

AVOIDING WORDINESS

“Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts.”

– William Strunk, Jr. (*The Elements of Style*)

USE ACTIVE VOICE AND STRONG VERBS

Passive voice can occur either by using the *to be* verb or by switching the grammatical placement of subjects and objects (which usually also requires the *to be* verb). Oftentimes, forms of the verb *to be* result in wordiness. Unless your instructor specifies that you should use the passive voice, you should always aim to use the active voice. By using active verbs, you will enliven your writing and generate interest in your reader.

PASSIVE: *I was swimming to the dock.*

“to be” verb

ACTIVE: *I swam to the dock.*

In the first sentence, the real action of the sentence is the swimming. When you can, replace “to be” verbs with a verb that better describes the main action of the sentence. To read more about active and passive voice, see our active voice handout.

SUBJECT-VERB-OBJECT ORDER

Passive voice also occurs when writers place objects in the grammatical position of the subject and vice versa. English is specific in that it prefers a Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) order. A subject of a sentence is the thing or person that performs the sentence’s action or verb, and the object is the thing or person receiving the action of the verb.

PASSIVE: *The cake was baked by mom.*

ACTIVE: *Mom baked the cake.*

In the above example, mom is the subject because mom is performing the action of baking. Thus, the cake is the object because it is receiving the action of being baked. The active version of the example follows the S-V-O order (i.e., Mom-baked-cake). You can’t always eliminate *to be*: sometimes it is necessary but avoid unnecessary or excessive usage. For example, you may write, “A high-fat diet is bad for your heart.” You could revise this sentence and write, “A high-fat diet harms your heart.” Similarly, you can avoid wordiness by getting rid of expletive constructions such as *there is*, *there are*, and *it is*.

EXAMPLE: *The primary work that Ben will experience is the art of building stools for kitchen tables.*

subject (Ben is doing the action)

central action (will be the verb)

REVISION: *Ben will build stools for kitchen tables.*

ADDITIONAL TIPS

SUGGESTION	WORDY SENTENCE	CONCISE VERSION
<p>AVOID REDUNDANCY. In writing, redundancy is characterized by verbosity and unnecessary repetition. When revising your draft, make sure to avoid expressing the same idea twice. Here are some examples of unnecessary repetition and redundancy.</p>	<p><i>Dr. May Foss is a professor of American history. She holds a Ph.D. and teaches American history at the University of South Florida.</i></p>	<p><i>Dr. May Foss, a professor of American history, teaches at the University of South Florida.</i></p>
	<p><i>Many different forms of hazing may occur, such as physical abuse and mental abuse. Also, sexual abuse may occur.</i></p>	<p><i>Different forms of hazing may occur, such as physical, mental and sexual abuse.</i></p>
	<p><i>Compulsory attendance at assemblies is required; students must attend every assembly.</i></p>	<p><i>Students are required to attend assemblies.</i></p>
<p>AVOID EMPTY WORDS. Empty words and meaningless modifiers are so general and overused that they contribute little meaning to a sentence. Replace them with specific examples.</p>	<p><i>The nature of the house's location really makes it very vulnerable to natural disaster situations.</i></p>	<p><i>The house's location makes it vulnerable to flooding.</i></p>
	<p><i>The social aspects of a person's life can be a major impact on job performance.</i></p>	<p><i>A person's social life can impact job performance.</i></p>

AVOID REDUNDANT WORDS OR EXPRESSIONS

Below is a list of common redundancies alongside leaner, concise versions that communicate the same ideas.

REDUNDANCY	CONCISE VERSION
Twelve midnight, twelve noon -- midnight, noon	Biography of a life -- biography
a (adjective) person -- a person who is (adjective)	In the field of (academic study) -- in (academic study)
Close proximity -- proximity	In the event that -- if
Completely (adjective) -- (use the adjective)	One and the same -- the same
Consensus of opinion -- consensus	Period of six days -- six days
Each and every -- each	Personally, I think -- I think
Exactly the same -- exactly	Personal opinion -- opinion
Usual custom -- repeat	Refer back -- refer
Surrounded on all sides -- return	Circle around -- circle
Summarize briefly -- summarize	

