which urged politicians to work to get safe driving legislation to make driving safer. Members of the other group of people were being approached by the researchers for the first time. As you might expect, the people who had already expressed a willingness to do the smaller task responded a lot more favorably to the second request than people who had not already been approached on the issue beforehand. Over 55 per cent of those people who had agreed to the initial small request agreed to post the ugly sign, and less than 17 per cent of those who were being approached for the first time agreed to put up the sign.²

Sites referenced:

Capital Community College, "Writing Concise Sentences"

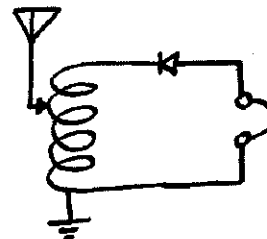
<http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/concise.htm>

Purdue University OWL, "Conciseness"

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/572/01/>

The Nuts and Bolts of College Writing

<http://nutsandbolts.washcoll.edu/concision.html>



Je n'ai fait celle-ci plus longue que parce que je n'ai pas eu le loisir de la faire plus courte.

"I would have written a shorter letter, but I did not have the time." – Blaise Pascal

¹ Example taken from <http://www.tameri.com/write/academese.html>

² Example taken from http://people.douglas.bc.ca/oltp/pdf/gr/GR8_10_Avoiding_Wordiness.pdf