

6.

EDITING FOR CONCISENESS, FORMALITY, AND CORRECTNESS

Learning Objectives

- Identify and eliminate wordy phrases
- Choose words appropriate to the writing situation
- Develop a system for catching mechanical errors

Conciseness

Writing concisely is like packing for a trip: you don't want too much to carry around, so you have to think carefully about what you really need to take. When you attempt to communicate clearly with educated readers, too many unnecessary words will confuse your readers, so you have to think carefully about what you're really trying to communicate. *Unlike* packing for a trip, though, you can work on making your writing more concise after you've completed your writing. You can't really plan to be concise—or at least, you shouldn't worry about it while trying to get your ideas on the page in a reasonable order.

You can, however, learn to recognize common wordy phrases and eliminate them from your writing. These are some of the ways we tend to clutter our writing with unnecessary words:

1. **Passive voice.** Passive voice is a sentence structure that puts the logical subject of a sentence in the direct object position. Take a moment to listen to Grammar Girl's explanation; then, check your writing for passive voice. <https://www.quickanddirtytips.com/education/grammar/active-voice-versus-passive-voice>
2. **Expletive constructions.** An expletive construction is a phrase that begins with *there* or *it*, followed by a *be* verb (*am*, *are*, *is*, *was*, *were*, *been*, *being*). Although expletives are not always wrong, you should look for them and determine whether you can rephrase without them. Consider them guilty until proven

innocent. Here's a helpful explanation from Grammar Girl: <https://www.quickanddirtytips.com/education/grammar/oddness-when-you-start-a-sentence-with-there-is>

3. **Nominalization.** Nominalization occurs when writers make nouns out of verbs or adjectives. Sometimes, a nominalization is fine. "Assumption" is a nominalization of the verb "assume," and in many instances, it's a highly useful word. But if you write "The professor made the assumption that he missed class because he was sick," you're being wordy. You could write instead, "The professor assumed he missed class because he was sick." Same meaning, more concise. This handout explains more. Be sure to watch the video! <https://pages.charlotte.edu/unccwrc/blog/2017/09/07/nominalizations-know-them-try-not-to-use-them/>
4. **Deadwood.** These are words, phrases, or clauses that don't add anything to your writing; they're also known as **filler words** or **circumlocutions**. It would be impossible to list all of them, but the University of Wisconsin provides this helpful list: https://writing.wisc.edu/handbook/style/css_wordyphrases/.
5. **Redundancies.** Sometimes, repeating a word or phrase can be an effective stylistic choice (think of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech), but unnecessary repetition is known as redundancy. As with deadwood phrases, listing every redundancy that might ever appear in writing is impossible, but this list of 50 redundant phrases should help you look for redundancies in your summaries: <https://www.dailywritingtips.com/50-redundant-phrases-to-avoid/>.

But My Professor Wants a 1,000-1,500 Word Essay!

Many students are hesitant to edit their work for conciseness because they are trying to meet a page- or word-length requirement. They might think, "Why eliminate words that were so hard to come up with in the first place?" The answer is that your professors are not judging your writing based on the number of words or the number of pages you produce; they are looking for solid content that's easy to understand and engaging. Details and specific word choices will make your writing stronger *and* longer, and most of the time, your first draft of a paper won't be as specific and as detailed as it needs to be. Revising, therefore, often requires adding more words.

Thinking critically means presenting specific and detailed explanations and descriptions, and the first step toward being more specific and detailed is to understand the difference between **general and specific language** and between **abstract and concrete language**. General language refers to categories or groups whereas specific language identifies actual components of that group. "Living creatures" is general language; "My salt-and-pepper miniature schnauzer, Pete" is specific language. Abstract language refers to concepts or ideas, such as love, beauty, morality. Concrete language attempts to capture what we can perceive through our senses—things we can smell, taste, touch, see, or hear.

How specific and concrete should you be? The answer depends on the writing situation. If you're

summarizing a text, you're not going to present details. Instead, you're trying to share the main points of the text so that readers understand the author's general points or main ideas. That doesn't mean, though, that you should use only general language. If a text is discussing teenagers, you shouldn't say the author is writing about people. On the other hand, if the text presents specific data to support a main idea, you need to present the main idea only, not the specific data.

With essays, professors want to see that you've really thought critically about your topic and can show that thinking on the page, in a way that readers can appreciate. They also want you to narrow your focus appropriately so that you can provide an in-depth discussion of your topic rather than a superficial discussion. For essays, therefore, you need to be very specific and concrete, but again, you need to determine when your readers need specifics and when they'll be okay with general or abstract language. If you're trying to persuade readers to eat more fruits and vegetables to lose weight, you wouldn't need to replace every use of fruits and vegetables (general language) with specific fruits and vegetables. You may, however, want to give specific examples of how many calories are in a medium-sized apple. While it's possible to be too specific and concrete in an essay, we tend to use more abstract and general terms when we first start writing about a subject because being specific and concrete is just difficult. In most cases, therefore, revision requires that you provide more specific, detailed information rather than eliminating specifics.

In short, don't confuse being wordy with being specific. You want to meet the word or page count, but you want each word to contribute to your readers' understanding and appreciation of what you're writing.

Formality

The words you use to communicate with others, like the clothes you wear, depend on the circumstances. You wouldn't wear yoga pants and a t-shirt to (most) job interviews, not because wearing yoga pants and t-shirts is wrong but because they aren't appropriate for a job interview. The same is true for the words we use. Nothing is wrong with informal language—we use it all the time to communicate successfully with friends—but when writing an academic paper, you want to create an impression of yourself as well-informed, fair-minded, and respectful of your audience. To that end, you need to look over your work to make sure the words you've chosen have created the general impression you want to convey. The following words and phrases are usually not appropriate for college-level writing:

1. **Colloquial language.** Colloquial language is language you would use when talking with or writing to friends. You might tell a friend you “bombed” the exam, but in an academic paper, you would use the word “failed.”
2. **Slang.** Most students know not to use slang in their writing, but sometimes it slips in.
3. **Regionalisms.** Because we live in Oklahoma, we use phrases like “you all” and “might could.” Words that are used in a certain region of the country or only in certain dialects are typically too informal for

academic writing.

4. **Abbreviations.** Most academic writing doesn't include abbreviations like "etc." or "e.g." You can use acronyms, such as "CDC" for the Center of Disease Control, but you always present the full name before you use the acronym.

A thesaurus can help you improve word choice, but don't use a word you don't know! For example, the thesaurus will tell you that "deferential" is a synonym for "thoughtful," but deferential means to show utmost respect to someone who is in a position of authority, so it could sound silly if you used it without understanding the word's true meaning. You also have to understand a word's **connotative meaning**. The word connotation means the implied or suggested meaning of a word, and if you don't understand a word's connotation, you may use it incorrectly or in a way that puzzles your readers. "Solicitous" is another synonym for "thoughtful," but when you say someone is solicitous, you imply that they are being submissive or dutiful as well as kind, so it might not be appropriate as a synonym. Use the thesaurus to remind you of words you know, not to pad your writing with big words.

What about Using "I" and "You" in Academic Writing?

Many students ask whether they are "allowed" to use first or second person when they write academic papers. If you are wondering the same thing, the short answer to the question is almost always no to using second person (you), but using first person (I) might be okay, depending on the assignment and/or the effect you want. In some cases, whether to use first and second person doesn't take much thought. With summaries, you don't use first person because you're supposed to be objective. In some kinds of scientific writing, neither first or second person is appropriate. Pronoun usage, though, is usually not a matter of okay/not okay; it's a rhetorical choice that might be appropriate in some cases but not in others.

Second person can be problematic because it makes assumptions about your audience and invites an informal tone. In other cases, though, second person makes sense. For example, if someone wrote, "To be a good college professor, you need to be available to help your students outside of class," that would probably be fine if the intended audience consisted of only college professors. As another example, consider the fact that this textbook uses second person. Why? Because it's directed at a group of similar readers: composition students. You'll also find sentence fragments, rhetorical questions, and informal word choices in this text, all of which contribute to a more casual tone—one intended to engage you. In this case, using second person makes sense.

Most college essays, on the other hand, are directed to a larger group of readers that can't be pigeonholed easily. (Note the use of the informal word choice? Pigeonholed is not formal, but it works in this context, right?) Addressing them directly, therefore, may be off-putting if the assumptions you're making aren't valid.

In the example above, if the readers were not all professors, the use of second person might annoy some readers. Moreover, using second person may convey the impression that you're not thinking about your audience's needs or the writing situation. Even if the audience is somewhat homogenous, and even if you are considering its needs, the second person usually undermines your attempts to develop a semi-formal tone. You're writing as if you know your audience well when, in most cases, you don't (and they don't know you). You're also likely to include other informal word choices when you use second person. So, second person is usually not appropriate.

First person may also diminish the formality level of your essay, but it could be appropriate if you're going to share personal experiences relevant to what you're arguing and if your readers will count that experience as good support. In some kinds of writing, relevant experiences can serve as representative examples—i.e., evidence for a claim you've presented. Relaying a personal experience in a moving or thoughtful way can also contribute to emotional and/or ethical appeals. You have to be careful about getting off topic if you include your personal experiences, and you usually need to acknowledge that your own experiences are limited. But presented as support, your own experiences can be included in some arguments, which means you may want to use first person.

Most English teachers also caution against first person because it can be wordy to keep repeating “I think” or “I believe” (Of course you believe what you're writing! Why else would you write it?), but even announcing the fact that you're expressing your opinion can be a rhetorical strategy to engage the reader. When you call attention to the fact that you're expressing a belief, you signal to the readers that you are aware that they might not share your belief, that you're willing to help them see how you arrived at your opinion. Compare “I think students who avoid taking a language class in college don't realize how much knowing another language can benefit them later in life” to this statement: “Students who avoid taking a language class don't realize how much it can benefit them later in life.” Which sounds more conciliatory? Which tone do you want your argument to adopt?

Finally, first person plural (we/us) can create an appropriate tone as well, but it should be used with caution. Like second person, first person plural might generalize about the reader in a way that is off-putting. On the other hand, first person plural can create the impression that you share something with the reader. For example, in the margins of a student's essay, a professor might write, “most of us struggle with developing a strong opening paragraph.” The professor could write “most students struggle with developing a strong opening paragraph,” but by including herself as well as others, the professor hopes to convey that writing well is a challenge at all levels—a challenge that even experienced writers encounter—and to convey that she is understanding. Similarly, a statement like “We all need to try harder to appreciate different points of view” may contribute to a writer's ethos: the statement indicates that the writer acknowledges himself as someone who can improve. The tone is humble rather than arrogant.

Asking whether you're allowed to use a certain pronoun, therefore, is the wrong question. The question to ask is, “How will using first or second person affect my tone and help me communicate my ideas?” In most cases, if you ask that question when writing a college paper, you won't use second person at all, and you'll use first person only in certain circumstances.

What About Contractions?

Another common question about writing formally is whether to use contractions, such as “can’t” instead of “cannot” or “they’re” instead of “they are.” In certain circumstances, writers will avoid contractions. Scholarly journals, which publish the work of scholars, typically publish articles that do not use contractions. In most published writing, though, writers use contractions. So, while not using contractions is a way to make your writing more formal, it’s definitely not the most important way to create a formal tone. In fact, if you’re striving for a semi-formal tone, avoiding contractions can seem odd.

Bottom line: whether to use contractions depends on how formal you want to be, but merely avoiding contractions won’t make your writing clearer or more formal.

Can You Be Too Formal?

The answer is yes, and when someone’s writing is too formal, we say the writer is using **pretentious language**. The word pretentious means to act overly important or—to use a colloquial phrase—to act highfalutin. If someone says you’re being pretentious, it’s definitely not a compliment! They are saying you’re being arrogant or pompous. Just as you wouldn’t wear yoga pants and a t-shirt to a job interview, you wouldn’t wear a tuxedo to a picnic. Being overdressed, just as being overly formal, is usually not a huge problem, but padding your writing with big words can come off as silly.

You can also appear overly formal if you use a lot of **jargon**. Jargon consists of words associated with specific groups—the “in” language that people who are not part of that specific group won’t understand. When writing to a general audience, you need to be careful about using jargon. For example, students often think that using legal jargon—words like “aforementioned” and “henceforth”—will create a more scholarly tone in their writing, but those words are appropriate only when writing to a particular audience. They will sound odd when writing to a general audience. Your audience also may not know certain jargon words. If you play basketball, you know what a crossover step is, but your readers may not. If your audience doesn’t understand a word’s meaning, you either need to define it or replace it with a word they do understand.

As with everything in writing, when to use jargon and whether or not you’re being pretentious depends upon the writing situation. In your college classes, you’ll encounter certain phrases that your professors understand but that you don’t. The phrases are often the “jargon” of the discipline, and you’ll be expected to learn those phrases. If you’re writing a paper for a literature class, your professors will expect you to use words associated with literature. If you’re taking a computer class, you’ll use more technical jargon in your essays. In all of your writing, you’ll need to use sophisticated word choice, but that doesn’t mean all of your words will need to be highly formal. Rather, you’ll need to use words that convey your meaning precisely, concisely, and in a way that engages your readers.

Mechanics

As explained in Chapter 3, grammar and punctuation rules help readers understand your ideas, so you always, always need to spend time editing to eliminate errors. The goal is not to write without making errors, though; instead, you should to create a list of the mistakes you tend to make and look for these mistakes after you have a solid draft. In other words, you need to edit for grammar and punctuation, just as you need to edit for conciseness and formality, after you have a draft.

Key Takeaways

- No one writes a first draft that is concise, appropriately formal, and error free; editing is crucial to creating clear and concise writing
- Editing requires you learn what to look for in your writing. You can't eliminate wordiness or informal word choices if you don't know what those are
- Editing also requires you understand the writing situation. Some words are appropriate in certain situations but not in others