

Writing Concisely/Reducing Wordiness

Academic writing, especially in MLA and APA formats, requires writers to be concise. Many students have a problem with wordiness because they have a hard time explaining their ideas clearly, or they want to take up more space on the page. However, clear and concise sentences often get the point of a paper across more effectively.

Here are some tips on how to reduce wordiness in academic writing:

- Try explaining your ideas verbally—out loud—to either a friend or to yourself. You might begin by stating “what I’m trying to say is...” Pay close attention to what follows that opening phrase. Usually, you will simplify your ideas verbally, and then you can write down what you said. Remember, if you start out simple, you can always expand from there later.
- After you finish your paper, take a break before beginning the editing process. Even if you just get a quick snack, walking away for a while helps you to refocus.
- There are certain patterns of wordiness that many people fall into. Try to find your specific trouble area(s) to work on.

Here are some ways to eliminate wordiness:

- **Use the active voice rather than the passive voice.** When you use the passive voice, the subject of the sentence receives the action. When you use the active voice, the subject of the sentence performs the action.

Passive voice (wordy):

The documents have been photocopied by my assistant.

Active voice (concise):

My assistant photocopied the documents.

- **Omit phrases such as “There is,” “It is,” and “There are” at the beginning of your sentence.** This way, you can begin with the main verb and lead straight into your main subject.

Wordy:

It is difficult to teach Chinese to American students.

Concise:

Teaching Chinese to American students is difficult.

- **Combine and/or shorten sentences by eliminating words such as “this,” “which,” or “that.”**

Wordy:

The baker softens the butter before adding it to the sugars. This makes it easier to mix the ingredients by hand.

Concise:

The baker softens the butter before adding it to the sugars, making it easier to mix the ingredients by hand.

Wordy:

Global warming, which has an effect on the temperatures in the Arctic, is endangering many species, including the seal and the polar bear.

Concise:

Global warming affects temperatures in the Arctic, endangering many species, including the seal and the polar bear.

- **Replace words like “should,” “could,” and “would” with strong verbs.**

Wordy:

His mother could understand why he was so upset.

Concise:

His mother understood why he was so upset.

- **Combine simple, closely related sentences by omitting certain words.**

Wordy:

The Broadway show included several forms of entertainment. The entertainment included singing, dancing, instrumental solos, and magic tricks.

Concise:

The Broadway show included entertainment such as singing, dancing, instrumental solos, and magic tricks.

- **Use a colon to introduce a list or expand on an idea rather than writing two separate sentences.** Remember, a colon must be preceded by a complete sentence. It can be thought of as a “gateway” leading to more information.

Wordy:

Bill went to the store to buy three things. These three things were ice-cream, cherries, and chocolate fudge.

Concise:

Bill went to the store to buy three things: ice-cream, cherries, and chocolate fudge.

Wordy:

There are two reasons why the baseball team did not make the playoffs. These reasons include the fact that they needed a new pitching coach and the players could not get along during practices.

Concise:

There are two reasons why the baseball team did not make the playoffs: they needed a new pitching coach and the players could not get along during practices.

The following resource was consulted in the design of this handout:

Kilborn, Judith. “Strategies for Reducing Wordiness.” *LEO: Literacy Education Online*. 2000. St. Cloud State University. < <http://leo.stcloudstate.edu/style/wordiness.html>>.

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The College of Saint Rose Writing Center, 2008

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