How to be a more Concise Writer

Intro

Ill-conceived, clunky writing appears everywhere and we've all experienced it in some form or another. Whether it be that dense US history textbook or a wordy email, reading sprawling sentences can feel overwhelming, confusing, or boring. And if you are anything like me, I'm sure your writing assignments have received feedback from professors such as "too wordy", "irrelevant" or "unclear". Generations of students all around the world have faced this same problem of not being concise and in doing so, significantly hinder the quality of their work.

Examples of this kind of writing can be observed in many social settings. In his book, "Style: lessons in clarity and grace", author Joseph Williams gives an example of a long winded sentence I'm sure many of you have come across in your textbooks:

> "Recognition of the fact that systems [of grammar] differ from one language to another can serve as the basis for serious consideration of the problems confronting translators of the great works of world literature originally written in a language other than English."
> (Williams 7)

The same information can be said in about half as many words:

> "When we recognize that languages have different grammars, we can consider the problems of those who translated great works of literature into English." (7)

It's safe to assume that when asked to compare the two, most students would say that the second sentence is easier to understand. Students have long struggled with dense writing, with many thinking they were not smart enough to grasp the author's deep ideas. While this may be true for some, more could blame the writer's inability or refusal to write clearly. This turgid style of writing can also be seen in the language of law, social sciences, and medicine. For example, on the language of medicine, author Michael Crichton states that "It now appears that obligatory obfuscation is a firm tradition within the medical profession . . . . [Medical writing] is a highly skilled, calculated attempt to confuse the reader . . . . A doctor feels he might get passed over for an assistant professorship because he wrote his papers too clearly — because he made his ideas seem too simple." (qtd. in Williams 7).

Writers may also have their own personal reasons for why they make their work so complex. Michael Crichton again offers an explanation: "some writers plump up their prose to impress those who think that complicated sentences indicate deep thinking. And in fact, when we want to hide the fact that we don't know what we're talking about, we typically throw up a tangle of abstract words in long, complex sentences" (qtd. in Williams 9). This includes not only undergraduates taking their first course in economics or psychology, but lawyers, doctors — basically anyone writing on an unfamiliar topic. Students may also do this to sound impressive

when they first get into college. Others fail to write concisely because they fail to understand their audience. What we write will always seem clearer to us than it does to our reader, because we read into our writing what we want the readers to get out of it. And so instead of revising our writing to meet their needs, we send it off the moment it meets ours.

That is where the irony kicks in: writers are likely to confuse others when they write about a topic that they are confused about themselves. But when they read about a confusing subject written in a complex style, they are too easily convinced that complexity signals deep thought, and so they imitate it, further compounding their already confusing writing. In this article, I will share the importance of concise writing and some of the techniques I've learned during my research process in becoming a more concise writer.

What is concise writing and why should I even care?

The goal of concise writing is to ensure that you keep all the relevant information while choosing your words deliberately and constructing your sentences carefully to eliminate deadwood. Concise writing does not have to always have the fewest words, but it will have the most effective words which will make your writing straight to the point in a way your audience can easily comprehend. The main reason you should care about writing concisely is because of the audience. Many of us assume that our writing will be read carefully by an ideal reader who eagerly awaits our every word. However more often than not, our readers will be short on time and patience. Therefore if your writing is hard to follow, your readers will quickly lose interest. For this less-than-ideal reader, we are prompted to focus on what really matters: getting him/her to read, understand, and accept your message. Concise writing helps with this because it is easier for readers to understand and will help grab and hold your audience's attention. This style is also likely to be more memorable and leave a lasting impression on your readers.

Tips and Tricks for Writing Concisely

Throughout this section I will be using examples I've found on University writing websites and from William's book: "Style: lessons in clarity and grace". I should be quick to note that if you think about the principles offered here while completing your draft, you may end up never getting anything done. A better strategy would be to get something down on paper or on screen as fast as you can. Then as you rewrite that first draft into something clearer, you will understand the ideas better. And as you understand the ideas better, you will be able to convey them more clearly which will make them easier to understand to readers. Another thing to note is that executing succinct writing doesn't come naturally to most people. Even the most experienced writers who appreciate the benefits of clear and concise language can struggle with editing their own writing to eliminate wordiness. It is a skill that takes practice and effort so do not worry if these tips seem difficult to apply at first. Bottomline is, use what you find here not as rules to impose on every sentence as you draft it, but as principles to help identify already written sentences likely to give your readers a problem so you can revise them promptly.

1 . Delete Repetitive Words

In other words: Don't be redundant! It is important to always keep the reader in mind whenever going over your drafts, so if a passage explains or describes details that would be obvious to the reader already, delete it or reword it. Spotting redundancies can be a tricky task especially since there are so many forms.

Redundant Modifiers: Sometimes the meaning of a word or phrase implies its modifier, making the modifier unnecessary **(**the redundancy is in **bold** and the word it modifies is *italicized*)

> ❌Do not try to *predict* **future** events that will **completely** *revolutionize* society, because **past** *history* shows that it is the **final** *outcome* of minor events that **unexpectedly** *surprises* us more.

> ✅Do not try to predict revolutionary events, because history shows that the outcome of minor events surprises us more.

In this example, "predict" already implies a future event, "revolutionize" already implies that something will be completely changed, "history" already implies something that occurred in the past, "outcome" already implies the final product, and "surprises" already implies that something unexpected has occurred.

Other common redundancies:

- terrible tragedy
- free gift
- basic fundamentals
- future plans
- each individual
- final outcome
- true facts

Redundant Categories: words often imply what category they are in so you can remove the word that describes it (category in **bold**)

> ❌During that period **of time**, the membrane **area** became red **in color** and dull **in appearance**.

> ✅During that period, the membrane became red and dull.

Here are some general nouns (**bold**) often used redundantly :

- small in **size**
- square in **shape**
- honest in **character**
- of a bright **color**
- at an early **time**
- in a confused **state**

<u>Redundant Pairs:</u> If the first word in a pair has roughly the same meaning as the second, choose one. Some common examples of redundant pairs include: full and complete, each and every, hopes and dreams, whole entire, first and foremost, true and accurate, always and forever.

> ❌For **each and every** book you purchase, you will receive a free bookmark.

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<u>Redundancies: Metadiscourse:</u>

I know the term "metadiscourse" is a mouthful and may seem like a scary topic, I assure you it's not as bad as it seems. Simply put, metadiscourse refers to those places in which a writer explicitly acknowledges that they are writing something. For example, metadiscourse can be used to signal the writer's intentions:

> **I believe** that concise writing is an important skill to teach writers

Metadiscourse can also be used to signal how a text is organized:

> **To conclude**, the historiography of consumer demand in the eighteenth century has undergone many changes since the inception of consumer studies. **Therefore** ...

Here are some common examples of metadiscourse:

- Signals the writer's intentions: "to sum up", "candidly", "I believe"
- Gives directions to the reader: "To sum up", "consider now", "as you can see"
- Explains the structure of the text: "first", "second", "finally", "however", "therefore"

Some teachers I have come across urge their students to cut out metadiscourse, but all writing needs some. This is especially true for metadiscourse that guides readers through your text such as "first", "second", "therefore", and so on. The big risk is in using too many which can bury your ideas:

❌**This section introduces another problem**, that of noise pollution. **The first thing to say about it is** that noise pollution exists not only . . .

The topic becomes clearer to the reader if you reduce the metadiscourse:

✅**Another** problem is noise pollution. **First**, it exists not only . . .

It's better to state the fact rather than announcing that something has been observed, noticed, studied, etc.:

❌High divorce rates **have been observed** to occur in areas that **have been determined to have** low population density .

✅High divorce rates occur in areas with low population density.

2. **Delete Meaningless Words**

Unnecessary modifiers: Simply put, modifiers are words that change, clarify, qualify, or limit another word in a sentence in order to add emphasis, explanation, or detail. Writers will often use modifiers that really aren't necessary to express what they mean (just like how "really" was used in this sentence). Getting rid of these unnecessary modifiers can make your sentences more impactful while eliminating word count as well.

Common unnecessary modifiers include:
- kind of
- actually
- particular
- really
- certain
- various
- virtually
- individual
- basically
- generally
- given
- practically

Notice how much clearer the following sentences are when the unnecessary words (**in bold**) are removed:

❌Productivity **actually** depends on **certain** factors that **basically** involve psychology more than **any particular** technology

✅Productivity depends on psychology more than on technology.

❌**Basically**, the first widget **pretty much** surpassed the second one in **overall** performance.

✅The first widget performed better than the second.

❌Because **a great** many of the words in this sentence are **basically** unnecessary, it would **really** be a **very** good idea to edit **somewhat** for conciseness.

✅Because many of the words in this sentence are unnecessary, we should edit it.

Remove fillers: Filler words are words that add no meaning to the sentence and simple "fill" the space.

❌**For all intents and purposes,** this project will be outsourced.
✅This project will be outsourced.

❌**Needless to say**, I think we should get grilled cheese.
✅We should get grilled cheese.

Remove excessive detail: Always be sure to consider who your readers are. If a passage explains details that the reader would already find obvious, delete them or reword them.

❌I received **and read** the email **you sent yesterday** about the report **you're writing for** the project. I agree it needs **a thorough, close** edit **from someone familiar with your audience**.

✅I received your email about the project report and agree it needs an expert edit

❌**After booking a ticket to** Dallas **from a travel agent, I packed my bags and arranged for a taxi to the airport. Once there, I checked in, went through security, and was ready to board. But problems beyond my control led to** a three-hour delay **before takeoff.**

✅My flight to Dallas was delayed for three hours.

Tip: When revising your paper, think about what the thesis of your paper is. What exactly are you trying to accomplish? What components of your paper are necessary to help prove that

argument? Every paragraph should have a purpose. Critically review each one of your paragraphs and ask yourself whether it is necessary to your overall thesis/argument. You may end up having to cut some paragraphs, which can be painful especially if you've done a lot of research or need to reach a word count, but it will strengthen your writing.

3. Replace a Phrase with a Word

Many commonly-used phrases can be replaced with single words:

- "Because", "since", or "why" can replace:
    - the reason for
    - due to the fact that
    - in light of the fact that
    - given the fact that
    - considering the fact that
- "If" can replace:
    - in the event that
    - under circumstances in which
- "Must" or "should" can replace:
    - it is necessary that
    - cannot be avoid
    - there is a need/necessity for
- "May," "might," "could" can replace:
    - it is possible that
    - there is a chance that
    - it could happen that
    - the possibility exists for

❌**In the event that** going out for the purpose of eating with them **cannot be avoided**, **it is necessary that** we first go to the ATM, **in light of the fact that** I am out of cash.

✅**If** we **must** go out to eat with them, we **should** first go to the ATM **because** I am out of cash.

4. Change Negatives to Affirmatives.

When you choose to express an idea in the negative form, not only do you have to use an extra word: **same** → **not different**, but it can also confuse readers, forcing them to work harder to

figure out your meaning. For example, these two pair of sentences mean the same thing, but the affirmative is much more direct:

> ❌If you **do not have** more than five years of experience, **do not call** for an interview if you **have not already** spoken to human resources.

> ✅Applicants with more than five years of experience can bypass human resources and call for an interview.

> ❌Your audience **will not appreciate** the **details that lack relevance.**

> ✅Your audience will appreciate relevant details.

Most negatives can be replaced by affirmatives:

> Not different → similar
> Not the same   → different
> Not many → few
> Not often → rarely
> Not allow → prevent
> Not include → omit

How to be concise without losing your personality

One thing you don't want to do as a writer is strip down your writing so much that it loses its personality. Yes readers don't like rambling, but neither do they like writing so terse that it's all gristle and bone. But if your personality is to have lengthier sentences and you cut out large portions, it might feel like you're cutting your voice. So how does one navigate making their writing concise without losing their personality? To answer this question, I interviewed Dan Melzer, a writing professor at UC Davis. In his response he said,

> "As a writer, it's good to be flexible and to be able to adopt your style to different situations …. Sometimes I get to write exactly what I want to say and how I want to say it …. And then other times I write for a situation where I have to adjust my voice and my style for my audience …. As a writer, you have to be flexible and understand that sometimes you're going to get to write in your voice exactly how you want to say something and you're going to get to use your style to the fullest and sometimes you're gonna have to adjust to make sure you're really clear for the reader and you're writing appropriately for the type of writing that you're doing."

A lot of what your writing will look like depends on your audience. Your writing should function foremost to secure and maintain the attention of your reader. That's why you should listen carefully to what your readers have to say about your writing and be able to make the necessary

adjustments. They will know what you never can: how it feels to be your reader. Professor Melzer also gives advice for those who might feel uneasy cutting down on their writing:

> "If you are a writer who is not concise and that's your style, it's okay to not always be super concise. I think it's okay to not always be concise as long as the reader is not complaining, as long as the reader understands what you're saying, I don't think you have to totally change your style because I also feel like for most kinds of writing, there are different kinds of styles that are acceptable … there are certain genres that are very restrictive and you have to have a certain style and you just have to deal with that, but a lot of genres of writing have different options and different styles available, so I don't think you should totally change your style to be concise if you're not comfortable with that style."

So while you don't need change to a concise style if you do not feel comfortable, realize that there are some genres of writing that require concise writing such as an email to a professor or a resume. Be willing to be flexible but you don't have to reinvent who you are as a writer.

Conclusion

So now go back and review your own writing. Use these tips and tricks as a guide to help streamline your writing. Concise sentences and paragraphs grip your reader's attention and help them focus on the main point. Revising long clunky passages by trimming redundant and meaningless words reveals the essence of your thought. Concise writing will also help you organize your ideas and simplify your overall writing process, making you a better writer at the end of the day.

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