

Writing Spaces Assignments & Activities Archive

Concise Writing Strategies

Elizabeth Blomstedt

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Concise Writing Strategies

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Overview

Students often rely on writing strategies that make their writing wordy and bloated—sometimes subconsciously, sometimes to make their writing sound more sophisticated, and sometimes to meet word count. Presenting students with concrete strategies for making their writing more direct, clear, and concise increases student awareness of their own wordy writing habits and makes a case for the benefits of writing concisely.

This activity presents students with five sentence-level habits that make writing wordy and shows them how to revise these to make their writing more concise. I've arranged this information in a "Concise Writing Strategies" handout (see Appendix) that includes sample revisions and sentences that students can practice revising themselves. The handout ends with a section that asks students to apply these strategies to a draft of their own writing or writing from one of their peers.

This activity is most effective when taught shortly before final drafts of a writing project are due (after content has been solidified) because it focuses on writing style.

Time Commitment

60 minutes

Materials

Students should bring a hard or digital copy of their own writing (ideally a draft of a major writing project) to revise. Instructors can provide hard or digital copies of the "Concise Writing Strategies" handout (see Appendix)

Activity Process

- Students will learn five strategies for writing more concisely at the sentence-level. You can present these to them in handout form, adapt them into slides to present orally, or both.
- Students will then practice rewriting a sample sentence using that strategy. I recommend that students do this after you teach each strategy, giving them an opportunity to apply what they've learned before moving on to the next strategy. You can have students volunteer to read their rewritten sentences aloud or write them on the board.
- Finally, students will use these strategies on a piece of their own writing or writing from one of their peers.

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity will:

- Learn the benefits of concise writing and five ways to make their writing more concise
- Practice using five specific concise writing strategies by revising sample sentences
- Apply concise writing strategies to their own writing

Learning Accommodations

- Material should be presented in multiple formats, depending on instruction style. I recommend using the “Concise Writing Strategies” handout, putting the material from that handout onto slides, and explaining the material to students orally while presenting the slides (in-person, synchronously over video chat, or in a pre-recorded video for asynchronous classes) to reach a variety of learners.
- For asynchronous online instruction or quieter in-person classes, students can rewrite the five sample sentences from the “Concise Writing Strategies” handout in a collaborative Google Doc or submit those rewritten

sentences to their instructor as a minor writing assignment. Instructors can also create additional sentences to be revised.

- Similarly, students can apply these strategies to their own writing or to the writing of another student in the class, depending on class dynamic and instruction style. For students working with digital copies of their writing, I ask them to use the commenting function in their word processing program to “highlight” these different wordy sentence patterns.
- Respect student autonomy over their own writing styles by teaching students that these five strategies are not “rules” they need to follow in every circumstance. To achieve this aim, you can ask students to complete a written reflection on this lesson; in this reflection, students can identify which strategies they found helpful and which ones they did not, or write sample sentences where they would not use these strategies (in other words, where passive voice or nominalizations might be effective and necessary).

Further Reading

Barnet, Sylvan, and Marcia Stubbs. *Barnet & Stubbs's Practical Guide to Writing*. HarperCollins, 1995.

Fiske, Robert Hartwell. *The Dictionary of Concise Writing: More than 10,000 Alternatives to Wordy Phrases*. Marion Street Press, 2006.

Heard, Stephen B. “Brevity.” *The Scientist's Guide to Writing: How to Write More Easily and Effectively throughout Your Scientific Career*, Princeton University Press, 2016, pp. 182–191.

Trimble, John R. “Readability.” *Writing with Style: Conversations on the Art of Writing*, by John R. Trimble, Prentice Hall, 2011, pp. 64–81.

Appendix: Concise Writing Strategies

To write concisely means both to use fewer words and to use more powerful words to best convey your meaning. Below are five sentence-level writing moves that might be making your writing bloated and wordy.

Expletive Constructions

An expletive construction is a sentence or phrase that starts with “It + [to-be verb]” or “There + [to-be verb],” like “it is,” “there are,” “there was,” “it was,” etc. Though not grammatically incorrect, these types of sentences are longer than they need to be, and these constructions can rob your sentence of energy. Compare the sentence written with an expletive construction to the revised sentence, which has three fewer words and identifies its subject quicker:

- Expletive construction: **There are** many TikTok stars who only post videos of themselves dancing.
- Revision: Many TikTok stars only post videos of themselves dancing.

Now try rewriting this sentence to eliminate the expletive construction:

- There were aftershocks from the earthquake that made the chandelier in our dining room shake.

Passive Voice

In passive voice, the subject receives the action the verb describes. Many students are taught to avoid passive voice at all costs; there are good reasons to selectively use passive voice, but it often makes sentences longer and less clear. This is because using passive voice requires the use of a helping verb and preposition, as we can see in this example:

- Active voice: Michelle caught the frisbee.
- Passive voice: The frisbee was caught by Michelle.

These elements can make it easy to identify sentences written in passive voice. To revise sentences written in passive voice, place the person or thing doing the action (“Michelle” in the example above) in the subject slot of the sentence.

- Passive voice: The Presidential Medal of Freedom was awarded to Joe Biden by Barack Obama.
- Active voice: Barack Obama awarded Joe Biden the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Rewrite this passive voice sentence into active voice:

- A request on your part to be excused from the mandatory training will be reviewed by us.

Nominalizations

Nominalizations are nouns built from adjectives or verbs, like “analysis,” “decision,” “expectation,” “disagreement,” “intensity,” or “nominalization.” They are often necessary or convenient, but sometimes writers use them in a way that makes their sentences longer, as you can see with these sentences:

- Nominalization: We conducted an analysis of the advertising campaigns.
- Revision: We analyzed the advertising campaigns.

These types of sentence constructions with nominalizations also often lead writers to use less descriptive “to be” verbs, as you can see underlined in this example:

- Nominalization: Our intention is to partner with a local elementary school.
- Revision: We intend to partner with a local elementary school.

Revising often requires you to turn the nominalization back into its verb form.

Rewrite this sentence to eliminate the nominalization and provide a more descriptive verb:

- My decision is to remain in the class and take it pass/fail.

Excessive Prepositional Phrases

Prepositional phrases are groups of words beginning with prepositions (“with,” “of,” “by,” “to,” “like,” “around,” etc.), a

noun or object of the preposition, and any modifiers of the object. Here's a sentence with prepositional phrases underlined and prepositions in bold:

- The flock **of** seagulls flew **over** the coastline **near** the pier.

Prepositional phrases enable us to write interesting, complex sentences; without them, the above sentence would just be "The flock flew." However, sometimes writers choose to use excessive prepositional phrases when noun phrases, adjectives, or adverbs could be used instead.

- Excessive prepositional phrases: Individuals who benefit **from** the Medicare program **with** prostate cancer are eligible **for** treatment **that** is experimental **in** nature.
- Revision: Medicare beneficiaries **with** prostate cancer are eligible **for** experimental treatment.

As you can see, prepositional phrases still exist in the revised sentence. The goal is not to eliminate all prepositional phrases but to be mindful of when you may be using them unnecessarily.

Practice revising this sentence. Begin by underlining the prepositional phrases, then focus on re-organizing the sentences to eliminate some:

- The new documentary directed by Tanya Stevenson about the early history of the ABC Corporation, one of the first women-led companies on the West Coast, includes some incredible stories of women overcoming obstacles.

Intensifiers, Redundancies, and Meaningless Phrases

Some words or phrases add nothing to your sentences other than wordiness. These include intensifiers ("very," "really," "so," "extremely," etc.), redundancies or two or more words that mean the same thing ("past experience," "collaborated together," "close proximity," "new innovations," "end result," "price point," etc.), or meaningless phrases that add nothing to

your sentences (“all things considered,” “due to the fact that,” “for the most part,” “that exists,” etc.). While you may occasionally want to use these for clarity or style, often you can omit them. For example, this original sentence uses an intensifier (“really”), a redundancy (“returning again”), and a meaningless phrase (“by means of”):

- Wordy: Major forest areas are really returning again by means of natural processes.
- Revision: Major forest areas are returning naturally.

Here’s another example:

- Wordy: As far as I’m concerned, *Mamma Mia* is an extremely exceptional film and should be longer in length.
- Revision: *Mamma Mia* is an exceptional film and should be longer.

Try identifying some of the intensifiers, redundancies, and meaningless phrases in this sentence, then revise it to eliminate some:

- In this report, I will present a rather thorough analysis of the benefits of each and every free gift that our boutique has given out this year.

Applying Concise Writing Strategies

Looking at a piece of your own writing or the writing of one of your peers:

- Highlight *expletive constructions*. Rewrite at least one of these sentences to create a more concise sentence.
- Highlight sentences written in *passive voice*, and indicate which ones you think would be better written in active voice. Rewrite at least one of these.
- Find *nominalizations*, and highlight those that are creating unnecessary wordiness. Rewrite at least one of these sentences.
- Choose a long sentence, and underline all of the *prepositional phrases* in that sentence. Rewrite the

- sentence to eliminate some of the prepositional phrases.
- Focusing on one paragraph, comb through it for *intensifiers, redundancies, or meaningless phrases* and mark them in the text. Rewrite at least one sentence that contains these.