

Eliminating Wordiness

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The goal of this handout is to help you to find and eliminate unnecessary words or phrases in your writing during the editing stage of the writing process. By eliminating wordiness, you can

- Clarify your meaning.
- Strengthen your prose, making it sound more authoritative and confident.
- Get to the heart of your argument so that your readers will not get lost.

Five Common Causes of Wordiness

Passive voice

In passive voice, the subject of the sentence is not performing an action, but instead, has an action performed on it. Because of this, the focus of the sentence becomes what was done (the thing the action was performed on) rather than the person or thing that performed the action. For example:

The flower was picked by Lisa.

The speech was listened to by five hundred people.

Passive voice can confuse the meaning of a sentence. Often, it is unclear who or what is the most important thing in the sentence. Lisa or the flower? The people or the speech?

To clarify meaning, try using active voice. Active voice means that the subject is performing the action in the sentence. For example:

Lisa picked the flower.

Five hundred people listened to the speech.

Over-use of the verb “to be”

Sometimes, you need to use a form of “to be.” But, go through and see if you can replace some of them with a stronger verb. This makes the entire sentence stronger and more succinct.

O.K.— He was feeling claustrophobic because the market was crowded.

Better— The crowded market exacerbated his claustrophobia.

Redundancies

Redundancies are words or phrases with the same meaning repeated in close succession. They can obscure your main point.

I have a future plan to attend the Super Bowl next year.

Future and plan is redundant. If you are planning something, we know that it will be done in the future. Future and next year are also redundant. Next year is a specific time in the future. Try this instead:

I plan to attend the Super Bowl next year.

Here are some of the most common redundancies:

- absolute guarantee
- added bonus
- advance notice
- few in number
- forever and ever
- first began
- plan ahead
- past records
- close scrutiny
- unexpected surprise
- end result
- repeat again

Repetition

Used sparingly and intentionally, repetition can be an effective tool. However, when overused, repetition can be confusing and can interrupt the flow of your sentences. If you find repetition in your writing, chances are you can condense your sentences.

The horse ran. When a horse runs, it is called a gallop. The horse ran to get away from the mountain lion.

“Ran” is repeated twice and the horse features in all of the sentences. When editing, it is often beneficial to combine sentences:

The horse ran, or galloped, to get away from the mountain lion.

Filler words or phrases

You want to get directly to the point in your sentence. Short and simple is more engaging:

Instead of this—

The reason why is that

This is a subject that

In spite of the fact that

Because of the fact that

There were students sitting

Try this—

Because

[State the subject]

Despite

Because

Students sat