

CONCISENESS

Upon successful completion of this lesson, you should be able to:

- Make sentences and paragraphs more concise by omitting:
 - unnecessary prepositions and prepositional phrases
 - redundancies and expletive constructions
 - meaningless announcements about forthcoming text and authorial perspective

In writing, more is not always better. Student writers often make the mistake of thinking that writing a lot of words will earn them high marks on assignments. The truth is that most instructors care more about the number and strength of your *ideas* than they do about the number of words you write. Sure, your instructors may impose a minimum word or page count on some of your assignments, and it's important that you meet those requirements. However, writing the same thing over and over again—or writing it in fifty words when you could just as easily write it in twenty-five—is not the right approach to meeting a word-count minimum.

In fact, being too wordy can cause many problems in your writing. Not only can wordiness overburden readers, it can also cause clarity problems and lead to bad writing habits.

PART 1: PREPOSITIONS AND PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES

Omitting unnecessary prepositions and prepositional phrases is often the easiest way to make your writing more appealing. Recall from elementary or middle school that prepositions are words that express relationship between a noun or pronoun and other words. Some of the most common prepositions are listed below.

along	across	alongside
below	inside	in
beneath	of	for
beneath	between	by
into	against	beside
off	beyond	among
onto	during	at
over	under	around
through	up	on
with	without	until

A **prepositional phrase** begins with a preposition, ends with a noun (called the *object* of the preposition), and may or may not contain words that modify the noun.

on (preposition)	the (modifies <i>beach</i>)	beach (noun/object of phrase)
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in (preposition)	summer (noun/object of phrase)
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above (preposition)	the (modifies <i>sky</i>)	blue (modifies <i>sky</i>)	sky (noun/object of phrase)
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with (preposition)	elegance (noun/object of preposition)
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in (preposition)	his (modifies <i>way</i>)	deceitful (modifies <i>way</i>)	way (noun/object of phrase)
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Unfortunately, many writers overuse prepositions and prepositional phrases. Consider the following pairs of sentences.

With much hesitance, I made my way to the dance floor. (**Wordy**)
Hesitantly, I made my way to the dance floor. (**More concise**)

The most current trends in the education industry can have a really significant impact on the classroom approaches of teachers. (**Wordy**)
Educational trends can greatly impact teaching methods. (**More concise**)

At this point in time we should demonstrate, as has always been the case in the past, much trust in the good judgment of the CEO. (**Wordy**)
Now, as always, we should trust the CEO. (**More concise**)

Notice from the examples above that unnecessary prepositional phrases often require longer, unnecessary verb forms. In the second example, for instance, a writer who insisted on using the two prepositional phrases *on the classroom approaches* and *of teachers* would need to use the verb phrase *can have...* However, when the two prepositional phrases are omitted, the sentence requires the simpler and more powerful verb *impact*.

In his book *On Writing Well*, renowned author and writing teacher William Zinsser addresses the plague of unnecessary prepositional phrases in his chapter titled “Clutter”:

Consider all the prepositions that are routinely draped onto verbs that don’t need any help. Head up. Free up. Face up to. We no longer head committees. We head them up. We don’t face problems anymore. We face

up to them when we can free up a few minutes. A small detail you may say—not worth bothering about. **It is worth bothering about. The game is won or lost on hundreds of small details. Writing improves in direct ratio to the number of things we can keep out of it that shouldn't be there.** “Up” in “free up” shouldn’t be there. Can we picture anything being freed *up*? The writer of clean English must examine every word that he puts on paper. He will find a surprising number that don’t serve any purpose. (William Zinnsser, *On Writing Well*, 3rd ed. [New York: Harper and Row, 1985], 13; bold emphasis added)

The emphasized statements in the above passage underscore the importance of taking every word seriously. While it might seem trivial to worry about an unnecessary word here and there, unnecessary words can add up quickly and noticeably—and negatively—impact a piece of writing *as a whole*. Developing a habit of looking for unnecessary words and phrases—especially prepositional phrases—can improve your writing skills tremendously.

EXERCISE 1

Shorten the following sentences by omitting unnecessary prepositional phrases. Work with your tutor as you complete this exercise.

1. My father is not at home at the present time.
2. Because of the fact that we were out too late, we did not do well on the final exam.
3. I took Composition I for the purpose of becoming a better writer.
4. In the unlikely event of a tornado, run down the hall to the shelter beneath the basketball court.
5. In a reluctant manner, she called the doctor and asked for advice.
6. With the possible exception of the three men from Georgia, no one at the event knew any of the songs that were sung at the concert.
7. Of all people with citizenship in the United States of America, Lisa was the only one who noticed the mistake on the ballot.
8. The man’s dogs have a habit of barking on nights during which the moon in the sky is full.

9. My intentions for the evening are to ask her to marry me.
10. He drove in a sporadic way and in an angry manner when he went to see his sister.

PART 2: REDUNDANCIES AND EXPLETIVE CONSTRUCTIONS

You can also make your writing more concise by omitting redundancies and avoiding expletive constructions. Redundant words creep into writing more than most writers realize. Just as he eloquently explains the problem of unnecessary prepositions and prepositional phrases, William Zinsser also addresses the problem of redundancy in a way that resonates with many writers, adding a little humor as he does so:

Take the adjective “personal,” as in “a personal friend of mine,” “his personal feeling,” or “her personal physician.” It is typical of the words that can be eliminated nine times out of ten. The personal friend has come into the language to distinguish him from the business friend, thereby debasing not only language but also friendship. Someone’s feeling *is* his personal feeling—that’s what “his” means. As for the personal physician, he is that man summoned to the dressing room of a stricken actress so that she won’t have to be treated by the impersonal physician assigned to the theatre. Someday I’d like to see him identified as “her doctor.” Physicians are physicians, friends are friends. The rest is clutter. (William Zinsser, *On Writing Well*, 3rd ed. [New York: Harper and Row, 1985], 14)

In addition to Zinsser’s example of the word *personal*, consider the common redundancies below.

hot water heater (Does this device make already hot water even hotter?)
ask the question (Ask and *question* mean the same thing. Don’t they? Don’t they?)
continue on (A person can go forward only so much. The word *on* is unnecessary.)

Expletive constructions occur when words or phrases such as *There* or *It is* begin sentences. Occasionally, such constructions are necessary, but many writers use them far too often. Expletive constructions usually require a writer to use the passive voice instead of the active voice. Consequently, they make for duller sentences.

There was a bear that ate the trash in the neighbor’s yard. (**Wordy**)
A bear ate the trash in the neighbor’s yard. (**More concise**)

It is required that students complete the application. (**Wordy**)
Students must complete the application. (**More concise**)

Remember, as Zinsser writes: “The game is won or lost on hundreds of small details. Writing improves in direct ratio to the number of things we can keep out of it that shouldn’t be there.”

EXERCISE 2

Shorten the following sentences by omitting redundancies and expletive constructions. Work with your tutor as you complete this exercise.

1. Unnecessary redundant words and phrases are common in too many people's writing.
2. There are far too many wild cats in Sterling.
3. It is with much pride that I introduce tonight's guest speaker.
4. Mandatory attendance at assemblies is required.
5. The auction featured contemporary furniture made recently.
6. There are numerous theories that address the phenomenon.
7. It is necessary for students to attend a certain number of chapel services each semester.
8. We should cooperate together as we work through this problem.
9. Despite the thoughtful advanced planning, the effort still failed.
10. There were seventeen people who showed up at the game.

PART 3: UNNECESSARY ANNOUNCEMENTS

Yet another common writing problem involves meaningless expressions such as “in my opinion,” “it should be pointed out,” “I believe,” and “it is interesting to note that.” Such phrases are a type of redundancy. They are unnecessary because if you are writing it, then of course it’s your opinion. You don’t need to tell your reader what is already *implied* by the fact that you are writing. Would you really write it if it weren’t interesting?

EXERCISE 3

Omit the meaningless announcements from the following sentences.

1. In my humble opinion, television has become too violent.
2. It is interesting that some bird species mate for life.
3. I would like to say that some professors are better than others.
4. I believe that going to college is the most important thing a person can do.

5. From my perspective, writing courses would be better if they emphasized more practical skills.

EXERCISE 4

The following paragraph contains 158 words. By omitting redundancies, expletive constructions, meaningless announcements, and unnecessary prepositions and prepositional phrases, you should be able revise the paragraph so that it contains no more than 88 words. You may change a few words if you like, but don't change the meaning of any statements. Keep working until you trim the paragraph to 88 words.

In my own personal opinion, I believe that all amusement-park roller coasters should be required to undergo thorough and complete inspections once they have reached the old age of fifteen years old. From what I have seen and read, most roller coaster accidents that tend to occur on older steel roller coasters can be traced to poor, inadequate, bad maintenance. The engineering technology of old should be considered obsolete and out of date, and amusement parks should be forced to comply with strict safety rules and regulations that revolve around the idea that once a coaster has reached fifteen years of age, it should be taken apart and put back together with newer, better, more technologically sound, and safer roller coaster mechanical parts. I think and strongly feel that changing the current standards of roller coaster safety urgently needs to be made a federal law. It is the Constitutional responsibility of the federal government to keep citizens safe.