

Eliminating Words

This resource will help you write clearly by eliminating unnecessary words and rearranging your phrases.

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1. Eliminate words that explain the obvious or provide excessive detail

Always consider readers while drafting and revising writing. If passages explain or describe details that would already be obvious to readers, delete or reword them. Readers are also very adept at filling in the non-essential aspects of a narrative, as in the fourth example.

Wordy: I received your inquiry that you wrote about tennis rackets yesterday, and read it thoroughly. Yes, we do have. . . (19 words)

Concise: I received your inquiry about tennis rackets yesterday. Yes, we do have. . . (12 words)

Wordy: It goes without saying that we are acquainted with your policy on filing tax returns, and we have every intention of complying with the regulations that you have mentioned. (29 words)

Concise: We intend to comply with the tax-return regulations that you have mentioned. (12 words)

Wordy: Imagine a mental picture of someone engaged in the intellectual activity of trying to learn what the rules are for how to play the game of chess. (27 words)

Concise: Imagine someone trying to learn the rules of chess. (9 words)

Wordy: 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. (47 words)

Concise: My flight to Dallas was delayed for three hours. (9 words)

Wordy: Baseball, one of our oldest and most popular outdoor summer sports in terms of total attendance at ball parks and viewing on television, has the kind of rhythm of play on the field that alternates between times when players passively wait with no action taking place between the pitches to the batter and then times when they explode into action as the batter hits a pitched ball to one of the players and the player fields it. (77 words)

Concise: Baseball has a rhythm that alternates between waiting and explosive action. (11 words)

2. Eliminate unnecessary determiners and modifiers

Writers sometimes clog up their prose with one or more extra words or phrases that seem to determine narrowly or to modify the meaning of a noun but don't actually add to the meaning of the sentence. Although such words and phrases can be meaningful in the appropriate context, they are often used as "filler" and can easily be eliminated.

Wordy: Any particular type of dessert is fine with me. (9 words)

Concise: Any dessert is fine with me. (6 words)

Wordy: Balancing the budget by Friday is an impossibility without some kind of extra help. (14 words)

Concise: Balancing the budget by Friday is impossible without extra help. (10 words)

Wordy: For all intents and purposes, American industrial productivity generally depends on certain factors that are really more psychological in kind than of any given technological aspect. (26 words)

Concise: American industrial productivity depends more on psychological than on technological factors. (11 words)

Here's a list of some words and phrases that can often be pruned away to make sentences clearer:

- kind of
- sort of
- type of
- really
- basically
- for all intents and purposes
- definitely
- actually
- generally
- individual
- specific
- particular

3. Omit repetitive wording

Watch for phrases or longer passages that repeat words with similar meanings. Words that don't build on the content of sentences or paragraphs are rarely necessary.

Wordy: I would appreciate it if you would bring to the attention of your drafting officers the administrator's dislike of long sentences and paragraphs in messages to the field and in other items drafted for her signature or approval, as well as in all correspondence, reports, and studies. Please encourage your section to keep their sentences short. (56 words)

Concise: Please encourage your drafting officers to keep sentences and paragraphs in letters, reports, and studies short. Dr. Lomas, the administrator, has mentioned that reports and memos drafted for her approval recently have been wordy and thus time-consuming. (37 words)

Wordy: The supply manager considered the correcting typewriter an unneeded luxury. (10 words)

Concise: The supply manager considered the correcting typewriter a luxury. (9 words)

Wordy: Our branch office currently employs five tellers. These tellers do an excellent job Monday through Thursday but cannot keep up with the rush on Friday and Saturday. (27 words)

Concise: Our branch office currently employs five tellers, who do an excellent job Monday through Thursday but cannot keep up with Friday and Saturday rush periods. (25 words)

4. Omit redundant pairs

Many pairs of words imply each other. Finish implies complete, so the phrase completely finish is redundant in most cases – as are many other pairs of words:

- past memories
- various differences
- each individual _____
- basic fundamentals
- true facts
- important essentials
- future plans
- terrible tragedy
- end result
- final outcome
- free gift
- past history
- unexpected surprise
- sudden crisis

A related expression that's not redundant as much as it is illogical is "very unique." Since unique means "one of a kind," adding modifiers of degree such as "very," "so," "especially," "somewhat," "extremely," and so on is illogical. One-of-a-kind-ness has no gradations; something is either unique or it is not.

Wordy: Before the travel agent was completely able to finish explaining the various differences among all of the many very unique vacation packages his travel agency was offering, the customer changed her future plans. (33 words)

Concise: Before the travel agent finished explaining the differences among the unique vacation packages his travel agency was offering, the customer changed her plans. (23 words)

5. Omit redundant categories

Specific words imply their general categories, so we usually don't have to state both. We know that a period is a segment of time, that pink is a color, that shiny is an appearance.

In each of the following phrases, the general category term can be dropped, leaving just the specific descriptive word:

- large in size
- often times
- of a bright color
- heavy in weight
- period in time
- round in shape
- at an early time
- economics field
- of cheap quality
- honest in character
- of an uncertain condition
- in a confused state
- unusual in nature
- extreme in degree
- of a strange type

Wordy: During that time period, many car buyers preferred cars that were pink in color and shiny in appearance. (18 words)

Concise: During that period, many car buyers preferred pink, shiny cars. (10 words)

Wordy: The microscope revealed a group of organisms that were round in shape and peculiar in nature. (16 words)

Concise: The microscope revealed a group of peculiar, round organisms. (9 words)