

Concise Writing: Part II

Writers get stuck with meeting a word count and filling the page. However, having many words does not equate to good writing. Being able to say the same thing with fewer words is an important skill to have as a writer. The ability to be succinct is valuable. When you learn to write concisely, you'll have fewer redundancies and clearer writing.

Intensifiers

When you tell a friend about a delicious meal or a good movie, you might say something like “it was really, really good” or “the movie was very fun!” While appropriate in verbal communication, words like **very** and **really** are generally avoided because they do not add significant value to the sentence. These words are known as intensifiers. To work around intensifiers, consider using stronger, more meaningful word choice or more descriptive sentence(s).

Common Intensifiers

Some commonly seen/used intensifiers are “very,” “really,” “extremely,” “so,” and “pretty.” However, note that these words are not the only intensifiers—there are many of them in the English language. When you're editing your own writing, focus on trying to choose one stronger word when possible instead of using two words that are weaker (e.g., “intelligent” vs. “pretty smart”). Don't use two words when one will do!

Avoid Intensifiers

Avoid: This sandwich was so, so yummy.

Do: This sandwich was delicious because of the quality of the meat and cheese.

The first sentence might be appropriate when verbally telling someone about the sandwich. However—especially in formal academic writing—avoid intensifiers (especially doubling up like “so, so yummy” or “really, really good”). “So, so” is ineffective because it is vague and doesn't provide description or add meaning.

Instead, use one stronger word like “delicious” that conveys a greater depth of meaning and is more concise; it'd also be preferable to add more description to explain why the sandwich was delicious and to give the reader a better understanding of what's being described.

Redundant Words

What is the difference between “smart” and “intelligent”? Or “rules” and “policies”? There isn’t a significant difference. Yet, many writers will find themselves describing someone as “smart and intelligent” or something as “easy and simple.” The thought behind doubling up on similar words is that it adds emphasis. However, this practice is seen as lazy writing and does not provide specific insight or detail. If you want to highlight someone’s intelligence or something’s simplicity, try to talk instead about details that highlight the certain adjective/trait.

Avoid Redundant Words

Avoid: The child’s joy and exuberance were quite clear.

Do: The child’s joy was clear from her beaming smile.

“Joy” and “exuberance” have similar meaning. Choosing one word suffices. Also, “quite” is an intensifier that doesn’t add much to the sentence. Instead, give more description by explaining what makes the child’s joy clear (i.e., her beaming smile).

Prepositional Phrases

Prepositions are words like “for,” “in,” “of,” “to,” and “at” (see our [prepositions handout](#) for more review). Using a preposition before a noun creates a prepositional phrase that is commonly used to modify a sentence (e.g., “at the store”). However, using too many prepositional phrases can detract from the main purpose of the sentence and create unnecessary wordiness. Also, putting the entire subject of the sentence in the introductory phrase followed by the pronoun ‘it’ creates unnecessary wordiness. Simply replacing the pronoun ‘it’ with the subject of the sentence’s main idea will save words and help with clarity.

Avoid Use of Excessive Prepositional Phrases

Avoid: The heart of the issue of the bill that is relevant to all Americans at the center of the debate in the Senate is basic freedom.

Do: The bill the Senate is debating deals with basic freedom, an issue relevant to all Americans.

The first sentence uses multiple prepositional phrases: “of the issue,” “of the bill,” “to all Americans,” “at the center,” “of the debate,” and “in the Senate.” These phrases cause a long and wordy sentence that is hard to follow. Instead, make the subject simpler by removing and simplifying.

Avoid: For Marty to go home at this juncture of his life, it means that he has let go of his past.

Do: Marty going home symbolizes his choice to let go of his past.

The problematic sentence above has multiple prepositional phrases: “at this juncture,” “of his life,” and “of his past.” It also contains the subject of the sentence “Marty.” To make the sentence succinct and easier to follow, simply make Marty the subject of both points presented in the sentence and write the sentence based on his actions.

Repeated Statements/Ideas

Removing intensifiers and redundant words helps to make writing more clear, descriptive, and less wordy. These changes are on the micro level. On a macro level, looking for repeated ideas and statements can help remove large areas of repeated thoughts. Usually, students repeat thoughts because they are running out of things to say. Instead of coming up with a new approach, they would rather tweak some words to sound slightly different. Remember: depth of content matters more than “fluffing” the paper with words. If you think your sentence sounds similar, or if you feel like you’ve been saying the same thing repeatedly, double check and see if the meaning is any different. If you identify such sentences, determine if you can edit them to say something different or if they can be removed entirely.

Avoid Repeated Statements/Ideas

Avoid: The healthcare system in the U.S. needs improvement because it is complex and not user-friendly. People struggle to comprehend the system and gain access to healthcare. Good treatments and medicine are available for those who need it. These treatments can be helpful and are necessary. However, people are locked out by the language barriers and confusing directions. The healthcare system needs to be changed so that those who really need it can use it.

In the paragraph above, ideas are repeated even though words are changed. The first two sentences of the paragraph can be condensed into one sentence that avoids the unnecessary repetition.

Do: The healthcare system in the U.S. needs improvement because it is complex, which often prevents people from gaining access.

The next two sentences in the paragraph above are repetitive and can be condensed into one.

Do: Necessary treatments and medicine are available for those who need it.

Activity

Directions: Identify the part(s) of the sentence that can be changed and indicate the edits that you would make.

1. Jake was pretty tired.
2. After the race, Carina was extremely famished and starving, so she scarfed down so much food.
3. At this point in time for them to act rashly, it would be senseless.
4. Studying was super helpful. The amount of time they studied helped them achieve their top scores.

Activity Answer Key

Possible answers are provided below. Note that answers will vary.

1. Intensifier: “pretty”
Jake was exhausted, and he fell asleep in the front row of class.

This above revision removes a generic intensifier that doesn’t add much to the sentence and replaces “pretty tired” with one word that conveys more meaning (“exhausted”). It also provides additional description to show Jake’s exhaustion.

2. Redundant words: “famished” and “starving”; intensifiers: “extremely” and “so much”
After the race, Carina was famished, so she scarfed down three plates of spaghetti.

The words “famished” and “starving” have the same meaning, so it’s unnecessary to say both. The two intensifiers do not add meaning to the sentence, and it would instead be preferable to show Carina’s starvation by describing how much she ate.

3. Unnecessary prepositional phrases: “at this point,” “in time,” “for them”
Acting rashly would be senseless.

Eliminate the unnecessary wordiness created by too many prepositional phrases. Replace “it” with the idea in the introductory phrase to make the sentence clear and concise.

4. Intensifier: “super”; repeated ideas: discussion of studying multiple times
Studying helped them achieve their top scores.

The idea of studying being helpful is mentioned directly and then explained indirectly by saying it’s helpful. The two sentences can be combined into one. Also, “super” is an informal intensifier that does not add much to the idea of being helpful.