

## Clarity and Conciseness

Clarity and conciseness often go hand in hand: writing that focuses directly on a point and maximizes meaning with minimum wordiness tends to be both clear and concise. Revising for clarity of meaning often makes prose more concise and *vice versa*. This handout offers tips for keeping academic writing clear and concise.

### Express actions in verbs (avoid *nominalization*)

Consider this sentence:

Original: *The cause of our schools's failure at teaching basic skills is not understanding the influence of cultural background on learning.*

The central verb in the sentence is *is*—a verb that doesn't pack much punch. The sentence abounds with actions much more interesting than *being*, but they're not expressed as verbs: the nouns *cause*, *failure*, *influence*, and *learning* imply the verbs *to cause*, *to fail*, *to influence*, and *to learn*.

Actions expressed in nouns rather than verbs are called *nominalizations*. (For example, the word *nominalization* is the noun form of the verb *to nominalize*.) We can't eliminate nominalizations altogether, nor would we want to. However, letting verbs express actions usually makes sentences more dynamic, direct, clear, and concise:

Revised: *Our schools have failed to teach basic skills because educators do not understand how cultural backgrounds influence learning.*

What makes the revision clearer than the original?

### Avoid strings of prepositional phrases

Notice that the above revision eliminates clunky strings of prepositional phrases (*of the failure*, *of our schools*, *of cultural background*, *on learning*).

Consider another example:

Original: *A revision of the program will result in increases in our efficiency in the servicing of our customers.*

Revised: *If we revise the program, we can serve our customers more efficiently.*

Strings of prepositional phrases are often red flags for nominalizations.

## Choose clear subjects

Compare the subjects in the first two examples above:

*The cause of our schools' failure at teaching basic skills...*  
versus *Our schools...educators...cultural backgrounds...*

Which subjects are more concrete? Which are easier to understand? Why?

Clear subjects typically include people, institutions, and events. Abstractions and processes often create unclear subjects.

## Another example...

Here's an example that demonstrates the benefit of putting actions into verbs, avoiding strings of prepositional phrases, and choosing clear subjects:

Original: *Our more effective presentation of our study resulted in our success, despite an earlier start by others.*  
Revised: *Although others started earlier, we succeeded because we presented our study more effectively.*

The revision replaces the nominalizations *presentation* and *success* with the verbs *presented* and *succeeded*, simultaneously eliminating the awkward prepositional phrases *of our study* and *in our success*. The original lengthy subject, *our more effective presentation of our study*, yields to the clearer subjects *others* and *we*. The revision is both clearer and more concise.

## Favor active voice over passive voice, using [passive-voice](#) constructions with intent

Which sentence is more concise?

- *It was decided by the Director to expand the program.*
- *The Director decided to expand the program.*

Which sentence is clearest?

- *The Snark was lassoed successfully.* [By whom?]
- *The Snark was lassoed successfully by the Animal Control Officer.* [Still passive]
- *The Animal Control Officer successfully lassoed the Snark.* [Active]

Note that passive voice is more prevalent and accepted in some disciplines (e.g. some sciences, public policy) than others.

## Avoid beginning sentences with expletive constructions

Expletive constructions (*there is/are...*, *it is...*) take up space but add little meaning to sentences. Compare the following:

Original: *It is vital that we delete the word “absolutely.”*

Revised: *We must delete the word “absolutely.”*

Original: *There are five car alarms that are blaring in the parking lot.*

Revised: *Five car alarms are blaring in the parking lot.*

Original: *It is possible that the dog did not steal the cantaloupe after all.*

Revised: *The dog might not have stolen the cantaloupe after all.*

### Eliminate unnecessary words

Writers sometimes feel the urge to add emphasis to their prose by using extra words or phrases that don't contribute much to the meaning (and indeed, sometimes obscure it). Consider the following:

- *It is **absolutely** vital that...* [What does *vital* mean? Can something be only *sort of vital*?]
- *Their strategy is **quite** unique.* [What does *unique* mean? Are there degrees of uniqueness?]
- *The cat is **kind of** pregnant.* [The cat is either pregnant or not].
- *He prefers wheat **due to the fact that**...* [Substitute *because*...]
- *I need **some sort of** response by Thursday.* [Replace *some sort of* with *a*.]

### Revise your work

The rules of thumb discussed above are useful not only when you draft an essay, but also when you revise. Try the following steps<sup>1</sup> on your own writing, especially in passages you find inelegant or unnecessarily wordy:

1. Underline the actions (including nominalizations—implied actions in non-verb forms);
2. Put boxes around the verbs;
3. Circle the prepositions.
  - Now check: Do the prepositions point to unnecessary nominalizations? Can you replace forms of “to be” with action verbs?
  - If a sentence still sounds wordy after revision, check the distance between the subject and the verb. Do you have clear subjects followed directly by verbs?
4. Scan your passage for passive voice. Does the text benefit from the passive construction, or would it sound more direct using active voice?
5. Scan your passage for redundant words and expletive constructions. Do they add necessary stress, or can they be eliminated?

### Useful links

<http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/concise.htm>

The Capital Community College Guide to Grammar includes clear and helpful advice on writing concisely. (See their index at <http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/index2.htm> for information on all things grammar-related.)

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/572/01/>

Purdue's Online Writing Lab explains strategies for writing more concisely.

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<sup>1</sup>Adapted from the “Paramedic Method” developed by Richard Lanham in *Revising Prose* (1979).