

Making Your Sentences Concise

“Long sentences are not necessarily wordy, nor are short sentences always concise. A sentence is wordy if its meaning can be conveyed in fewer words.” –*A Writer’s Reference*

“Wordiness is verbal fat.” –*Writing: A College Handbook*

Good writing is lean writing: every word counts. Any word you can drop from your sentences without sacrificing information or color is an “empty” word. Empty words are like flab--they slow your sentences down. Writing is “wordy” if it has a lot of empty words in it. Here’s a good way to fight wordiness: imagine a crisp new dollar bill in your pocket for every colorless, factless, or repetitious word you drop. How many words can you cut from this student sentence? “Most any gym you can attend will have their hours open early and close late in the day” (18 words). How about “Most gyms open early and close late” (You’ve cut 7 words, \$11 in your pocket). Wordy words and phrases like *quite, rather, kind of, sort of, somewhat, about* or *around* (meaning approximately), *very, you know, I mean, to me, in my opinion, it seems, and I guess* weaken sentences. Avoid them: It was ~~about~~ ten years ago. She was ~~kind of~~ angry when I told her the news. It was ~~somewhat~~ late. Of course, sometimes these qualifying words are appropriate: Your Honor, it was *around* ten o’clock when I heard the footsteps hurrying down the alley. See how many empty words you can condense out of the following sentences. You can change the form of words or even the order they appear in, as long as you don’t change the meaning or drop any information or specifics. Imagine you’re getting paid a dollar for every empty word you drop. Jot down your earnings at the end of each sentence.

There are millions of Americans out there who love watching Jackie Chan movies.

In the backyard of his mother’s house stood an old shed made of tin, which was used for storage purposes.

They both grew old together.

The child’s eyes were green in color.

Our neighbor who lives next door is the coach for a new rugby team.

It was on Friday of last week that we got the news that great-uncle Ziggy had remarried.

Engineering is a career which is a very demanding job.

Veronica is responsible for the management of the playground and for the organization of all the field trips that the school has.

By choosing to make a full payment of your bill at this time, you will avoid having to pay financing fees.

The driver who hit the child was driving while intoxicated from alcohol.

Monica found her studies at medical school to become a doctor to be exhausting and exhilarating.

He taught a fifth grade class for a period of one year.

Ray kept his manuscript locked up on a shelf in the cupboard which was in the dining room.

I recently read an article entitled “Disaster Capitalism” which was written by Naomi Klein.

Sometimes very bad things take place in our lives (bumper sticker).

Hints for Concision

1. Except for clarity or emphasis, don't repeat words.
2. Avoid redundancy: “That’s a true fact”; “He had a limp in the way he walked”; “King Arthur’s table was round in shape”; “The hall closets were small in size”; “The New Mexico State Fair was entertaining and lots of fun.”
3. Avoid starting sentences with *there*, which requires empty supporting words: revise “There are too many students who study the job market instead of exploring their dreams” to “Too many students study the job market instead of exploring their dreams.”
4. Watch out for words ending in *tion*, *sion*, *ance*, *ence*, *ment*, etc. These “nominalizations”—nouns created from verbs or other parts of speech—are often puffy and always require empty supporting words. Replace them with their own root words: revise “The committee made the decision to give a contribution to the urban garden project” to “The committee decided to contribute to the urban garden project.” (Can you see the empty supporting words those nominalizations required?)
5. The colorless verbs *is*, *are*, *was*, and *were* often require empty supporting words. Replace them with active verbs. Revise “She is the leader in the church choir” to “She leads the church choir.”
6. Frequently you can drop phrases like *who is*, *which was*, *that are*. Read the following sentences without the underlined words: “The chocolate éclairs that are on the kitchen counter are for Tyrone.” “The boys who were in the blue Escort stopped to help the cow that was caught on the median.”
7. Whenever you see *to be*, ask yourself whether you can drop it: “Joe found his volunteer work at the wildlife refuge to be fascinating.”
8. Combine sentences. Reduce less important sentences to dependent clauses, phrases, or even single words such as adjectives.

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