

ON WRITING CONCISELY

This article intends to share instruction and practical techniques for writing concisely. Some of the material is borrowed from *The Bedford Handbook*.¹ Sentence length does not embody conciseness. Conciseness is a learned and honed skill in writing that entails tightness and energy in words and sentences. Long sentences are not necessarily wordy; short sentences are not necessarily tight and energetic. “Tightness” refers to how well unnecessary words are avoided. “Energy” (or “vigor”) of words refers to the power or vividness communicated by words, especially action verbs.² The most effective time to implement conciseness in your writing is during the proofreading and editing phase, not while writing the first draft. Below, editorial techniques to approach tightness and energy in your writing will be illustrated and explained.

SELECT TECHNIQUES FOR REACHING CONCISENESS

With the following editorial techniques, note the original rough draft version and revised concise version of sentences:

Eliminate Redundancies:

Example 1:

Original rough draft:

Brother Edward is now employed at a private rehabilitation center working as a certified physical therapist.

Concise revision:

Brother Edward works at a private rehabilitation center as a certified physical therapist.

Example 2:

Original rough draft:

Sally was determined in her mind to lose weight.

Concise revision:

Sally was determined to lose weight.

Example 3:

Original rough draft:

Thirty-somethings are often thought of or stereotyped as apathetic.

Concise revision:

Thirty-somethings are often stereotyped as apathetic.

Avoid Unnecessary Repetition:

Example 1:

Original rough draft:

Our fifth patient, in room six, is a mentally ill patient.

Concise revision:

Our fifth patient, in room six, is mentally ill.

Example 2:

Original rough draft:

The best instructors help each student to become a better student both academically and emotionally.

Concise revision:

The best instructors help each student grow both academically and emotionally.

Example 3:

Original rough draft: A single paragraph:

The explanation offered by the treasurer was not at all convincing to the Board. First, he stated that the missing funds were not actually missing but only appeared to be missing on the ledger. However, he was not able to show where the actual funds then were. Then second, he said that the funds were missing because customers had not really paid their bills yet. Then third, he said that the funds were missing because of the expenses of the corporate conference last month that were not recorded yet. Yet, the treasurer vowed that the funds were not actually missing, but only appeared on paper to be missing. The Board executives could easily see through these tricky diversions. If the latter explanations were true, the funds would not appear on their ledger and not in their bank account.

Concise revision: Same paragraph:

The explanation offered by the treasurer was not at all convincing to the Board. First, he vowed that the missing funds were not actually missing but only appeared so on the ledger. However, he was not able to show where the actual funds were. Second, he said that the funds were missing because customers had not paid their bills yet. Third, he said that the expenses of the corporate conference last month were not recorded yet. The Board executives could easily see through these tricky diversions. If the latter explanations were true, the funds would appear neither in their ledger nor their bank account.

[Note: The above revised paragraph can still be improved. The point here is simply to illustrate concision of unnecessary repetitions.]

Eliminate Empty or Inflated Phrases:

An empty or inflated phrase can be deleted with very little or no loss of meaning.

Example 1:

Original rough draft:

In my opinion, our current tax policy is misguided.

Concise revision:

Our current tax policy is misguided.

Example 2:

Original rough draft:

It certainly seems that *The Telltale Heart* is Edgar Allen Poe's most macabre story.

Concise revision:

The Telltale Heart is Edgar Allen Poe's most macabre story.

Example 3:

Original rough draft:

I will file the proper papers in the event that I am unable to meet the deadline.

Concise revision:

I will file the proper papers if I cannot meet the deadline.

Simplify Sentence Structure:

Sentence structures can be needlessly indirect or passive, creating wordiness. Structure is simplified in part by using direct action or active verbs to replace passive or indirect state-of-being and helping verbs.

Example 1:

Original rough draft:

The investment analyst claimed that because of volatile market conditions, he could not make an estimate of the company's future profits.

Concise revision:

The investment analyst claimed that because of volatile market conditions, he could not estimate the company's future profits.

Example 2:

Original rough draft:

Mervina is responsible for monitoring and balancing the budgets for travel, contract services, and personnel.

Concise revision:

Mervina monitors and balances the budgets for travel, contract services, and personnel.

Example 3:

Original rough draft:

There is another book that tells the story of Karl Marx and explains his theory of socialism.

Concise revision:

Another book tells the story of Karl Marx and explains his theory of socialism.

Example 4:

Original rough draft:

All too often, athletes with minimal academic skills have been recruited by our coaches.

Concise revision:

All too often, our coaches have recruited athletes with minimal academic skills.

Trim Clauses to Phrases; Phrases to Single Words:

Example 1:

Original rough draft:

My family took a side trip to Monticello, which was the home of Thomas Jefferson.

Concise revision:

My family took a side trip to Monticello, the home of Thomas Jefferson.

Example 2:

Original rough draft:

For her birthday we gave Harriet a stylish vest made out of silk.

Concise revision:

For her birthday we gave Harriet a stylish silk vest.

Illustration: Writing an Abstract:

Some student writing assignments, especially those in APA format, require an Abstract. Writing a paper's Abstract is worthy practice for sharpening conciseness if a word count maximum attends it. Composing an Abstract provides practice in synthesizing and articulating a large body of material within a word count boundary.

Exercise: Self-Disciplined Word Counts:

An excellent way to sharpen conciseness is to discipline your writing under a series of word count limits you prefer. First, write your rough draft. Then proofread and edit the composition as many times as you wish before submitting the final copy.

Identify the word count of the body of the paper in the first draft. Microsoft Word 2007 automatically displays the word count of the entire document in the bottom left of the document tray, which makes further tallies extremely easy to obtain. Each time you proofread and edit an Abstract, a paragraph, a section, or the entirety of the paper body, decide a realistic lower word count limit for that part, and force yourself not to exceed that limit. This cyclical strategy can be implemented any number of times, in whatever way you choose, and by practice will train you to write more concisely.

For example, if the body of your first draft consists of 1,750 words, in the proofreading and editing phase you might choose to reduce the word count to 1,400. Using careful judgment, you would then edit and revise the composition to under 1,400 words. You will discover the lower word count can be attained with little or no loss of meaning. The more concise composition will be leaner, and more direct and potent. Do not lower the word count so far that substantive meaning is lost.

¹ Compare: Hacker, Diana (2006). *The Bedford handbook* (7th ed.). Boston/ New York: Bedford/St. Martins, pp. 206-210.

² Action verbs, state-of-being verbs, and helping verbs are not defined in this article.