

Proofreading Skills Tutorial:

Tutorial #14:
Writing Concisely

Eliminating Empty Phrases

Avoiding Clichés

Eliminating Redundancy

Writing Center
English 800 Center

All notes and exercises should be done on separate sheets of paper, which you will bring to your conference with an instructor in the center.

As you work through the tutorial, make sure to see an instructional aide at the front desk in the Writing Center or English 800 Center if you have any questions or difficulties.

Improving Sentence Focus: Writing Concisely

According to research in the field of composition, university professors identify long, flowing sentences as one of the characteristics of good academic writing. But the truth is that simply adding extra words to your sentences can interfere with the effective communication of your ideas. Writing concisely, or making a point in the fewest possible words, will make your essays clear and easy to understand.

When you proofread, you should think of yourself as a butcher who is trimming the fat from your sentences. This tutorial will teach you some principles to follow as you proofread for concision. Once you finish making your essay more concise, you should fuse the concise, choppy sentences into the longer, varied structures that good academic writing requires.

Note: The tutorials *Coordination and Subordination*, *Noun-Phrase Appositives* and *Verbal Phrases* also cover different sentence styles that you can use to combine your sentences.

This tutorial will demonstrate three strategies for ensuring concise writing:

- 1. eliminating empty phrases**
- 2. avoiding clichés**
- 3. eliminating redundancy**

Eliminating Empty Phrases

Look at the following sentences:

As far as I am concerned, discrimination against certain ethnic groups continues to exist for all intents and purposes.

Discrimination against certain ethnic groups continues to exist.

In your own words, explain the differences between these two sentences.

As you probably noticed, the first sentence contains more words than the second one. The second sentence is more concise and direct. Because the first sentence includes empty or “filler” words, it does not communicate the main idea as clearly as the second sentence does. Eliminating the phrase makes the sentence more effective.

Some students think that adding empty phrases will make their essays sound more formal and impressive, but these phrases actually sound artificial and pretentious and make the writing hard to understand. Look at the following examples of empty phrases that you should always cut from your sentences. Do you use any of these in your own writing?

All things considered	In my opinion	The fact is that
As far as I'm concerned	It is my opinion that	In a manner of speaking
For all intents and purposes	What's more is that	The thing is that

When you are writing, try to use your own natural voice. Speak aloud as you type and imagine that you are explaining to someone else in person. Using your own voice will help you avoid empty phrases.

Now consider the following pairs of sentences, with the empty phrases in italics:

At this point in time, the latest iPad is expensive *due to the fact that* it has no competition.
Now, the new iPad is expensive because it has no competition.

The reason why Jhumpa Lahiri's novel is so great is *because* it has vivid imagery.
 Jhumpa Lahiri 's novel is great because it has vivid imagery.

As you can see from these examples, you can reduce empty or “filler” phrases to a single word.

FOR	SUBSTITUTE
at the present time	now
at this point in time	now
concerning the nature of	about
in the nature of	like
for the purpose of	for
in order to	to
in this day and age	today
in view of the fact that	because
it is clear that	clearly
by virtue of the fact that	because
due to the fact that	because
for the reason that	because
the reason why is because	because
in the event that	if
by means of	by
last but not least	finally

Principle I: Whenever possible, eliminate or condense empty phrases.

Exercise 1

Instructions: Using Principle I, rewrite the following sentences, eliminating or condensing empty words and phrases.

1. Losa came to this country due to the fact that she wants a career in computer graphics.

2. For all intents and purposes, Aspara dropped out of school in view of the fact that she had to help support her family.
3. The fact is that parents must build closer relationships with their teenaged children by virtue of the fact that so many teens get into trouble in the United States.
4. After she arrived from Burma, the reason that Aung enrolled at CSM was because it was close to his home and had an excellent English department.
5. In the event that it snows, Luanna will purchase some chains for her tires.
6. In this day and age, it is clear that young people know more about computers than they know about American history.

Avoiding Clichés

Look at the following sentences.

A healthy lifestyle enhances your ability both to live life to its fullest and to live to a ripe old age.

A healthy lifestyle helps you live life fully and longer.

In your own words, explain which sentence seems more effective and why.

As you may have noticed, the first sentence contains more words, including expressions that you have heard before, “live life to its fullest” and “live to a ripe old age.”

Clichés are stale phrases. These expressions were once fresh and forceful, but constant use has weakened them. Instead of using clichés, it is better to substitute fresh words or restate the idea in plain language. Be sure to choose words that reflect your ideas and suit your purpose, instead of settling for overused phrases or vague generalizations.

Here are some examples of clichés:

better late than never
cool, calm, and collected
hard as a rock
white as snow
live life to its fullest
see eye to eye

knight in shining armor
soar like an eagle
pass with flying colors
ripe old age
work like a dog
few and far between

If you are a second-language English speaker, you have probably learned some clichés (idioms) in your ESL classes so that you will understand what they mean when you hear them. But there are many more clichés that you will have difficulty recognizing. Remembering to stick to plain

language when you are writing your essays will help you avoid clichés. And your classroom instructor will point out any clichés in your writing, so you can learn to avoid them.

Principle II: Use fresh words or plain language rather than clichés.

Exercise 2

Instructions: Using Principle II, rewrite the following sentences by using fresh words or plain language to eliminate the clichés.

1. We talked until early in the morning, but we just couldn't see eye to eye on where to go for dinner.
2. In rural areas doctors are so few and far between that even though the doctors work like dogs, the children do not get adequate medical care.
3. In a crisis, Jing is cool, calm and collected, so we know that he will be an effective nurse in the ER.

Eliminating Slang and Jargon

Consider the following sentences:

Many kids begin school pretty together but then they space out.

Many students begin school focused but then lose their direction.

Explain which sentence sounds more appropriate for a college essay and why.

You may have noticed that the first sentence contains **slang**. Slang is the colorful and novel expressions created by different groups of people—from teenagers to computer scientists to musicians. Among those who understand it, slang may be vivid and forceful. In fact, some slang, such as “dropout,” has proved so useful that it has passed into the general vocabulary. But most slang is inappropriate for academic or business writing.

Language specific to a field or discipline is called **jargon**. Writing a biology paper about cell division would be impossible without using jargon such as *mitosis* and *meiosis*. Similarly, if you are writing an English essay about a novel, you might use jargon such as *protagonist* and *antagonist*. When you are

writing a paper, use jargon only when it is appropriate to your audience and purpose. When writing for a general audience, avoid using jargon, or you will risk sounding artificial and pretentious.

Principle III: Avoid slang, and use jargon only when appropriate.

Exercise 3

Instructions: Using Principle III, rewrite the following sentences to eliminate slang or jargon.

1. If he gets too hyper before the interview, Uto may mess up his chances of getting hired.
2. Anne and Carrie were very into Rashad, but he was into Clarice.
3. AIDS is a major deal all over the world.
4. Hassan was so out of it that he forgot his homework.
5. The large black and blue mark on Shireen’s arm, a hematoma caused by a fall from her bicycle, was painful.

Eliminating Redundancy

Consider these sentences:

Many people who have dropped out of school and lack formal education are unemployed and do not have jobs.

Many uneducated people are unemployed.

In your own words, explain which sentence is more effective and why.

Although repeating key words in an essay is one way to make writing more analytical and coherent, **redundancy** or unnecessary repetition weakens sentences. The first sentence contains two redundancies. That is, not completing high school means a lack of formal education, and the definition of being unemployed is not having a job. The second sentence lacks redundancy, and it is concise and clear.

The simplest kind of repetition is the phrase that says the same thing twice. In the following examples, the redundant words are italicized.

aggressive <i>by nature</i>	<i>habitual</i> custom	repeat <i>again</i>
biography of his <i>life</i>	honest <i>in character</i>	revert <i>back</i>
circle <i>around</i>	<i>ink</i> pen	oval <i>in shape</i>
continue <i>on</i>	lilac <i>in color</i>	small <i>in size</i>
consensus <i>of opinion</i>	<i>past</i> memories	<i>sudden</i> crisis
few <i>in number</i>	<i>past</i> history	<i>terrible</i> tragedy
<i>final</i> outcome	plans <i>for the future</i>	<i>true</i> facts
first <i>and foremost</i>	refer <i>back</i>	<i>various</i> differences

Shortening these redundant pairs to a single word is one way to improve concision and clarity. The shorter versions are easier to read and convey the same message more effectively, as shown in the following pairs of sentences.

Redundant: Past history shows that the students who transfer are actually very few in number.

Concise: History shows that the students who transfer are actually very few.

Redundant: President George W. Bush made serious errors in responding to the sudden crisis that followed the terrible tragedy of September 11.

Concise: President George W. Bush made serious errors in responding to the crisis that followed the tragedy of September 11.

Joining sentences can also help reduce unnecessary repetition, as illustrated in the following examples:

Redundant: The vegetable industry is one of the largest agricultural sectors in the United States. The vegetable industry is a significant contributor to the American export market.

Concise: The vegetable industry is one of the largest agricultural sectors in the United States and contributes significantly to our export market.

Finally, to check whether a word is working in a sentence, test it. If removing the word does not alter the meaning, leave it out. Also, if you find yourself repeating the same word or a synonym in the same sentence, look for ways to eliminate one of the words.

Principle IV: Eliminate redundancy and unnecessary repetition by cutting words or combining sentences.

Exercise 4

Instructions: Using Principle IV, rewrite the following sentences to make them more concise.

1. Some Vietnam veterans coming back to the United States after their tours of duty in Vietnam had problems readjusting again to life in America.
2. In the 1970s, many students used drugs in high school. Many students could not stop using drugs during college, especially if they were confronted with a sudden crisis.
3. In spite of the fact that many ordinary middle-aged people say they generally feel physically healthy and in good shape, debilitating heart attacks or strokes can occur suddenly at any time.
4. The general consensus of opinion among voters was that the mayor had exceeded his authority.
5. The fox that was gray in color and large in size slyly circled around his prey.

Exercise 5

Instructions: Using Principles I, II, III and IV, revise the following paragraph for concision.

At this point in time, my reason for taking this Shakespeare course is complicated. The first reason why is due to the fact that I wish to transfer from the community college system to the University of California system. When entering the university as a junior, first and foremost, the college system expects me to have completed my general education coursework. Therefore, an expectation of mine for this class involves enhancing my chances of being accepted to the U.C. system by completing all my general education courses. The second purpose for my taking the class is for my own personal enrichment. In this day and age, it does not hurt having a well-rounded education, and I have always really been into Shakespeare. As a matter of fact, the reason why I have fond past memories of reading his sonnets in high school is because I have had great teachers at CSM. My plans for the future might include majoring in liberal studies or even English, and a university requirement requires students to take a course in Shakespeare. So my anticipation is that I will enjoy this class, and I anticipate that it will help improve my chances of getting into the University of California system. Last but not least, I hope to pass with flying colors.

Exercise 6

Instructions:

1. Review a classroom essay that you are working on and incorporate concise sentences in your own writing.
2. Look back at the principles and exercises in this tutorial and make notes on a separate sheet of paper. You will bring these notes and the essay to your conference.
3. Make an appointment for a conference with an instructor in the Writing Center (18-104) or English 800 Center (18-102). To make this appointment, stop by the Centers or call (650) 574-6436. During this appointment, the professor will make sure you understand the concepts covered in this tutorial, answer any questions that you might have, review your answers to these exercises, and check to see if you can incorporate the skill into your writing.

Reminder:

For this appointment, bring

- any notes about the tutorial that you have taken
- your completed tutorial exercises
- and the essay