

Revising and Editing for Conciseness

The basic rule for strong academic writing is to say everything relevant in as few words as possible. “Instant prose” can come from being forced to write papers of a particular length, or being told that a paragraph must always contain exactly five sentences. This habit leads to the opposite of conciseness—wordiness in sentences and redundancy in paragraphs.

TO WRITE MORE CONCISELY, FOLLOW THESE SUGGESTIONS:

- Write what you mean—nothing more and nothing less.
- Trust and respect yourself as a writer enough to not overstate what you mean.
- Study sentences in your first draft to see what you can delete without losing meaning.
- Read each paragraph aloud. Be sure that all sentences support the topic sentence.
- Keep concrete, specific examples. Cut out extra words, empty phrases, weak qualifiers, negative constructions, and unnecessary “to be” verbs. (See examples below.)
- Also, watch for sentences and clauses beginning with *it is*, *this is*, and *there are*.

EXAMPLES OF WORDY SENTENCES—AND CONCISE REVISIONS:

Try to eliminate extra words, especially at the beginning of sentences:

Wordy:

- 1) However, it must be remembered that Ruth’s marriage could have positive effects on Naomi’s situation.
- 2) In high school, where I had the opportunity for three years of working with the student government, I realized how significantly a person’s enthusiasm can be destroyed merely by the attitudes of his superiors.
- 3) The economic situation of Anne Moody was also a crucial factor in the formation of her character.
- 4) Frequently, a chapter in a book reveals to the reader the main point that the author desires to bring out during the course of the chapter.

Concise:

- 1) Ruth’s marriage, however, will also provide security for Naomi.
- 2) In high school, during three years on the student council, I saw students’ enthusiasm destroyed by insecure teachers and cynical administrators.
- 3) Anne Moody’s poverty also helped form her character.
- 4) A chapter’s title often reveals its thesis.

Watch for weak intensifiers and qualifiers; sentences are more forceful without them:

Notice how much clearer the following sentences are without the words in brackets:

- 1) We found the proposal [*quite*] feasible.
- 2) The remark, though unkind, was [*entirely*] accurate.
- 3) The scene was [*extremely*] typical.
- 4) That behavior is [*fairly*] unique for such an intelligent animal.
- 5) The first line [*definitely*] establishes that the father had been drinking.

Make sure that sentences are specific and concrete in their conclusions:

Wordy:

In both Orwell's and Baldwin's essays, the feeling of white supremacy is very important.
(*How is it important? Why?*)

Concise:

Both Orwell and Baldwin trace the consequences of white supremacy.

Avoid unnecessary use of "to be" verbs:

Wordy:

- 1) The scene is taking place at night, in front of the capitol building.
- 2) The friar is knowledgeable about Juliet being alive.
- 3) There are two pine trees which are growing behind this house.

Concise:

- 1) The scene takes place at night, in front of the capitol building.
- 2) The friar knows that Juliet is alive.
- 3) Two pine trees grow behind this house.

Look out for redundant words and phrases:

Wordy:

Any student could randomly sit anywhere.

Concise:

Students could sit anywhere. (*If they could sit "anywhere," seating was clearly "random."*)

Change negative constructions into positive constructions:

Wordy:

Housing for married students is not unworthy of consideration.

Concise:

Housing for married students is worthy of consideration.

Simplify, simplify, simplify:

Wordy:

- 1) The Book of Ruth was probably written in the fifth century B.C. It was a time when women were considered the property of men.
- 2) This is a quote from Black Elk's autobiography that discloses his prophetic powers.
- 3) It is frequently considered that *Hamlet* is Shakespeare's most puzzling play.

Concise:

- 1) The Book of Ruth was probably written in the fifth century B.C., when women were considered the property of men.
- 2) This quote from Black Elk's autobiography discloses his prophetic powers.
- 3) *Hamlet* is frequently considered Shakespeare's most puzzling play.