



Clarity

1

Tighten wordy sentences.

Long sentences are not necessarily wordy, nor are short sentences always concise. A sentence is wordy if its meaning can be conveyed in fewer words.

1a Redundancies

Redundancies such as *cooperate together*, *basic essentials*, and *true fact* are a common source of wordiness. There is no need to say the same thing twice.

- ▶ Slaves were ~~portrayed or~~ stereotyped as lazy even though they were the main labor force of the South.
- ▶ Daniel ^{works} ~~is employed~~ at a software company ~~working~~ as a marketing assistant.

Modifiers are redundant when their meanings are suggested by other words in the sentence.

- ▶ Sylvia ~~very hurriedly~~ scribbled her name and phone number on the back of a greasy napkin.

1b Empty or inflated phrases

An empty word or phrase can be cut with little or no loss of meaning. An inflated phrase can be reduced to a word or two.

- ▶ ~~In my opinion,~~ ^o ~~our~~ current immigration policy is misguided on several counts.
- ▶ We will file the appropriate forms ^{if} ~~in the~~ ~~event that~~ we cannot meet the deadline.

INFLATED

along the lines of
 at the present time
 because of the fact that
 by means of
 due to the fact that
 for the reason that
 in order to
 in spite of the fact that
 in the event that
 until such time as

CONCISE

like
 now, currently
 because
 by
 because
 because
 to
 although, though
 if
 until

1c Needlessly complex structures

In a rough draft, sentence structures are often more complex than they need to be.

- ▶ ~~There is~~ ^A another DVD ~~that~~ tells the story of Charles Darwin and introduces the theory of evolution.
- ▶ ~~It is imperative that~~ ^A all police officers ^{must} follow strict procedures when apprehending a suspect.
- ▶ The CEO claimed that because of volatile market conditions she could not ~~make an~~ estimate ~~of~~ the company's future profits.

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2

Prefer active verbs.

As a rule, active verbs express meaning more vigorously than their duller counterparts—forms of the verb *be* or

verbs in the passive voice. Forms of *be* (*be, am, is, are, was, were, being, and been*) lack vigor because they convey no action. Passive verbs lack strength because their subjects receive the action instead of doing it.

Forms of *be* and passive verbs have legitimate uses, but if an active verb can convey your meaning as well, use it.

FORM OF BE	A surge of power <i>was</i> responsible for the destruction of the coolant pumps.
PASSIVE	The coolant pumps <i>were destroyed</i> by a surge of power.
ACTIVE	A surge of power <i>destroyed</i> the coolant pumps.

2a When to replace *be* verbs

Not every *be* verb needs replacing. The forms of *be* (*be, am, is, are, was, were, being, been*) work well when you want to link a subject to a noun that clearly renames it or to a vivid adjective that describes it: *Advertising is legalized lying. Great intellects are skeptical.*

If a *be* verb makes a sentence needlessly wordy, however, consider replacing it. Often a phrase following the verb will contain a word (such as *violation*) that suggests a more vigorous, active alternative (*violate*).

- ▶ Burying nuclear waste in Antarctica would ~~be in violation of~~ ^{violate} an international treaty.
- ▶ When Rosa Parks ~~was resistant to~~ ^{resisted} giving up her seat on the bus, she became a civil rights hero.

2b When to replace passive verbs

In the active voice, the subject of the sentence does the action; in the passive, the subject receives the action.

ACTIVE	The committee reached a decision.
PASSIVE	A decision was reached by the committee.

In passive sentences, the actor (in this case *committee*) frequently disappears from the sentence: *A decision was reached.*

In most cases, you will want to emphasize the actor, so you should use the active voice. To replace a passive verb with an active alternative, make the actor the subject of the sentence.

Lightning struck the transformer,

- ▶ ~~The transformer was struck by lightning,~~

^

plunging us into darkness.

The settlers stripped the land of timber before realizing

- ▶ ~~The land was stripped of timber before the settlers~~

^

~~realized~~ the consequences of their actions.

The passive voice is appropriate when you wish to emphasize the receiver of the action or to minimize the importance of the actor. In the following sentence, for example, the writer wished to focus on the tobacco plants, not on the people spraying them: *As the time for harvest approaches, the tobacco plants are sprayed with a chemical to retard the growth of suckers.*

NOTE: In scientific writing, the passive voice properly puts the emphasis on the experiment or the process being described, not on the researcher: *The solution was heated to the boiling point, and then it was reduced in volume by 50 percent.*

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3 Balance parallel ideas.

If two or more ideas are parallel, they should be expressed in parallel grammatical form.

A kiss can be a comma, a question mark, or an exclamation point. —Mistinguett

This novel is not to be tossed lightly aside, but to be hurled with great force. —Dorothy Parker

3a Items in a series

Balance all items in a series by presenting them in parallel grammatical form.

- ▶ Cross-training involves a variety of exercises, such as running, swimming, and ^{lifting} weights.
- ▶ Abused children commonly exhibit one or more of the following symptoms: withdrawal, rebelliousness, restlessness, and ^{depression.} ~~they are depressed.~~
- ▶ The winner of the gluttony contest swallowed six pancakes, slurped down a cream pie, gobbled ^{devoured} six waffles, and four pastries.

3b Paired ideas

When pairing ideas, underscore their connection by expressing them in similar grammatical form. Paired ideas are usually connected in one of three ways: (1) with a coordinating conjunction such as *and*, *but*, or

or; (2) with a pair of correlative conjunctions such as *either . . . or*, *neither . . . nor*, *not only . . . but also*, or *whether . . . or*; or (3) with a word introducing a comparison, usually *than* or *as*.

- ▶ Many states are reducing property taxes for home owners and ^{extending} extend financial aid in the form of tax credits to renters.

The coordinating conjunction *and* connects two verbs: *reducing . . . extending*.

- ▶ Thomas Edison was not only a prolific inventor but also ~~was~~ a successful entrepreneur.

The correlative conjunctions *not only . . . but also* connect two noun phrases: *a prolific inventor* and *a successful entrepreneur*.

- ▶ It is easier to speak in abstractions than ^{to ground} grounding one's thoughts in reality.

The comparative term *than* links two infinitive phrases: *to speak . . . to ground*.

NOTE: Repeat function words such as prepositions (*by*, *to*) and subordinating conjunctions (*that*, *because*) to make parallel ideas easier to grasp.

- ▶ Many hooked smokers try switching to a brand they find distasteful or ^{to} a low tar and nicotine cigarette.

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4 Add needed words.

Do not omit words necessary for grammatical or logical completeness. Readers need to see at a glance how the parts of a sentence are connected.

4a Words in compound structures

In compound structures, words are often omitted for economy: *Tom is a man who means what he says and [who] says what he means.* Such omissions are acceptable as long as the omitted word is common to both parts of the compound structure.

If the shorter version defies grammar or idiom because an omitted word is not common to both parts of the structure, the word must be put back in.

- ▶ Some of the regulars are acquaintances whom we
who
see at work or live in our community.
^

The word *who* must be included because *whom live in our community* is not grammatically correct.

- ▶ Mayor Davis never has *accepted* and never will accept a bribe.
^

Has . . . accept is not grammatically correct.

- ▶ Many South Pacific tribes still believe *in* and live by
^
ancient laws.

Believe . . . by is not idiomatic English.

4b The word *that*

Add the word *that* if there is any danger of misreading without it.

- ▶ Looking out the family room window, Sara saw her *that*
^
favorite tree, which she had climbed so often as
a child, was gone.

Sara didn't see the tree; she saw that the tree was gone.

4c Words in comparisons

Comparisons should be between items that are alike. To compare unlike items is illogical and distracting.

- ▶ The women entering VMI can expect haircuts as short as ^{those of} the male cadets.

^
Haircuts must be compared with haircuts, not with cadets.

Comparisons should be complete enough so that readers will understand what is being compared.

INCOMPLETE Brand X is less salty.

COMPLETE Brand X is less salty than Brand Y.

Also, you should leave no ambiguity about meaning. In the following sentence, two interpretations are possible.

AMBIGUOUS Mr. Kelly helped me more than Sam.

CLEAR Mr. Kelly helped me more than he helped Sam.

CLEAR Mr. Kelly helped me more than Sam did.

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5

Eliminate confusing shifts.

5a Shifts in point of view

The point of view of a piece of writing is the perspective from which it is written: first person (*I* or *we*), second person (*you*), or third person (*he/she/it/one* or *they*). Writers who are having difficulty settling on an appropriate point of view sometimes shift confusingly from one to another. The solution is to choose a suitable perspective and then stay with it.

- ▶ One week our class met to practice rescuing a victim trapped in a wrecked car. ~~You~~ were graded on ~~your~~ speed and ~~your~~ skill.

- You need*
▶ ~~One needs~~ a password and a credit card number to access this database. You will be billed at an hourly rate.

Shifts from the third-person singular to the third-person plural are especially common. (See also 12a.)

- Artists are*
▶ ~~The artist is~~ often seen as a threat to society, especially when they refuse to conform to conventional standards of taste.

NOTE: The *I* (or *we*) point of view, which emphasizes the writer, is a good choice for writing based primarily on personal experience. The *you* point of view, which emphasizes the reader, works well for giving advice or explaining how to do something. The third-person point of view, which emphasizes the subject, is appropriate in most academic and professional writing.

5b Shifts in tense

Consistent verb tenses clearly establish the time of the actions being described. When a passage begins in one tense and then shifts without warning and for no reason to another, readers are distracted and confused.

- ▶ There was no way I could fight the current and win. Just as I was losing hope, a stranger ~~jumps~~ *jumped* off a passing boat and ~~swims~~ *swam* toward me.

Writers often shift verb tenses when writing about literature. The literary convention is to describe fictional events consistently in the present tense. (See p. 35.)

- ▶ The scarlet letter is a punishment sternly placed on Hester's breast by the community, and yet it ~~was~~^{is} an extremely fanciful and imaginative product of Hester's own needlework.

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6 Untangle mixed constructions.

A mixed construction contains parts that do not sensibly fit together. The mismatch may be a matter of grammar or of logic.

6a Mixed grammar

A writer should not begin with one grammatical plan and then switch without warning to another.

- ~~For~~^M most drivers who have a blood alcohol concentration of .05 percent increase their risk of causing an accident.

The phrase beginning with *For* cannot serve as the subject of the sentence. If the phrase opens the sentence, it must be followed by a subject and a verb: *For most drivers who have a blood alcohol concentration of .05 percent, the risk of causing an accident is increased.*

- ▶ Although the United States is one of the wealthiest nations in the world, ~~but~~ almost 20 percent of American children live in poverty.

The *Although* clause is subordinate, so it cannot be linked to an independent clause with the coordinating conjunction *but*.

6b Illogical connections

A sentence's subject and verb should make sense together.

- ▶ Under the revised plan, the elderly ^{the double personal exemption for} / ~~who now receive a double personal exemption~~ / will be abolished.

The exemption, not the elderly, will be abolished.

- ▶ Social workers decided that ^{Tiffany} / ~~Tiffany's welfare~~ would not be safe living with her mother.

Tiffany, not her welfare, may not be safe.

6c *is when, is where, and reason . . . is because* constructions

In formal English many readers object to *is when, is where, and reason . . . is because* constructions on either logical or grammatical grounds.

- ▶ Anorexia nervosa is ^{a disorder suffered by people who,} / ~~where people,~~ believing they are too fat, diet to the point of starvation.

Anorexia nervosa is a disorder, not a place.

- ▶ ~~The reason~~ I was late ~~is~~ because my motorcycle broke down.

The writer might have replaced the word *because* with *that*, but the preceding revision is more concise.

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7 Repair misplaced and dangling modifiers.

Modifiers should point clearly to the words they modify. As a rule, related words should be kept together.

7a Misplaced words

The most commonly misplaced words are limiting modifiers such as *only*, *even*, *almost*, *nearly*, and *just*. They should appear in front of a verb only if they modify the verb: *At first I couldn't even touch my toes*. If they limit the meaning of some other word in the sentence, they should be placed in front of that word.

- ▶ Lasers ~~only~~ destroy the target, leaving the surrounding healthy tissue intact.

The limiting modifier *not* is frequently misplaced, suggesting a meaning the writer did not intend.

- ▶ In 1860, all black southerners were ~~not~~ slaves.

The original sentence means that no black southerners were slaves. The revision makes the writer's real meaning clear.

7b Misplaced phrases and clauses

Although phrases and clauses can appear at some distance from the words they modify, make sure your meaning is clear. When phrases or clauses are oddly placed, absurd misreadings can result.

- ▶ *On the walls*
There are many pictures of comedians who have performed at Gavin's. ~~on the walls.~~

The comedians weren't performing on the walls; the pictures were on the walls.

- ▶ The robber was described as a *150-pound,* six-foot-tall man with a mustache. ~~weighing 150 pounds.~~

The robber, not the mustache, weighed 150 pounds.

7c Dangling modifiers

A dangling modifier fails to refer logically to any word in the sentence. Dangling modifiers are usually introductory word groups that suggest but do not name an actor. When a sentence opens with such a modifier, readers expect the subject of the following clause to name the actor. If it doesn't, the modifier dangles.

DANGLING

Upon entering the doctor's office, a skeleton caught my attention.

This sentence suggests—absurdly—that the skeleton entered the doctor's office.

To repair a dangling modifier, you can revise the sentence in one of two ways:

1. Name the actor immediately following the introductory modifier or
2. turn the modifier into a word group that names the actor.

► Upon entering the doctor's office, ^{*I noticed*} a skeleton [^] ~~caught my attention.~~ [^]

► ^{*As I entered*} ~~Upon entering~~ the doctor's office, a skeleton [^] caught my attention.

A dangling modifier cannot be repaired simply by moving it: *A skeleton caught my attention upon entering the doctor's office.* The sentence still suggests that the skeleton entered the doctor's office.

► ^{*I was*} While [^] working as a ranger in Everglades National Park, a Florida panther crossed the road in front of my truck one night.

The panther wasn't working as a ranger. The writer has revised the sentence by naming the actor (*I*) in the opening modifier.

- women have often been denied*
- ▶ After completing seminary training, ~~woman's~~ access
 to the pulpit, ~~has often been denied~~.

The women (not their access to the pulpit) complete the training. The writer has revised the sentence by making *women* (not *women's access*) the subject.

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7d Split infinitives

An infinitive consists of *to* plus a verb: *to think*, *to dance*. When a modifier appears between its two parts, an infinitive is said to be “split”: *to carefully balance*. If a split infinitive is awkward, move the modifier to another position in the sentence.

- ▶ Cardiologists encourage their patients to
~~more carefully~~ watch their cholesterol levels *more carefully*.

When a split infinitive is more natural and less awkward than alternative phrasing, most readers find it acceptable. *We decided to actually enforce the law* is a perfectly natural construction in English. *We decided actually to enforce the law* is not.

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8 Provide some variety.

When a rough draft is filled with too many same-sounding sentences, try to inject some variety—as long as you can do so without sacrificing clarity or ease of reading.

8a Combining choppy sentences

If a series of short sentences sounds choppy, consider combining some of them. Look for opportunities to tuck some of your ideas into subordinate clauses. Subordinate clauses, which contain subjects and verbs, begin with words like these: *after, although, because, before, if, since, that, unless, until, when, where, which, and who*.

- ▶ The executive committee was made up of superstars. ^{who} They fought for leadership instead of addressing the company's problems.
- ▶ We keep our use of insecticides, herbicides, and fungicides to a minimum. ^{because we} We are concerned about the environment.

Also look for opportunities to tuck some of your ideas into phrases, word groups that lack subjects or verbs (or both).

- ▶ The Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, ^{is} a 184-mile waterway constructed in the 1800s. ^{It} was a major source of transportation for goods during the Civil War.
- ▶ ^{Enveloped} Sister Consilio was enveloped in a black robe with only her face and hands visible. ^{Sister Consilio} She was an imposing figure.

At times it will make sense to combine short sentences by joining them with *and*, *but*, or *or*.

- ▶ Shore houses were flooded up to the first floor, ^{and} Brandt's Lighthouse was swallowed by the sea.

CAUTION: Avoid stringing a series of sentences together with *and*, *but*, or *or*. For sentence variety, place some of the ideas in subordinate clauses or phrases.

- ▶ ^{When my} My uncle noticed the frightened look on my face, ^{and} he told me that the dentures in the glass were not real teeth.
- ▶ These particles, ^{are} known as “stealth liposomes,” ^{and they} can hide in the body for a long time without detection.

8b Varying sentence openings

Most sentences in English begin with the subject, move to the verb, and continue to an object, with modifiers tucked in along the way or put at the end. For the most part, such sentences are fine. Put too many of them in a row, however, and they become monotonous.

Words, phrases, or clauses modifying the verb can often be inserted ahead of the subject.

- ▶ ^{Eventually a} A few drops of sap ~~eventually~~ began to trickle into the pail.
- ▶ ^{Just as we were heading to work, the} The earthquake rumbled throughout the valley. ^{just} ~~as we were heading to work.~~

Participial phrases can frequently be moved to the beginning of a sentence without loss of clarity.

- ▶ ~~The university,~~ ^D discouraged by the researchers' apparent lack of progress, [^] *the university* nearly withdrew funding for these prize-winning experiments.

NOTE: When you begin a sentence with a participial phrase, make sure that the subject of the sentence names the person or thing being described. If it doesn't, the phrase will dangle. (See 7c.)

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9

Find an appropriate voice.

An appropriate voice is one that suits your subject, engages your audience, and conforms to the conventions of the genre in which you are writing. When in doubt about the conventions of a particular genre—lab reports, informal essays, research papers, business memos, and so on—look at models written by experts in the field.

In the academic, professional, and business worlds, three kinds of language are generally considered inappropriate: jargon, which sounds too pretentious; slang, which sounds too casual; and sexist or biased language, which offends many readers.

9a Jargon

Jargon is specialized language used among members of a trade, profession, or group. Use jargon only when readers will be familiar with it; even then, use it only when plain English will not do as well.

JARGON For decades the indigenous body politic of South Africa attempted to negotiate legal enfranchisement without result.

REVISED For decades the indigenous people of South Africa negotiated in vain for the right to vote.

Broadly defined, jargon includes puffed-up language designed more to impress readers than to inform them. Common examples in business, government, higher education, and the military are given in the following list, with plain English translations in parentheses.

commence (begin)	indicator (sign)
components (parts)	input (advice)
endeavor (try)	optimal (best)
exit (leave)	parameters (boundaries)
facilitate (help)	prior to (before)
factor (consideration, cause)	prioritize (set priorities)
finalize (finish)	utilize (use)
impact (v.) (affect)	viable (workable)

Sentences filled with jargon are hard to read, and they are often wordy as well.

- listen to*
- ▶ If managers ~~have adequate input from~~ subordi-
nates, they can ~~effectuate more viable~~ decisions.
^ *make better*
^
- ▶ All ~~employees functioning in the capacity of~~ work-
study students ~~are required to give evidence of~~
must prove that they are
~~currently enrolled.~~
current enrollment.

9b Clichés

The pioneer who first announced that he had “slept like a log” no doubt amused his companions with a fresh and unlikely comparison. Today, however, that comparison is a cliché, a saying that has lost its dazzle from overuse. No longer can it surprise.

In your writing do not rely heavily on clichés. To see just how predictable clichés are, put your hand over the right-hand column below and then finish the phrases given on the left.

cool as a	cucumber
beat around	the bush
busy as a	bee, beaver
crystal	clear
light as a	feather
like a bull	in a china shop

playing with	fire
nutty as a	fruitcake
selling like	hotcakes
water under the	bridge
white as a	sheet, ghost
avoid clichés like the	plague

The cure for clichés is frequently simple: Just delete them. When this won't work, try adding some element of surprise. One student, for example, who had written that she had butterflies in her stomach, revised her cliché like this:

If all of the action in my stomach is caused by butterflies, there must be a horde of them, with horseshoes on.

The image of butterflies wearing horseshoes is fresh and unlikely, not dully predictable like the original cliché.

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9c Slang

Slang is an informal and sometimes private vocabulary that expresses the solidarity of a group such as teenagers, rock musicians, or soccer fans. Although it does have a certain vitality, slang is a code that not everyone understands, and it is too informal for most written work.

- ▶ The new governor is ^{a creative}~~an out-of-the-box~~ thinker.

9d Sexist language

Sexist language is language that stereotypes or demeans men or women, usually women. Such language arises from stereotypical thinking, from traditional pronoun use, and from words used to refer indefinitely to both sexes.

Stereotypical thinking. In your writing, avoid referring to any one profession as exclusively male or exclusively female (such as referring to nurses in general as females). Also avoid using different conventions when identifying women and men (such as giving a woman's marital status but not a man's).

- ▶ All executives' ~~wives~~ ^{spouses} are invited to the picnic.
^
- ▶ Boris Stotsky, attorney, and ~~Mrs.~~ Cynthia Jones, ^{graphic designer,} ~~mother of three,~~ are running for city council.
^

The pronouns he and him. Traditionally, *he*, *him*, and *his* were used to refer indefinitely to persons of either sex: *A journalist is stimulated by his deadline.* You can avoid such usage in one of three ways: substitute a pair of pronouns (*he or she*, *his or her*); reword in the plural; or revise the sentence to avoid the problem.

- ▶ A journalist is stimulated by ~~his~~ ^{or her} deadline.
- ▶ ~~A journalist is~~ ^{Journalists are} stimulated by ~~his~~ ^{their} ~~deadline.~~ ^{deadlines.}
^
- ▶ A journalist is stimulated by ~~his~~ ^a deadline.
^

man words. Like *he* and *his*, the nouns *man* and *men* and related words containing them were once used indefinitely to refer to persons of either sex. Use gender-neutral terms instead.

INAPPROPRIATE

chairman
congressman
fireman
mailman
mankind
to man
weatherman
workman

APPROPRIATE

chairperson, chair
representative, legislator
firefighter
mail carrier, postal worker
people, humans
to operate, to staff
meteorologist, forecaster
worker, laborer

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9e Offensive language

Obviously it is impolite to use offensive terms such as *Polack* or *redneck*, but offensive language can take more subtle forms. When describing groups of people, choose names that the groups currently use to describe themselves.

- ▶ North Dakota takes its name from the ~~Indian~~ ^{Sioux} word meaning “friend” or “ally.”
- ▶ Many ~~Oriental~~ ^{Asian} immigrants have recently settled in our small town.

Avoid stereotyping a person or a group even if you believe your generalization to be positive.

- ▶ It was no surprise that Greer, ~~a Chinese American,~~ ^{an excellent math and science student,} was selected for the honors chemistry program.