

Guidelines for Text Shortening Task

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1 Introduction

Many documents that we create to communicate have length or size restrictions. For example, we may be asked to provide a one-page description of an event or to prepare an announcement that will fit in three lines of a page. In these cases we often scan our draft for places that are verbose and work on shortening them. Sometimes, we need to omit some of the original information in order to fit the text in the required size.

The interface is a web form for shortening text. It has a header section with 'Document Type: Newswire' and 'Brief Guidelines'. The 'Brief Guidelines' section contains instructions to reduce text by 25% characters while preserving meaning and grammar. Below this is the 'Text to Shorten' section, which displays a sample text about a Microsoft partnership. A prompt asks the user to enter their shortened text. At the bottom, there are three character counts: 'Current Characters: 0', 'Minimum Characters: 73', and 'Maximum Characters: 137'.

Document Type: Newswire

Brief Guidelines

Imagine that the author of the text below needs to fit their text in 25% fewer characters. Rewrite the text to fit according to the following guidelines. The shortened text should:

- Have between the minimum and maximum numbers of characters shown below the input box.
- Preserve as much of the original meaning as possible.
- Be grammatically correct.
- Preserve the style of the original text as much as possible.

See the guidelines document for more details and examples.

Text to Shorten

Microsoft plans to announce on Wednesday a partnership with AT&T Wireless Services to offer software for wireless devices and services, a person close to the talks said Tuesday night.

Please enter your shortened text here. Press Submit when done.

Current Characters: 0 **Minimum Characters:** 73 **Maximum Characters:** 137

Figure 1: The shortening task interface.

In the text shortening task, you will see one or two sentences labeled “Text to Shorten”. The task is to write a shortened version, where the number of characters used is reduced to the specified maximum number.

Please aim to convey as much of the original information as possible, while also making sure the resulting shortened text is grammatical and fluent. In addition, the shortened text should not change the style of the text substantially, so that one can imagine that the original text can be replaced with the shortened version in a document without sounding inappropriate. When choosing what information to remove, please think about which part of the information/message is most important to express the

main point(s) of the author (this information should be preserved). Also, consider that the reader could guess or infer some of the information from general background knowledge or other parts of the text (such information can be removed).

In the task interface displayed above, the target number of characters for your shortened text will be displayed with the help of two counters: one showing the minimum number of characters, and one showing the maximum number of characters. A third counter, labeled “Current Characters” will continually update as you work on your shortened version to help show you how much more work you have left to do. You may find it convenient to first copy and paste the original text and start working on your shortening from there.

When you are satisfied with your shortened version and when the number of characters falls within the desired range, you can press the Submit button on the bottom to submit your work.

Below we list some examples of shortenings and the types of operations that are usually done to shorten text.

2 Text shortening examples

Example 1

In some cases it makes sense to simply delete a verbose or unimportant expression.

Original: Mr Usta was examined by Dr Raymond Crockett, a Harley Street physician specialising in kidney disease.

Shortened: Mr Usta was examined by Dr Raymond Crockett, a physician specialising in kidney disease.

Note that here we deleted the phrase “Harley Street” and the resulting sentence is well-formed. Even though it is often unclear what the least important information is, our choice of a phrase to delete is reasonable. Another possible shortening of this kind is:

Shortened: Mr Usta was examined by Dr Raymond Crockett, a Harley Street physician.

Example 2

In other cases, we can delete a verbose or unimportant set of words, and make additional changes to make sure the resulting sentence is grammatically correct (Notice how we changed “an” to “a” after deleting the word “orange” to ensure the grammaticality of the shortened sentence).

Original: She adorned her hair with an orange flower.

Shortened: She adorned her hair with a flower.

Example 3

We can also make text shorter by changing the grammatical construction used so that the concept can be expressed in fewer words. (Here we removed the words “was” and “by” when we rewrote the sentence using active voice).

Original: Mr Usta was examined by Dr Raymond Crockett, a Harley Street physician specialising in kidney disease.

Shortened: Dr Raymond Crockett, a Harley Street physician specialising in kidney disease, examined Mr Usta.

Similarly, we can replace “physician specialising in kidney disease” with the very close in meaning “kidney specialist”.

Shortened: Dr Raymond Crockett, a Harley Street kidney specialist, examined Mr Usta.

Example 4

Another way we could shorten the text is to abstract some details away by replacing an original specific phrase with a (possibly) less specific and shorter phrase.

Original: High winds and snowfalls have, however, grounded the powerful helicopters used to transport the slabs.

Shortened: Bad weather has, however, grounded the helicopters transporting the slabs.

In the example above we replaced “high winds and snowfalls” with the less detailed “bad weather” and the phrase “used to transport” with the equivalent in meaning “transporting”.

Example 5

When the original text has more than one sentence, it might be possible to shorten the text by rewriting it as one sentence which might omit or abstract some details.

Original: City staff will be in attendance to listen to and record the comments that are shared. After the meeting, all comments will be reviewed and summarized with the goal of suggesting appropriate next steps.

Shortened: City staff will record, review, and summarize the comments with the goal of suggesting next steps.

3 Win a prize by shortening well!

Each of the produced shortenings will be evaluated on two criteria (i) the quality of the writing and (ii) the extent to which the meaning of the original text is retained.

We will give a prize of USD 25 to the top five judges that complete at least twenty five HITs and produce the highest quality shortened versions of text.