

10 Great Tips on Being Concise in Academic Writing



1.) Replace several vague words with more powerful, specific words.

Wordy: Suzie believed but could not confirm that Billy had feelings of affection for her. (14 words)

Concise: Suzie assumed that Billy adored her. (6 words)

Wordy: Our website has made available many of the things you can use for making a decision on the best dentist. (20 words)

Concise: Our website presents criteria for determining the best dentist. (9 words)

2.) Interrogate every word in a sentence.

*Check every word to make sure it is providing something important and unique to a sentence. If words are dead weight, they can be deleted or replaced.

Wordy: The teacher demonstrated some of the various ways and methods for cutting words from my essay that I had written for class. (22 words)

Concise: The teacher demonstrated methods for cutting words from my essay. (10 words)

3.) Avoid overusing expletives at the beginning of sentences

*Expletives are phrases of the form: IT + BE-VERB or THERE + BE-VERB.

*Whenever you want to start a sentence with “It is ___” or “There is ___,” delete that phrase, and start with the subject directly following.

Wordy: There are four rules that should be observed: ... (8 words) **Concise:** Four rules should be observed... (5 words)

Wordy: It is the governor who signs or vetoes bills. (9 words) **Concise:** The governor signs or vetoes bills. (6 words)

4.) Combine Sentences.

*Some information does not require a full sentence, and it can easily be inserted into another sentence without losing any value.

Wordy: Ludwig’s castles are an astounding marriage of beauty and madness. By his death, he had commissioned three castles. (18 words)

Concise: Ludwig’s three castles are an astounding marriage of beauty and madness. (11 words)

5.) Eliminate words that explain the obvious or provide excessive detail

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; you don’t need to tell someone to “imagine” a “mental picture.” Imagining is a mental process by definition.)

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)

◆ Information adapted from Purdue’s Online Writing Lab, available at: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/572/01/>



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6.) Change phrases into single-words and adjectives

*Remember that adjectives describe nouns, and adverbs describe verbs.

*Most adverbs end in -ly, and a few adjectives tend to end in -al.

Wordy: The department showing the best performance... (6 words)

Concise: The best-performing department... (4 words)

Wordy: The teacher who was always on time never walked in a slow manner. (13 words)

Concise: The punctual teacher never walked slowly. (6 words)

7.) Eliminate unnecessary determiners and modifiers

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

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

Here is a list of some words and phrases that can often be deleted to make sentences clearer:

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

8.) Change unnecessary “that,” “who,” and “which” clauses into phrases.

*Remember to double-check any punctuation that made need changing if you are editing clauses. (For example, notice this first illustration deletes the “which” clause, thus deleting the comma).

Wordy: The report, which was released recently... (6 words)

Concise: The recently released report... (4 words)

Wordy: The system that is most efficient and accurate... (8 words)

Concise: The most efficient and accurate system... (6 words)

9.) Avoid overusing noun forms of verbs

*When possible, use verbs rather than noun forms (also called nominalizations). Sentences with many nominalizations usually have forms of “be” as the main verbs. Using the action verbs disguised in nominalizations as the main verbs ~ instead of forms of be ~ can help to create more direct, engaging papers.

Wordy: The function of this department is the collection of accounts. (10 words)

Concise: This department collects accounts. (4 words)

10.) Eliminate any “personal belief statements.”

*Delete any “I think that,” “I believe,” “In my opinion,” or “I feel as though” statements.

*Eliminating these statements also make your main points more authoritative and crisp.

Wordy: In my opinion, dogs are better pets than cats. (9 words)

Concise: Dogs are better pets than cats. (6 words)

