

Lesson Plan: Five Ways to Make Writing Clear and Concise

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Lesson: Five Ways to Make Writing Clear and Concise

Timeframe: approximately 60 minutes

Target Audience: This lesson is intended for students in Engineering 100W, a course that teaches Technical Communication with a focus on environmental issues. Students enrolled in courses related to business, marketing, medicine, criminal justice, science, or other areas where clear and concise communication are required will benefit from this lesson. Teachers who work with English Language Learners and Special Education students may also benefit from learning how to revise instructions to make them simpler and more accessible.

Materials Needed: Computer, LCD Projector (with optional laser pointer), Concise Writing PowerPoint, whiteboard and markers, “Positive Construction” handout, “Fancy and Plain” handout, Homework Revision paragraph handout, highlighters, pencils, erasers

Objectives: After the lesson students will be able to

- identify 7+ phrases that use negative constructions.
- replace these negative constructions with positive constructions.
- identify 5+ unnecessary or “filler” words and phrases.
- remove these filler words and phrases from sentences and paragraphs.
- identify 2+ ways to streamline sentences by removing unnecessary words.
- identify 7+ problematic prepositional phrases.
- replace these problematic prepositional phrases with effective single words.
- identify 10+ “fancy” words (e.g., words from higher-level diction).
- replace these “fancy” words with simpler words.

Background: Students who come from a variety of academic and cultural backgrounds take Engineering 100W. They study computer engineering, civil engineering, mechanical engineering, aeronautical engineering, and other science-based fields. Engineering 100W students write résumés, business letters, memos, interview questions, scholarly analysis, proposals, and weekly responses to “Green Talk” speakers. All Engineering 100W students gather every Wednesday at noon in a large auditorium to listen to presentations that involve environmental issues such as renewable energy, energy conservation, waste management, desalination, and other topics. Besides this meeting, a maximum of 28 students meet twice a week for 90 minutes to learn writing techniques, write drafts and responses, research relevant topics, and interact with teams and partners.

This lesson on concise writing helps Engineering 100W students to improve their writing by clarifying it. In the business world, people need to focus on essentials—they don’t have time to sift through “filler” words and phrases. Students need to learn ways to replace wordy or bloated language with concise language to prepare for writing that will help them enter the professional

world and subsequently enjoy successful communication with their colleagues. Also, they often have an international audience for their emails, memos, letters, reports, proposals, and other correspondence, and clear, concise communication helps clients or colleagues who struggle with English.

Introduction to Lesson [2-3 minutes]:

Write the agenda on the board:

- Review key ideas from previous class session on résumés.
- Revise a paragraph using positive constructions—pair and share.
- Create “slimmer sentences” together as a class.
- Revise paragraph with problematic prepositional phrases—pair and share.
- Take “fancy” versus “plain” quiz. Check results with a partner.
- Begin homework: Revise the paragraphs on the handout.

The instructor says, “As you know from our last lesson on résumés, we use bullets to present action phrases to describe our abilities under the headings of past jobs, projects, or activities. We know that employers will read a résumé for about 5 seconds before they cast it aside if they don’t like what they see. In a busy business world, it is important to use the right words and arrange them so that people will get the most important information quickly; unnecessary words may confuse people and take too much of their time.”

Procedure [50+ minutes]:

Step 1: Class discussion of purpose [3-5 minutes]

- Start the PowerPoint presentation and show the picture of a man with a beer belly next to a man with a chiseled physique; the slide is titled “Get Rid of the Bloat.”
- Ask students to talk to a partner for about a minute to discuss how the picture might relate to our lesson today. Consider why we show a muscular physique, not a skinny physique next to the bloated one. Read the following bullet points for relevant responses—offer this information once students have had a chance to reveal their own guesses to partners, and some students have shared these ideas with the whole class.
- Possible answers include the following information: “fat” or “bloat” can relate to unnecessary words or phrases in our writing. When we “slim down” our writing, we communicate more efficiently and have a better chance of reaching team or company goals; also, time is money, and if a proposal or report is lengthy or boring it can be tossed aside, so we need to “trim the fat” to keep our reading audience engaged.
- Students may wonder how to meet word quotas that instructors apply to assignments. You may tell them that we want to cut the fat, not the muscles. E.g., build strong examples and analysis to support ideas. Cut out non-essential words and phrases.

Step 2: Overview the principles of concise writing from Markel’s text [1-2 minutes]

Show the third PowerPoint slide and verbalize the following list:

1. Use Positive Constructions
2. Avoid Filler Phrases
3. Streamline Sentences—Omit Unneeded Words
4. Revise Problematic Prepositional Phrases
5. Make Fancy Words Plain

Step 3: Practice positive constructions [10-12 minutes]

- Pause at the next slide, “Use Positive Construction.” Then, read each of the seven negative constructions out loud and ask students to say the corresponding positive construction each time.
- For example, say “What is the positive construction for ‘not all?’” Pause for students to say “most.” Say, “What is the positive construction for ‘not many?’” and then pause while students say “few.” Continue with each example from the list of the seven shown in the PowerPoint slide. Use a pointer to signal words that you want students to say.
- Next, distribute the handout that shows the paragraph using negative constructions.
- Distribute highlighters, or have students use their own. (I tell students to bring highlighters to class at all times, and I send a group reminder via email telling students to bring their highlighters the day before the lesson.) Leave the slide up and ***allow students 3-4 minutes to highlight negative constructions and share the problems that they find.***
- Allow 5 minutes to revise the paragraph. Encourage help from partners.
- The instructor circulates the room to encourage partnerships and share strategies (say, “I know you two can help each other with this—share your ideas.”) Check for individual understanding as you circulate.
- Invite two or more student volunteers to read their revisions out loud.
- Invite students to consider other changes. They may note that the streamlined version has combined two sentences into one sentence. Ask if they understand why it is acceptable to leave out particular words. If the words are understood in context, it may be okay to omit them.

Step 4: Identify filler phrases [5-7 minutes]

- Pause at the slide that says “Less filler, more flavor.” Ask a volunteer to read the “filler” sentence: “I think that, basically, the board felt sort of betrayed, in a sense, by the kind of behavior the president displayed.”
- Have another student read the “slimmer” sentence: “The board felt betrayed by the president’s behavior.”
- Ask each student to write 2-3 sentences using the five filler phrases. Ask them to switch papers with a partner and revise the sentences to eliminate the filler phrases.

Step 5: Discuss streamlining [3-4 minutes]

- Pause at the “streamlining explanations” slide. Ask a student volunteer to read the sluggish example out loud. Then ask a different volunteer to read the streamlined version.
- Ask students, “Why is it okay to change ‘the market for the sale of flash memory chips’ to read, simply, ‘the market for flash memory chips?’” Explain that the idea of “sale” is in the word “market.” We do not need the word “sale” here for that reason.
- Invite students to consider other changes. They may note that the streamlined version has combined two sentences into one sentence. Ask if they understand why it is okay to leave out particular words. If the words are understood in context, it may be okay to omit them.

Step 6: Revise problematic prepositional phrases [15 minutes]

- Show the slide titled “Problematic Prepositional Phrases.” Remind students that prepositions show location. Tell them that prepositional phrases sometimes work well in our writing, but sometimes they can be stated more simply. Read the examples one at a

time, and ask them to identify the preposition in each problematic phrase. Remind them that prepositions are, essentially, words that often show location or position in space or time, or they show a relationship between the main subject and something else.

Following each problematic example, recite the single word solution.

- For example, say, “The first problematic phrase is ‘at the present time.’” What is the preposition in this phrase? Yes, the preposition is ‘at.’ What is a simpler way to say ‘at the present time’? (Pause for them to say “now” as shown on the slide.) Yes, you can substitute the single word ‘now’ for ‘at the present time.’ Now let’s look at the next example, ‘during the course of.’ What’s the preposition? (Pause for the answer.) Yes, the preposition is ‘during.’ What’s a good way to replace the phrase...” and continue in this fashion throughout the examples.
- Note: prepositions are tough to define. Second language learners may need a separate lesson on prepositions before doing the concise writing lesson. Here is a helpful website for definitions of prepositions and ways to use them: <http://rwc.hunter.cuny.edu/reading-writing/on-line/prep-def.html>.
- Ask students to refer to the second paragraph on the handout they already have.
- Distribute highlighters or ask students to use their own. ***Ask students to highlight problematic prepositional phrases on the handout. Partners may share choices.*** If there are not enough highlighters, some student can underline or circle problem areas with pens or pencils.
- After highlighting is complete, ask them to revise the paragraph that uses the problematic prepositional phrases using the simple replacement words shown on the slide and on their handout.
- Circulate the room to encourage students to work with partners and share strategies. Check in on progress with revisions and offer help.
- Have students share examples of revisions with the class.

Step 7: Fancy versus plain [5-7 minutes]

- Show the slide of the fancy chicken versus the plain chick in the egg. Explain that simplicity can be more attractive than fancy, exotic, or decorative appearances at times. Note that the fancy chicken may make you stand back and point, but the simple chick makes you want to come near it and touch it. Simplicity is often more accessible than complexity.
- Remind students that this part of concise writing is about diction, or word choice.
- Pass out the handout that has the “Fancy versus Plain” words quiz on it. Have students use the word list on the handout to help them complete the quiz. Check answers together as a class and allow corrections and self-grading so every student gets an “A.” ☺

Closure/Evaluation [5 minutes]:

- Ask students to offer five ways they can make writing more clear and concise.
- The answers that relate to the lesson today are as follows: make negative constructions into positive constructions; omit filler phrases; streamline sentences by removing unneeded words (words that are redundant or overly obvious due to context); replace problematic prepositional phrases with single words; and make fancy words plain.

- Distribute the homework handout that shows a multi-paragraph piece of writing that uses fancy words, negative constructions, filler words and phrases, and problematic prepositional phrases. Ask students to revise the paragraphs to make them as concise and clear as possible. Begin the homework in class if there is extra time.

Lesson Analysis:

Reflections

- First, we established the practical purpose of the lesson. Most students will pay closer attention when they see how the lesson links to the professional world.
- The PowerPoint pictures help visual learners and also add a bit of fun to the lesson. People write best when they can have some enjoyment in the process. Spending time on the visuals helps students to shift their thinking about verbose and fancy writing.
- Saying the examples out loud, together, helps audio learners as we reinforce the examples and concepts. Then, as students practice the techniques in class and share their practice with partners, students have opportunities to see different writing strategies using the same principles.
- ***It is essential to use highlighters to note problem areas, and to discuss these potential problems with partners, before taking the next step to repairing the problems.*** This allows students time to absorb and practice each step of the process. Otherwise, it is like mixing the dessert with the salad and the main course and asking students to swallow it all as quickly as they can. Eating slowly is better for digestion and enjoyment. True learning also requires a sequence and a pace that lessens anxiety to improve digestion of new concepts, techniques, and applications.

Applications

- To continue the lesson, students may follow up by analyzing text that they are reading in class and test it for conciseness using the principles and techniques outlined above.
- Instructors may modify the lesson depending on the capabilities of their students; they may wish to teach the lesson during more than one session. They may want to use five different sessions—one session to cover each of the five points. Each session could involve a brief review of the previous point on concise writing and an addition of a new point.
- Educators and mentors who work with future teachers of EL students and/or special education students can use this to help teachers simplify their written and verbal instructions for projects and assignments.
- Instructors of courses that focus on professional preparation for fields related to science, engineering, medical procedures, criminal justice, marketing, and other disciplines may apply the lessons by using the principles from it by having students analyze workplace documents and academic journal articles. Following, students may apply the principles to their own correspondence: emails, letters, reports, proposals, brochures, blogs, et al.

Concise Writing Homework

Congratulations! You now have four strategies to create clear, concise writing:

- **Make negative constructions positive:** not all = most, many, some; not many = few; not late = punctual; not negative = positive; not possible = impossible; less depressed = happier; not healthy = unhealthy; not forget = remember; less tired = energized
- **Omit filler words.** Delete phrases that are not necessary, such as “I think that,” “basically,” “sort of,” “in a sense,” and “kind of.”
- **Change prepositional phrases into single words** if possible: at the present time = now; during the course of = during or while; in the event that = if; in view of the fact that = because; on a daily basis = daily; prior to = before; at the conclusion of = after, following
- **Make fancy words plain:** initiate or commence = begin; quantify = measure; utilize = use; furnish = provide, give; perform = do; manifest = show; attempt = try; advise = tell; terminate = end or stop

To practice using these strategies, revise the paragraphs below to make the writing as concise and clear as possible. First, highlight, circle, or underline the words you want to change. Then, revise the paragraphs using some of the words shown above.

Not all people who initiate an exercise program continue with it on a daily basis. During the course of the day people have many events that, basically, drain their energy and make them feel that it is not possible to get to the gym, go for a bike ride, or go to the pool to swim. Long hours at work, a long commute, and family obligations influence people to make decisions that are not healthy for them in the long run. It is true that the decision is unhealthy in view of the fact that terminating an exercise program can lead to heart disease, obesity, depression, anxiety, cancer, and other health problems.

This is kind of a tough problem, but I do not think that it is not possible to solve it. Basically, I think that prior to giving up on the problem people may consider taking some simple steps to add exercise to their lives in view of the fact that it affects their health and their attitudes significantly. They may utilize their lunch hour to take a brisk walk outside—they just need to make sure they do not forget their tennis shoes prior to leaving for work in the morning. In the event that it is raining, people can bring an umbrella or take their brisk walk inside a shopping mall. At the conclusion of the day, if they perform some light exercise at lunch time, they may feel less tired and find a way to go to the gym for another half hour work out at the end of the day. Or, even though not all people find it easy to commence an exercise program in the morning before work they may find that it manifests results when people discover that they are less tired, less depressed, and not as negative about life as they were prior to initiating the exercise program.

Teacher's Key: Concise Writing Paragraphs

Some people who start an exercise program have trouble doing it daily. During the day people have events that drain their energy and make them feel it is impossible to get to the gym, go for a bike ride, or go to the pool to swim. People make unhealthy decisions to skip the gym due to long work and commute hours plus family obligations. The decision to end an exercise program is unhealthy because it can lead to heart disease, obesity, depression, anxiety, cancer, and other health problems.

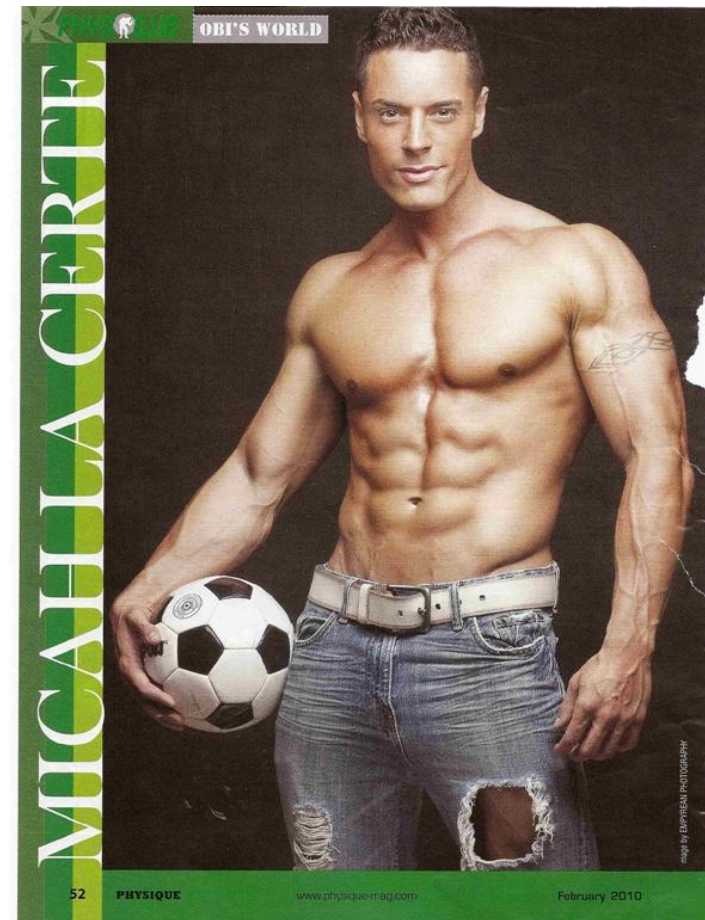
This is a tough problem, but it is possible to solve it. Before giving up on the problem, people may take some simple steps to add exercise to their lives. Use lunch hour to take a brisk walk outside—just remember your tennis shoes when you leave for work in the morning. If it rains, bring an umbrella or do the walk inside a shopping mall. At the end of the day, if you do some exercise at lunch you may have the energy to get to the gym after work. Or, even though some people find it hard to start a morning exercise program, when your efforts result in better energy and positivity than you had before, you will want to continue to maintain great health.

Concise Writing: How to Write Low-Fat Prose

PowerPoint by Deb Caterina

Based on Markel, M. (2012). *Technical
Communication*. Boston, MA: Bedford/
St. Martin's

Get rid of the bloat!



Principles of Concise Writing

- Use Positive Constructions
- Clean it up—avoid filler phrases
- Streamline sentences—omit unneeded words
- Watch for unnecessary prepositional phrases
- Make fancy words plain

Use Positive Construction

Avoid These

- not all
- not many
- not late
- not negative
- not efficient
- not possible
- not happy

Use These Instead

- most
- few
- punctual
- positive
- inefficient
- impossible
- upset, depressed

Less Filler, More Flavor

What words are the filler?

I think that, basically, the board felt sort of betrayed, in a sense, by the kind of behavior the president displayed.



Keep important words.

The board felt betrayed by the president's behavior.

- I think that
- basically
- sort of
- in a sense
- kind of

Add Energy by Streamlining Explanations

Sluggish

The market for the sale of flash memory chips is dominated by two chip manufacturers: Intel and Advanced Micro Systems. These two chip manufacturers are responsible for 76 percent of the \$1.3 billion market in flash memory chips last year.

Streamlined

The market for flash memory chips is dominated by Intel and Advanced Micro Systems, two companies that claimed 76 percent of the \$1.3 billion industry last year.

Problematic Prepositional Phrases

What's the problem here?

See the solution here!

1. at the present time

1. now

2. during the course of

2. during, while

3. in the event that

3. if

4. in view of the fact that

4. because

5. on a daily basis

5. daily

6. prior to

6. before

7. at the conclusion of

7. after, following

Make this Sentence Slimmer

At the present time, in view of the fact that we have elections coming in less than two months, it is important to take into consideration the voting records of the candidates.



Make Fancy Words Plain and Simple



Speak Plainly

Avoid Fancy Words

1. initiate, commence
2. quantify
3. utilize
4. furnish
5. perform
6. manifest
7. attempt
8. advise
9. terminate

Use Plain Words

1. begin
2. measure
3. use
4. provide, give
5. do
6. show
7. try
8. tell
9. end, stop

Concise Writing: How to Write Low-Fat Prose

Deborah Caterina

Rewrite the paragraph below using only **positive construction**. The following examples of positive construction may help you do this: most, few, punctual, positive, inefficient, impossible, upset, annoyed. Feel free to rearrange the presentation of information in any of the sentences as long as they are grammatically correct and retain the same essential information.

Prachi Patel's supervisor was not happy with her job performance, and Prachi was not sure how to improve. She was not late to work, there were not many errors in her reports, and, in terms of attitude, Prachi was not a negative person. Was it not possible to please Mr. Grumblegrouch? The boss was not pleased when workers acted in ways that were not efficient. Could that be the problem?

Alter the following paragraph to solve the **problematic prepositional phrases** in it. The words in the following list may help you: now, during, while, if, because, daily, before, following, after. Note: The word "because" often works better within a sentence rather than at the beginning of a sentence. Again, you may rearrange the order of the information in each sentence as long as it is grammatically correct and retains the same essential information.

During the course of an election process, the candidates may want to know about public opinion prior to the day that they go to the polls. In view of the fact that people may change their minds about a candidate in the event that they make a statement that is not positive, say, about the amount of government assistance that people receive, or about reproductive rights, some candidates change their statements to lean more to the left or to the right. As the candidate comes to the conclusion of the campaign trail, it will be interesting to compare their stances on issues at the present time to what they were prior to the election season.

**Speak Plainly—Simplifying Fancy Words
Quick Quiz**

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Choose from the words below to make these fancy words plainer:

1. initiate _____
2. commence _____
3. quantify _____
4. utilize _____
5. furnish _____
6. perform _____
7. manifest _____
8. attempt _____
9. advise _____
10. terminate _____

Words to use above: end, begin, stop, measure, tell, use, try, provide, show, give, do