

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

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 guidelines will show you 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.

SAMPLE SENTENCE #1: The **mountain climber** was unable to **descend down** the **mountain** by himself and needed the **help** of another climber to **assist** him.

EXPLANATION OF #1: *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 VERSION OF #1: The mountain climber was unable to descend without assistance.

2. Avoid unnecessary 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 ***** • 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 • Whether or not = whether • At this point in time = now • Fourth and final = last • In order to OR to be able to = to

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

SAMPLE SENTENCE #3: I was **quite** full after eating the **really** big and **very** filling potato.

EXPLANATION OF #3: *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*, and *abhor*.

CONCISE VERSION OF #3: I was full after eating the filling potato.

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

SAMPLE 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* (relative pronouns) 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 VERSION OF #4a: Sarah came to Speech class fifteen minutes late on the first day and is now earning an A+.

SAMPLE 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 *who*, *which*, or *that* 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 VERSION OF #4b: His first short story was about an alien invasion.

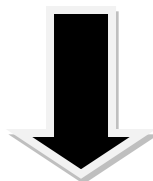
5. Omit unnecessary prepositional phrases, groups of words beginning with *in*, *on*, *by*, *of*, *for*, *under*, *with*, *between*, *from*, etc.

SAMPLE 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 prepositional phrase in this sentence could be omitted.

CONCISE VERSION OF #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: The noun in each of these prepositional phrases can be used as a descriptive word (adjective) elsewhere in the sentence.

CONCISE VERSION OF #5b: The college representative gave a course catalog to each high school student.

6. Use specific verbs and specific nouns.

SAMPLE SENTENCE #6a: Research assistants **are responsible for** completing most routine experiments and recording the results.

REVISED SENTENCE #6a: Research assistants **conduct** experiments and record the results.

SAMPLE SENTENCE #6b: Professor Allen **makes frequent references** to the 9-11 bombings.

REVISED SENTENCE #6b: Professor Allen **refers** to the 9-11 bombings often.

SAMPLE SENTENCE #6c: **The person who had lived in the apartment before me** painted all the walls pink.

REVISED SENTENCE #6c: The **previous tenant** painted all the walls pink.

SAMPLE SENTENCE #6d: **The best kinds of players** are those who don't show their reactions when playing poker.

REVISED SENTENCE #6d: **Successful poker players** disguise their reactions.

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

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

REVISED SENTENCE #7a: A big gate guards the park entrance.

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

REVISED SENTENCE #7b: For certification, you must complete ten 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.

SAMPLE SENTENCE #8: 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 #8: Queen Elizabeth I, a feminine, yet independent woman, considered marrying, but never did.

9. Avoid passive voice. Instead, use active voice, in which the subject actually “does” the action within a sentence. (For a better understanding of voice, see the Online Writing Center document on active and passive voice.)

SAMPLE SENTENCE #9: The meeting was called to order by the new vice-president of the General Mills company.

EXPLANATION OF #9: The meeting did not call itself to order. Since the vice-president did so, it is clearer and more concise to say just that.

REVISED VERSION OF #9: The new General Mills vice president called the meeting to order.

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

SAMPLE SENTENCE #10: 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 #10: Banks freely offer credit cards to college students in hopes of increasing profits. (13 words)

