

Concise Sentences

As the following quotations indicate, conciseness—brief and “to-the-point” writing—is an attribute of all good writing.

“The less said the better.” --Robert Browning, English poet

“The most valuable of all talents is that of never using two words when one will do.” --Thomas Jefferson, American president

“Say all you have to say in the fewest possible words, or your reader will be sure to skip them; and in the plainest possible words, or he will certainly misunderstand them.” --John Ruskin, Victorian thinker

“I believe more in the scissors than in the pen.”

--Truman Capote, American author



So, does this mean that writing should be brief and devoid of details? The answer is “no.” As William Strunk, author of the classic *The Elements of Style* (1959) wrote: “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.”

In short, effective writing is both detailed and brief. The following exercises will highlight ten ways that you can provide detail, but “Make every word count!” in your writing.

TEN WAYS TO “MAKE EVERY WORD COUNT”

1. Avoid redundancies or saying the same thing twice.

WORDY SENTENCE: The mountain climber was unable to descend down the mountain by himself and needed the help of another climber to assist him.

EXPLANATION: *Descend* and *down* communicate the same idea, right? And, wouldn't a mountain climber be on a mountain? Finally, if this mountain climber needed *help*, isn't that the same as *assistance*?

CONCISE SENTENCE: The mountain climber was unable to descend without assistance.

Common Redundancies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mutual cooperation • Consensus of opinion • Refer back • Open up • Sit down • 7 PM Monday night • Complete sentence

2. Avoid empty expressions and common wordy expressions.

Empty Expressions	Common Wordy Expressions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In my opinion • I believe • I have found that • From my viewpoint • I can remember • I recall • All things considered • Needless to say • As a general rule • Believe it or not 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Due to the fact that = because/since • In regards to = about/regarding • Whether or not = whether • At this point in time = now • Fourth and final = last/finally • In order to OR to be able to = to

WORDY SENTENCE: I can remember never being able to decide whether or not I needed to insert a comma in order to punctuate correctly.

EXPLANATION: We Americans often use “empty expressions” that don’t communicate much of anything. For example, when writing, it is assumed that we are presenting our opinion. Therefore, it is unnecessary to use “In my opinion” or “I believe.” Similarly, it is assumed that if you are writing about something that you must remember it. As a result, “I can remember” and “I can recall” are unnecessary. We Americans also clutter our language with wordy expressions. For example, “whether or not” simply means “whether,” and “being able to” only communicates “to.”

CONCISE SENTENCE: I was never able to decide whether to use a comma to punctuate correctly. *NOTE: This sentence could be even more concise: I never knew when I needed commas in my writing.*

3. Avoid *very*, *really*, *pretty*, or *quite*.

WORDY SENTENCE: I was **quite** full after eating the **really** big and **very** filling potato.

EXPLANATION: *Very*, *really*, and *quite* were originally intensifiers in our language. They added emphasis to our ideas. But, over time, these words have become so overused that they no longer carry any meaning. For example, if you said “I hate baseball,” you would have communicated the same exact thing as if you had said, “I really hate baseball.” By the way, if you “really, really, really hate” baseball, you can express that with other words, such as *detest*, *loathe*, or *abhor*.

CONCISE SENTENCE: I was full after eating the filling potato. *NOTE: Guideline #1 was also applied to this sentence.*

4. Avoid unnecessary groups of words beginning with *who*, *whom*, *which*, or *that*.

WORDY SENTENCE #4a: Sarah is the one **who came to class**, **which focuses on public speaking**, on the first day more than 15 minutes late and **who is now earning an A+**.

EXPLANATION OF #4a: While there is certainly nothing wrong with using *who*, *which*, or *that* in your writing, many times these words can be omitted. Often, the remaining essential detail can be re-incorporated into the sentence, but in a less wordy way.

CONCISE SENTENCE #4a: Sarah came to Speech class fifteen minutes late on the first day and is now earning an A+.

WORDY SENTENCE #4b: The short story **that he wrote**, **which happened to be his first**, was about an invasion **which involved aliens**.

EXPLANATION OF #4b: Often, the noun inside the group of words can be used as a descriptive word (an adjective) elsewhere in the sentence. Notice how *aliens* is used to describe *invasion*. Similarly, *first* is used to describe *short story*.

CONCISE SENTENCE #4b: His first short story was about an alien invasion.

5. Omit unnecessary prepositional phrases, which are groups of words beginning with *in, on, by, of, for, under, with, between, from, etc.* and ending with a noun. For an explanation of prepositional phrases, click here:

<http://www.chompchomp.com/terms/prepositionalphrase.htm>

WORDY SENTENCE #5a: **In the fall of every year**, I get homesick **for my hometown of Hempstead in the state of Connecticut**.

EXPLANATION OF #5a: Each of the prepositional phrases in this sentence could be omitted.

CONCISE SENTENCE #5a: Every fall, I get homesick for Hempstead, Connecticut, my hometown.

SAMPLE SENTENCE #5b: The representative **of the college** gave a catalog **about courses** to each student **in high school**.

EXPLANATION OF #5b: Sometimes, the entire prepositional phrase cannot be omitted, which was true in sample #5a. Yet, the noun inside the prepositional phrase can often be used as a descriptive word (adjective) elsewhere in the sentence.

REVISED SENTENCE #5b: The college representative gave a course catalog to each high school student.

6. Use specific verbs and specific nouns.

SPECIFIC VERBS	SPECIFIC NOUNS
<p>WORDY: Research assistants are responsible for completing most routine experiments and recording the results.</p> <p>REVISED: Research assistants conduct experiments and record the results.</p>	<p>WORDY: The person who had lived in the apartment before me painted all the walls pink.</p> <p>REVISED: The previous tenant painted all the walls pink.</p>
<p>WORDY: Professor Allen makes frequent references to <i>Survivor</i>.</p> <p>REVISED: Professor Allen refers to <i>Survivor</i> often.</p>	<p>WORDY: The best kinds of players are those who don't show their reactions when playing poker.</p> <p>REVISED: The best poker players disguise their reactions.</p>

7. Delete *there is*, *there are* and *it is* at the start of sentences. These words are almost always unnecessary.

WORDY SENTENCE #7a: **There is** a big gate guarding the entrance to the park.

REVISED SENTENCE #7a: A big gate guards the park entrance. *NOTE: Guideline #5 was also applied to this sentence.*

SAMPLE SENTENCE #7b: **It is** a requirement that you put in 10 hours of training while you are working in order to be certified.

REVISED SENTENCE #7b: For certification, you must complete 10 hours of on-the-job training.

8. Decrease the number of subject-verb pairs in a sentence. While a sentence could contain a number of subjects and verbs, only one subject-verb pair is required.

WORDY SENTENCE: **Queen Elizabeth I** **was** an independent woman **who** **was** also feminine, and even though **she** often **came** close to marrying someone **who** **admired** her, **she** never **accepted** a proposal from any of her suitors.

REVISED SENTENCE: Queen Elizabeth I, a feminine, yet independent woman, considered marrying but never did. *NOTE: Guideline #4 was also applied to this sentence.*

9. Avoid passive voice. Instead, use active voice, in which the subject actually “does” the action within a sentence. For an explanation of voice, click here: <http://www.westernct.edu/writingcenter/pdf/handbook/Mechanics/Voice.pdf>

WORDY SENTENCE: The meeting was called to order by the new vice-president of the General Mills’ company.

EXPLANATION: The meeting did not call itself to order. Since the vice-president did, it is clearer and more concise to say just that.

REVISED SENTENCE: The new General Mills’ vice president called the meeting to order. *NOTE: Guideline #4 was also applied to this sentence.*

10. Avoid impressive-sounding language, sometimes called gobbledygook. It is both wordy and unclear.

SAMPLE SENTENCE: The proliferation of credit cards among college students is the result of extensive marketing by banking institutions that see college students merely in terms of future profitability. (27 words)

REVISED SENTENCE: Banks freely offer credit cards to college students in hopes of increasing profits. (13 words)

Besides applying these ten strategies to your writing, you can always re-arrange words or even use different words to be more concise!

Links to Additional Information

["Writing Concise Sentences"](#) from Capital Community College