Be Concise, Explicit, and Clear

Step 2

Overview

Use fewer words and sentences to convey your messages.

Avoid misunderstandings with precise details and a logical order of text.

Provide immediate context to enrich understanding.

Stay away from stuffy language and buzzwords.

The more words you use, the smarter you’ll sound! Although most of us recognize that’s not true, too many workers at all levels instinctively—and often subconsciously—tack on useless words. For some, these habits began years or even decades ago in grade school and continued through high school and college, all to pad word counts and impress the teacher. But today, as working professionals, your readers (supervisors, co-workers, clients, and others) want just the opposite: brevity. This is especially true for busy CEOs and other C-suite executives, who need you to get to the point immediately.

Thomas Jefferson, our third president and an excellent writer who penned much of the Declaration of Independence, understood the importance of being concise: “The most valuable of all talents is that of never using two words when one will do.”

Wordy documents waste time—the writer’s and the reader’s. And lost time means lost productivity. To experience this firsthand, try this experiment: Time how long it takes you to read—and comprehend—paragraphs 1 and 2, one at a time.

Paragraph 1: In reviewing our latest renovation, we have determined that there were specific problems with the facilities in Houston. We feel that several mistakes were made that caused what amounted to a significant delay by our standards. This came about after a review of our records, which indicated that this renovation was supposed to be completed in a timely manner but was in fact three months behind the originally scheduled date. It was our determination that the delay was caused by several key factors. These included design that by all standards was considered inadequate and the submissions that were found to be late (completed by the engineer). In addition, the construction manager, according to our records, apparently didn’t take any timely action to address serious deficiencies, which was also a major contributor to the problem.

Paragraph 2: The renovation of the facilities in Houston was delayed three months due to inadequate design, late submissions by the engineer, and the failure of the construction manager to address serious deficiencies.

It probably took you four or five times longer to read and understand paragraph 1 compared with paragraph 2. Multiply that difference by all the emails sent in a typical day, week, or month, and you’ve got lots of lost productivity.

Plus, imagine trying to read paragraph 1 in an email or a text message on your smartphone. At 134 words, it would show up as one long chunk of text, likely bleeding off the bottom of the screen. If you’re like most mobile users, you’d scroll down once, realize the sender is wasting your time, and move on to another task. And even if you powered through all of it, you’d have to scroll up and down to connect the sentences together—too time-consuming. But with paragraph 2, which conveys the essential information in just 31 words, you could quickly read and understand the message.

Drop Unnecessary Words

Make every word, sentence, and paragraph count. Trash whatever doesn’t contribute meaning. Let’s start by getting rid of the “fatty” words in the following sentences:

Fat: In an effort to lower costs, we should order materials only from preferred suppliers.

Lean: To lower costs, we should order only materials from preferred suppliers.

Fat: Senior managers should work in conjunction with division heads to improve operations.

Lean: Senior managers should work with division heads to improve operations.

Fat: All employees must submit time sheets on a daily basis.

Lean: All employees must submit time sheets daily.

Fat: Hotel suites for the spring conference are completely filled.

Lean: Hotel suites for the spring conference are filled.

Pointer

Make every word count by deleting those that don’t add meaning.

Dumping fatty words is easy, right? Just use your common sense to find and delete the unnecessary words. Now let’s try dumping longer phrases and groups of words that don’t contribute meaning.

Fat: It has come to my attention that the marketing department needs to hire two associates before we launch the next initiative.

Lean: The marketing department needs to hire two associates before we launch the next initiative.

Fat: I thought you might like to know that more than 25 percent of the support staff are expected to take vacations in July, based on the report from HR.

Lean: Based on the report from HR, more than 25 percent of the support staff are expected to take vacations in July.

Fat: Let me start by thanking all the operations managers, who helped our division exceed expectations.

Lean: Thanks to all the operations managers, who helped our division exceed expectations.

There are many more unnecessary words and phrases that you may be tempted to use. Remember, if it doesn’t add meaning, trash it.

Tool 2-1 lists some of them and offers lean alternatives. These will be particularly useful for any active social media account, whether personal or professional. Consider Twitter, which puts a character limit on tweets. By cutting the fat from your tweets, you’re better able to pack your message with relevant information—or another hashtag. LinkedIn also limits the number of characters for updates, profiles, company pages, private messages, and other areas. And while Facebook doesn’t limit characters, it does hide content after a certain point, forcing users to click to see the rest. So with many forms of social media, if you’re not concise, your readers may end up missing what you’re trying to say.

Tool 2-1

Repetitious vs. Concise Terms

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Repetitious | Concise |
| advance warning | warning |
| completely filled | filled |
| during the course of | during |
| for the month of May | for May |
| for the purpose of | for |
| honest opinion | opinion |
| important essentials | essentials |
| in an effort to | to |
| in conjunction with | with |
| in two weeks’ time | in two weeks |
| located on, located in | on, in |
| merge together | merge |
| my personal belief | my belief |
| on a daily basis | daily |
| separate into groups | separate |
| the fact of the matter is | in fact |
| 3 p.m. in the afternoon | 3 p.m. |
| whether or not | whether |

Merge Sentences

Thomas Jefferson’s advice about words also applies to sentences: One is better than two in most cases. While that doesn’t justify run-on sentences, don’t believe the myth that multiple short sentences are always better. For each of the following examples, the wordy version begins with a trivial fact (in italics) that doesn’t merit a sentence. In the preferred versions, the trivial fact is weaved into the meaningful information in a single concise sentence that flows more naturally. Read more about flow in step 4 (Organize to Promote Understanding).

Multiple sentences and needless words: The September social media report was emailed to me yesterday. I feel it’s too vague. The report also exaggerates the number of impressions.

One concise sentence: The September social media report is too vague and exaggerates the number of impressions.

Multiple sentences and needless words: At the sales meeting I attended, several issues were talked about. These include the two most important areas: customer service and the lack of administrative support.

One concise sentence: The two most important issues discussed at the sales meeting were customer service and the lack of administrative support.

Multiple sentences and needless words: The chief marketing officer reviewed our promotional strategy. She believes it should be targeted to existing customers and to those who inquired about our products.

One concise sentence: The chief marketing officer believes our promotional strategy should be targeted to existing customers and to those who inquired about our products.

As you get in the habit of deleting unnecessary text, your number of sentences will naturally diminish, often dramatically, as in these two examples:

Five sentences: The Q3 report is a bit incomplete. This document needs more information on budgets. We need to know the amounts of money spent in the third quarters of the previous two years and how all those amounts compare with one another. So please make the necessary changes to this report. I do think it was well written, albeit without these key data.

To streamline, first identify the essential facts:

Q3 report well written

revisions needed

omitted budget information from last two years

need comparison with past two third quarters.

Then put them into a single sentence that eliminates the need for many of the superfluous words and phrases:

One sentence: Please revise the Q3 report, which was well written but omitted comparable budget information from the past two third quarters.

In cutting five sentences to one, without excluding key information, you’re conveying your point faster—exactly what the reader wants. In this next example, the impact is even more striking:

Seven sentences: I know customer service training is critical. The problem is that I’m not sure about the training you suggested that will occur on October 10. For my team, we need to address technical skills, its biggest problem. In the past, it has sometimes, but not always, been included. My decision to enroll my team in this training is contingent upon the inclusion of this technical skills component. I’d appreciate if you could let me know either way. Then I’ll make my decision, which also will be based on whether Anna’s team will be able to cover our duties adequately on the phone on the training day.

To get to your point faster, identify the essential information, in this case the two conditions under which you’ll enroll your team in the training:

if it covers technical skills

if Anna’s team can cover phone duties.

Then, as with the previous example, write one sentence that eliminates the need for much of the wordy text in the first version:

One sentence: I’ll enroll my team in the October 10 training if technical skills will be covered and if Anna’s team can cover our phone duties that day.

The difference: seven sentences with 104 words versus one sentence with 26 words—and far more readable text. We’ll talk more about cutting in step 8 (Edit and Proofread Effectively).

Be Specific the First Time

Readers prefer specifics over generalities, so don’t waste their time providing both. Compare these two versions:

General, then specific: With a comprehensive social media marketing plan, we can significantly increase the number of qualified new business leads in Q4 compared with the same period last year. Based on the latest projections, such a plan should result in a 20 percent jump in these leads during this quarter.

Specific only: Based on the latest projections, a comprehensive social media marketing plan can increase qualified new business leads by 20 percent in Q4 compared with the same period last year.

By overloading sentences with generalities, you force readers to sift through junk before conveying the key information—in this case, the anticipated 20 percent increase in leads—which might cause them to perceive your message as less important.

Clarify—So Nobody Misunderstands

Despite your best intentions, sometimes readers misinterpret a message that may have seemed obvious to you. So never make the reader guess at your meaning. Consider these two examples:

Vague: Maria Ramirez is still waiting for your budget projections. Her deadline for submitting them to the CFO is around the end of April, and they require two weeks to review what you’ve recommended. So please turn them in on time.

Pointer

Never make readers guess what you’re saying—they’ll often guess wrong.

From that paragraph, the reader can’t tell when Maria needs the budget projections. Here’s one way to make it more explicit:

Clear: Please submit your budget projections to Maria Ramirez by April 14. She needs two weeks to review your suggestions and must turn the projections in to the CFO by April 30.

Vague: Shipping costs for the third quarter were 20 percent higher.

Were the shipping costs 20 percent higher than the previous quarter (second), 20 percent higher than the third quarter last year, or 20 percent higher than last year’s quarterly average? If you’re using a comparative term (in this case, higher), you have to say what you’re comparing it with. Here’s one way to clarify:

Clear: Shipping costs for the third quarter were 20 percent higher than for the third quarter last year.

Keep Text in Order

Don’t let out-of-order text confuse readers. See how reordering words can clarify the meaning of the three following sentences:

Confusing: Andy Ross told me June 1 that interest rates on the loan are 0.5 percent higher than anticipated, effective immediately, so please revise your figures.

Does effective immediately refer to June 1 or to the date this message is sent? The reader can’t tell from this sentence and won’t know on what date to base the revised figures. Rearranging the words in one of these ways will clear up the confusion:

Clear: Andy Ross told me that effective June 1, interest rates on the loan are 0.5 percent higher than anticipated, so please revise your figures.

Clear: On June 1, Andy Ross told me that effective today (June 10), interest rates on the loan would be 0.5 percent higher than anticipated. Please revise your figures to reflect this increase.

Confusing: I need to speak with Oleg before his meeting today with the sales force at 2:30.

Do you need to speak with Oleg at 2:30? Or is Oleg’s meeting at 2:30? Here are a couple of ways to clarify it:

Clear: I need to speak with Oleg today before his 2:30 meeting with the sales force.

Clear: I need to speak with Oleg today at 2:30, before his meeting with the sales force.

Confusing: The account manager finalized the deal with the software company using an innovative approach to mobile marketing.

Who had the innovative approach—the account manager or the software company? Here’s a way to make that clear:

Clear: Using an innovative approach to mobile marketing, the account manager finalized the deal with the software company.

Put Your Message in Context

Never assume others know the topic or context of your message. At the moment they read it, they may be multitasking with countless thoughts, so they may forget the issue you’re addressing. When writing to many readers, don’t worry about offending those familiar with the subject matter. They’ll appreciate the reminder, and your words will establish a context for messages that will be filed and referred to later. Compare these two sets of messages, each with and without context:

Unclear, no context: I’m concerned that the project is taking too long, especially given the CEO’s issues with the upcoming meeting.

Which project? How long is too long? What are the CEO’s issues? What upcoming meeting, and when is it? Here’s a way to write that so all the questions are answered:

Clear with context: I’m concerned that the renovation of the videoconferencing center should’ve been completed September 16—two weeks ago—especially given the CEO’s desire to finish it before the sales meeting on October 7, one week from today.

Unclear, no context: You made the same mistakes again, and we need to get this estimate done right away so we can submit for approval before it’s too late. Please revise and get it to me on time.

Which mistakes were made again? When did the individual previously make these mistakes? When is right away or on time?

Clear with context: Your second-quarter estimate omitted travel expenses for the support staff, the same mistake you made on the first-quarter estimate. Please revise and submit to me by November 12.

Be Simple, Not Stuffy

One of the most prevailing writing myths is that simple and straightforward text will come across as unprofessional, particularly to supervisors and company leaders. As a result, many individuals use pompous language that lessens the impact of their intended messages. Busy readers—especially higher-level executives—want you to explain your point quickly and in plain English.

Plus, considering the rising number of people who read emails and other documents on mobile devices, straightforward text is more essential than ever. Mobile readers have little patience for pretentious words or phrases that irritate them or can’t be easily understood in the context of the message. Many will just stop reading and move on to another task on their mobile device.

Compare these sets of sentences for readability:

Stuffy and wordy: Our team developed a new capability, incorporating a software program that facilitates the tracking of lead conversion at a 50 percent faster rate than they were during the course of last year.

Plain English: Our team developed new software that allows us to track lead conversions 50 percent faster than we could last year.

Stuffy and wordy: Our determination of whether or not to retain the services of the management consultant is contingent upon the completion of the evaluation process by the senior managers.

Plain English: We’ll decide whether to retain the management consultant after the senior managers complete their evaluation.

Stuffy and wordy: You will be advised of my decision regarding whether our team will be able to meet the deadline that you requested on this project as soon as I review the situation with my supervisor.

Plain English: After I check with my supervisor, I’ll let you know if our team can meet the project deadline.

Tool 2-2 suggests simple, direct replacements for some stuffy words and phrases.

Tool 2-2

Stuffy vs. Straightforward Words and Phrases

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Stuffy | Straightforward |
| abbreviate | shorten |
| accordingly | so |
| acquaint yourself with | learn |
| advantageous | helpful |
| ascertain | determine, find out |
| as per your request | as requested |
| assumption | belief |
| at the present time | now |
| cognizant of | aware of |
| commence/inaugurate/originate | begin, start |
| consummate | close |
| conversant with | familiar with |
| due to the fact that | because |
| encounter (verb) | meet |
| endeavor (verb) | try |
| evident | clear |
| furnish | provide |
| inasmuch as | because |
| in lieu of | instead of |
| in regard to | about |
| in the event that | if |
| in the neighborhood of | about, roughly, approximately |
| of considerable magnitude | large |
| on the occasion of | when |
| peruse | review, study |
| precipitated | caused |
| predicated on | based on |
| prior to | before |
| pursuant to | according to |
| subsequent to | after |
| transmit | send |

Don’t Get Buzzed

Ready to peel back the onion for a deep dive into writing so you can move the needle on your capabilities?

These types of pompous buzzwords have permeated oral and written business communication in the past few decades. According to Robert Leonard, professor of linguistics at Hofstra University, workers use buzzwords as part of a basic human need to fit in (Kwoh 2012). While I’ve always discouraged the use of buzzwords, some participants in my writing workshops have shared that their colleagues and supervisors routinely include them in emails—so they follow suit.

Pointer

Use straightforward language—rather than buzzwords or jargon—to convey your point clearly.

Even if certain buzzwords and industry jargon are part of your organization’s culture, use them with caution. These words often aren’t the most efficient way to convey a message and may confuse readers. For example, the company’s need to pivot during the next six months might have different meanings to different people.

The bigger danger with buzzwords is that the more you use them, the more likely you’re sending this unintended message to the reader: I’m trying hard to impress you! As a result, you may come across as insecure and uninformed about the subject, which won’t serve you well, especially with senior-level managers and C-suite executives.

Here are a couple of buzzwords to avoid and more-straightforward replacements:

Buzz: To increase productivity, the shipping department should interface with purchasing managers.

Better: To increase productivity, the shipping department should work with purchasing managers.

Buzz: We need to incentivize the sales force to generate leads.

Better: We need to motivate the sales force to generate leads.

Remember, don’t let anyone tell you that straightforward language is too “simplistic” for the corporate world. In business communication, simplicity is your tool to achieve better results. See Tool 2-3 for more buzzwords.

Tool 2-3

Buzzwords vs. Simple Words

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Buzz | Simple |
| actualize | produce, make happen, achieve |
| deep dive | in-depth study |
| interface with | meet with, work with |
| bandwidth | capacity, resources |
| discuss offline | discuss at another time |
| amplify | improve |
| move the needle | make significant progress |
| drill down | examine thoroughly |
| above-board | honest and open |
| balls in the air | ongoing projects |
| face time | in-person meeting |
| heavy lifting | hard work |
| make waves | cause a conflict |
| north of | more than |
| red flag | warning sign |
| upshot | advantage, benefit |
| vanilla | plain, simple |

Your Turn

Make cutting the fat from your text and using straightforward language a habit. Start practicing with the following exercises.

Delete the unnecessary words from each of these sentences:

Her promotion will depend on whether or not she can meet her objectives.

Travel vouchers will be limited for the entire month of October.

Please create a list of our division’s essential goals for next quarter.

Rewrite this sentence with language that’s more straightforward.

We developed a new capability, incorporating a software program that facilitates the tracking of shipments at a 50 percent faster rate than they were during the course of last year.

Edit this paragraph to make it more concise.

Among the most important qualities of our leadership development program is its capability to enable those whose positions fall into the categories of first-line managers or midlevel managers to produce substantial enhancements to the overall productivity of their teams. In our opinion, this program will be able to show an increase, on the average, of 30 percent in team productivity. This result should occur within a 12-month time period.

The Next Step

Clear and concise text isn’t always enough to keep busy professionals engaged. To carry readers along—in emails, text messages, and longer documents—you need a pleasing writing style and paragraphs that flow smoothly. That’s what we’ll address in step 3 (Write With Style and Rhythm).