

# Creating Conciseness in Writing

From the Ivy College of Business Writing and Speaking Center

Clutter in writing includes words, phrases, and sentences that inflate word count, but do not help the writing's message. While cluttered writing may look like an easy way to achieve a word count for an assignment, it seriously detracts from the message because it buries the meaning of the message in unimportant words. Clutter is also sometimes called "wordiness," "conciseness," or "verbosity." Business communication in particular values clear and concise writing. Getting rid of clutter in writing isn't a perfect science, but the following tips can help!

## **Do...**

### **Use the active voice instead of the passive voice.**

Using an active voice instead of a passive voice reduces the number of words used and speeds up how quickly a reader can read the information.

In a sentence written in the *active voice*, the **subject** of sentence *performs the action*.

- Xinning **wrote** the report in May.
- John Deere **hired** Marisol as an intern for the summer.

In a sentence written in the *passive voice* the subject receives the action.

- The report was written by Xinning in May.
- Marisol was hired as an intern for the summer by John Deere.

### **Use strong, precise verbs instead of a weak verb and an adverb or qualifier.**

Adverbs modify verbs, adjectives, and other adverbs. They usually end in—"ly"—think "quickly," "quietly," "happily," or "sadly"—but also include other qualifiers like "very," "extremely," etc. While adverbs and other verb modifiers can be helpful, they oftentimes clutter writing by using two or three words instead of one great one. Examples:

- Lea **quickly ran** up the steps to make it to work on time. → Lea **sprinted** up the steps quickly to make it to work on time.
- He **quietly spoke** to her, "I need you to come with me." → He **whispered** to her, "I need you to come with me."
- I am **so tired** this week. → I am **exhausted** this week.

### **Limit redundancy by cutting modifiers implied in verbs and nouns.**

When you cut adverbs that are already implied in a strong, precise verb or adjectives that are already implied in a strong noun, you free up valuable real estate in your writing for the important parts of your message. Often, writers mistakenly assume that modifiers produce better description, but oftentimes, adverbs and adjectives just are not necessary.

Examples:

- Jackson whispered **quietly** to her. (Quietly? Is there another way to whisper?)
- The company is working on a **new**, innovative technique to reduce their carbon footprint. (Innovative already indicates that something is "new.")
- That is a **very unique** approach to solving employee turnover. (Unique means "one of a kind." Therefore, it cannot have a modifier like "very" or "somewhat" attached to it.)
- We plan to revert **back to** the old schedule after we finish this big project in June. (Revert means "to go back." Therefore, it does not need the adverb "back.")

## **Don't...**

### **Use several words when one good one will do.**

Sometimes, writers will use longer words or phrases in place of more common one because they mistakenly think it helps them look more intelligent. Use the shorter, more commonplace word in place of longer words. Some common examples are listed in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Replacing Clutter Phrases (Adapted from Christina Thompson, *Harvard Review*)**

<b>Instead of...</b>	<b>Try...</b>
Whether or not	Whether
In actual fact	Actually
At the time that; at the time when	Instead
In the affirmative; in the negative	Yes; No
At the present time; at this time; at present	Now; Today; Currently
Due to the fact that	Because
Inasmuch as	Because; Since
In excess of	More than; Over
In regard to	About; Regarding; Concerning
Presently	Now or Soon, depending on what "presently" means
Previous to	Before
Prior to	Before; Until
In the process of	This can almost always be deleted without affecting meaning
Subsequently	Later
Subsequent to	After
Question whether; Question of whether; Question as to whether	Don't use "question as to whether" at all; Use "question of whether" and "question whether" sparingly. All three can be replaced with "ask."
In the event that	If
With the possible exception of	Except
The reason he went to the store is because....	He went to the store because....

### **Use phrases that draw attention to the writer.**

Drawing extra attention to the writer detracts from the message. Oftentimes, writers want to interject themselves into their writing using phrases like "I noticed," "I spotted," "I saw" as lead-ins to the rest of the sentence. For instance, "I noticed we are running low on toner for the copier," put emphasis on the writer instead of the action of the sentence. When a writer makes an observation, the "I noticed," "I saw," and "I spotted" are all implied because there is no other way to know without making an observation. Simple revise the sentence to read: "We are running low on toner for the printer."

This is especially true when it comes to stating a personal opinion in writing. The audience knows you are the writer. As a result, it should be obvious that what you present in your writing is either your own opinion or sourced and cited from

someone else. Therefore, phrases like “I think,” “I believe,” and “In my opinion” are generally unnecessary. Instead of, “We believe that this merger will be beneficial because it increases capital for us,” say instead, “This merger will be beneficial because it increases capital for us.”

## **Don’t...**

### **Start an independent clause with “there” or “it.”**

By simply avoiding the word “there” at the beginning of a sentence, writers can eliminate wordy sentence constructions to economize words. Starting a sentence with “there” almost always promotes a passive voice where the sentence ends up with a helping verb such as “be” that follows “there.” Avoiding “there” at the beginning of sentence improves conciseness and clarity. Examples:

- There are two people in charge of writing this report. → Two people are in charge of writing this report.
- There was a woman giving a presentation on hiring best practices. → A woman gave a presentation on hiring best practices.

Writers should avoid using “it” to begin an independent clause for the same reasons as they avoid “there.” When this occurs, a helping verb or weak verbs such as “seems” usually follows “It.” Try to use action verbs or more concise ways of saying the same thing. Examples:

- It was a bad financial year for our company. → Our company experienced a bad financial year. (The strong, active verb “experienced” replaced two weaker words “it was.”)
- It seems like we need to reevaluate our hiring practices. → 1) We need to reevaluate our hiring practices (Use this structure if it is obvious why hiring practices need to be reevaluated) OR 2) We need to reevaluate our hiring practices because they are inconsistent and unfair (Use this construction that offers concrete details if it is not obvious why hiring practices need to be reevaluated.)

### **Use more than one active verb when only one is needed.**

Don’t use two or more active verbs when only one is needed to make the meaning clear because it can cloud the message’s meaning. Examples:

- Miguel began to cry when he received the news that company layoffs were coming. → Miguel cried when he received the news that company layoffs were coming. (Is it important to know when he started crying or that he was crying? In this case, it is not important to note when he started crying.)

### **Use hidden verbs.**

A hidden verb (“nominalization”) is a verb that has been converted into a noun. To avoid the wordiness that comes with using hidden verbs, a writer oftentimes needs to restyle the sentence to repurpose the verb as a noun.

Hidden verbs come in two forms. Some have endings such as *-ment*, *-tion*, *-sion*, and *-ance* or link with verbs such as *achieve*, *effect*, *give*, *have*, *make*, *reach*, and *take*. Let’s look at some examples below:

- Chris **makes the argument** that he needs a bigger office because he handles the most clients. → Chris **argues** that he needs a bigger office because he handles the most clients.
- Huan **has reached a major achievement** by signing her 100<sup>th</sup> client. → Huan **achieved a milestone** when she signed her 100<sup>th</sup> client.

Hidden verbs also occur when we turn verbs into nouns by adding endings such as *-ing*, *-tion*, *-ment*, or *-sion* and placing the longer word between the words “the” and “of.” Let’s look at some examples below:

- If you cannot **make the payment of** \$100, your registration will be cancelled. → If you cannot **pay** \$100, your registration will be cancelled.