

Proofreading Skills Tutorial

Tutorial 14: Writing Concisely

Eliminating Empty Phrases

Avoiding Clichés

Eliminating Redundancy

This Tutorial includes two files:

- **Lesson (14a_Writing_Concisely_Lesson)**

In order to learn the material presented in this tutorial more effectively, as you read you should take notes in a place that you can reference later. If it is convenient, you could print the tutorial and annotate it so you can keep it for future reference.

- **Exercises (14b_Writing_Concisely_Exercises)** – located in the same area as the lesson)

- It has highlighted areas for you to answer the exercises using an application such as Adobe Acrobat Reader.
- Download and save this file as your own; you will share it with an instructor after you complete the lesson and exercises.

Please contact the Writing Center with any questions or difficulties:

csmtwc@smccd.edu or 650-574-6436.

Improving Sentence Focus: Writing Concisely

According to research in the field of composition, university professors identify long, flowing sentences as one of the characteristics of good academic writing. But the truth is that simply adding extra words to your sentences can interfere with the effective communication of your ideas. Writing concisely, or making a point in the fewest possible words, will make your essays clear and easy to understand.

When you proofread, you should think of yourself as a butcher who is trimming the fat from your sentences. This tutorial will teach you some principles to follow as you proofread for concision. Once you finish making your essay more concise, you should fuse the concise, choppy sentences into the longer, varied structures that good academic writing requires.

Note: The tutorials *Coordination and Subordination*, *Noun-Phrase Appositives* and *Verbal Phrases* also cover different sentence styles that you can use to combine your sentences.

This tutorial will demonstrate three strategies for ensuring concise writing:

- 1. eliminating empty phrases**
- 2. avoiding clichés**
- 3. eliminating redundancy**

Eliminating Empty Phrases

Look at the following sentences:

As far as I am concerned, discrimination against certain ethnic groups continues to exist for all intents and purposes.

Discrimination against certain ethnic groups continues to exist.

In your notes, explain the differences between these two sentences.

As you probably noticed, the first sentence contains more words than the second one. The second sentence is more concise and direct. Because the first sentence includes empty or “filler” words, it does not communicate the main idea as clearly as the second sentence does. Eliminating the phrase makes the sentence more effective.

Some students think that adding empty phrases will make their essays sound more formal and impressive, but these phrases actually sound artificial and pretentious and make the writing hard to understand. Look at the following examples of empty phrases that you should always cut from your sentences. Do you use any of these in your own writing?

All things considered

As far as I’m concerned

For all intents and purposes

In my opinion

It is my opinion that

What’s more is that

The fact is that

In a manner of speaking

The thing is that

When you are writing, try to use your own natural voice. Speak aloud as you type and imagine that you are explaining to someone else in person. Using your own voice will help you avoid empty phrases.

Now consider the following pairs of sentences, with the empty phrases in italics:

At this point in time, the latest iPad is expensive *due to the fact that* it has no competition.

Now, the new iPad is expensive because it has no competition.

The reason why Jhumpa Lahiri's novel is so great is *because* it has vivid imagery.

Jhumpa Lahiri's novel is great because it has vivid imagery.

As you can see from these examples, you can reduce empty or “filler” phrases to a single word.

FOR

at the present time
at this point in time
concerning the nature of
in the nature of
for the purpose of
in order to
in this day and age
in view of the fact that
it is clear that
by virtue of the fact that
due to the fact that
for the reason that
the reason why is because
in the event that
by means of
last but not least

SUBSTITUTE

now
now
about
like
for
to
today
because
clearly
because
because
because
because
if
by
finally

Principle I: Whenever possible, eliminate or condense empty phrases.

Please open your 14b exercises file and complete Exercise 1.

Avoiding Clichés

Look at the following sentences.

A healthy lifestyle enhances your ability both to live life to its fullest and to live to a ripe old age.

A healthy lifestyle helps you live life fully and longer.

In your notes, explain which sentence seems more effective and why.

As you may have noticed, the first sentence contains more words, including expressions that you have heard before, “live life to its fullest” and “live to a ripe old age.”

Clichés are stale phrases. These expressions were once fresh and forceful, but constant use has weakened them. Instead of using clichés, it is better to substitute fresh words or restate the idea in plain language. Be sure to choose words that reflect your ideas and suit your purpose, instead of settling for overused phrases or vague generalizations.

Here are some examples of clichés:

better late than never
cool, calm, and collected
hard as a rock
white as snow
live life to its fullest
see eye to eye

knight in shining armor
soar like an eagle
pass with flying colors
ripe old age
work like a dog
few and far between

If you are a second-language English speaker, you have probably learned some clichés (idioms) in your ESL classes so that you will understand what they mean when you hear them. But there are many more clichés that you will have difficulty recognizing. Remembering to stick to plain language when you are writing your essays will help you avoid clichés. And your classroom instructor will point out any clichés in your writing, so you can learn to avoid them.

Principle II: Use fresh words or plain language rather than clichés.

Please open your 14b exercises file and complete Exercise 2.

Slang and Jargon

Consider the following sentences:

Many kids begin school pretty together but then they space out.

Many students begin school focused but then lose their direction.

In your notes, explain which sentence sounds more appropriate for a college essay and why.

You may have noticed that the first sentence contains **slang**. Slang is the colorful and novel expressions created by different groups of people—from teenagers to computer scientists to musicians. Among those who understand it, slang may be vivid and forceful. In fact, some slang, such as “dropout,” has proved so useful that it has passed into the general vocabulary. But most slang is inappropriate for academic or business writing.

Language specific to a field or discipline is called **jargon**. Writing a biology paper about cell division would be impossible without using jargon such as *mitosis* and *meiosis*. Similarly, if you are writing an English essay about a novel, you might use jargon such as *protagonist* and *antagonist*. When you are

writing a paper, use jargon only when it is appropriate to your audience and purpose. When writing for a general audience, avoid using jargon, or you will risk sounding artificial and pretentious.

Principle III: Avoid slang and use jargon only when appropriate.

Please open your 14b exercises file and complete Exercise 3.

Eliminating Redundancy

Consider these sentences:

Many people who have dropped out of school and lack formal education are unemployed and do not have jobs.

Many uneducated people are unemployed.

In your notes, explain which sentence is more effective and why.

Although repeating key words in an essay is one way to make writing more analytical and coherent, **redundancy** or unnecessary repetition weakens sentences. The first sentence contains two redundancies. That is, not completing high school means a lack of formal education, and the definition of being unemployed is not having a job. The second sentence lacks redundancy, and it is concise and clear.

The simplest kind of repetition is the phrase that says the same thing twice. In the following examples, the redundant words are italicized.

aggressive *by nature*
 biography of his *life*
 circle *around*
 continue *on*
 consensus *of opinion*
 few *in number*
final outcome
 first *and foremost*

habitual custom
 honest *in character*
ink pen
 lilac *in color*
past memories
past history
 plans *for the future*
 refer *back*

repeat *again*
 revert *back*
 oval *in shape*
 small *in size*
sudden crisis
terrible tragedy
true facts
various differences

Shortening these redundant pairs to a single word is one way to improve concision and clarity. The shorter versions are easier to read and convey the same message more effectively, as shown in the following pairs of sentences.

Redundant: Past history shows that the students who transfer are actually very few in number.

Concise: History shows that the students who transfer are actually very few.

Redundant: President George W. Bush made serious errors in responding to the sudden crisis that followed the terrible tragedy of September 11.

Concise: President George W. Bush made serious errors in responding to the crisis that followed the tragedy of September 11.

Joining sentences can also help reduce unnecessary repetition, as illustrated in the following examples:

Redundant: The vegetable industry is one of the largest agricultural sectors in the United States. The vegetable industry is a significant contributor to the American export market.

Concise: The vegetable industry is one of the largest agricultural sectors in the United States and contributes significantly to our export market.

Finally, to check whether a word is working in a sentence, test it. If removing the word does not alter the meaning, leave it out. Also, if you find yourself repeating the same word or a synonym in the same sentence, look for ways to eliminate one of the words.

Principle IV: Eliminate redundancy and unnecessary repetition by cutting words or combining sentences.

Please open your 14b exercises file and complete Exercises 4 and 5.

Final Activity

Instructions:

1. Review a classroom essay that you are working on and incorporate concise sentences in your own writing.
2. Make an appointment for a conference with an instructor working in the Writing Center. To make this appointment, sign up using the same method you use to make essay conference appointments. Be sure to include a comment or note that you are meeting about a tutorial.
3. During this appointment, the instructor will make sure you understand the concepts covered in this tutorial, answer any questions that you might have, review your answers to the exercises, and check to see if you can incorporate the skill into your writing.