

Techniques for Decreasing Wordiness

Promote nouns to verbs: helps to eliminate overlaps in meaning and gives writing action instead of simple description.

ex. The gold stampede in Europe reached near panic proportions. (9 words)
Europe's gold speculators almost stampeded. (5 words)

The company offered an explanation for its actions. (8 words)
The company explained its actions. (5 words)

Watch out for verbs that have taken on noun form through common suffixes, including *ion, tion, ing, ance, ment, ancy, ant, ent, able*.

To submit an argument — to argue.
It is his intention — he intends.
She achieved dominance in her field — she dominated it.
They came to an agreement — they agreed.
The company realized a savings of — they saved.
They are in violation of — they violated.
Her contention was — she contended.
The panel reached a finding — it found.
They gave consideration to — they considered.

Promote prepositional phrases to verbs: As above, this can add action and interest as well as reduce word count.

ex. Marvin then took hold of the knife. (7 words)
Marvin then grabbed the knife. (5 words)

He was forced to put up with the pain. (9 words)
He was forced to bear the pain. (7 words)

she made up her mind — she decided.
draw your attention to — show you
a man by the name of — named

Reduce prepositional phrases: to modifiers, conjunctions, or simpler prepositions.

due to the fact that — because
prior to, in advance of — before
best of health — well
in the final analysis — finally
in the foreseeable (or near) future — soon
on the part of — by

with the exception of — except
 the question as to whether — whether
 in the even of — if
 in order to, for the purpose of — to
 filled to capacity — full
 in spite of the fact that — although
 put in an appearance — appear
 in view of — because
 at present, at this time — now
 in short supply — scarce
 in the majority of instances (or cases) — usually
 a percentage (or degree) of — some
 a large percentage (or degree) of — most
 was unaware of the fact that — didn't know
 ahead of schedule — early
 in a hasty manner — hastily
 in attendance — there
 from her point of view — to her
 will have to — must
 each and every one of us — each of us

Recognize and eliminate redundancies:

ex. advance notice	she was modest about herself
each separate incident	the general public
many different ways	he owns his own home
dash quickly	strangled (or drowned) to death
end result	face up to the problem
plans for the future —	nodding his head
shrugging her shoulders	connecting links
past experience	crime activity
prior notice	Easter Sunday
new developments	he thought to himself
Jewish rabbi	contributing factor

Adverbs are often redundant or simply overused.

currently/presently — If I am *currently* doing something, then I do it.

ex. They *presently* live in Los Angeles — They live in Los Angeles.

clearly/basically/simply — Clearly, these are all basically unnecessary.

literally — This word is rarely used honestly.

ex. The team *literally* destroyed the opposition.

Shun the passive voice: (may require some changes other than in verb form)

- ex. It was approved that there would be a clothing drive for the needy. (13)
The council approved a clothing drive for the needy. (9)

Public concern has also been given a tremendous impetus by the findings of the Hoover Commission on the federal government. (20 words)

The findings of the Hoover Commission on federal government have also greatly stimulated public concern. (15 words)

Eliminate commonly used "stretchers":

- to be** ex. He seems [to be] upset about something.
This appears [to be] difficult.

there is . . . which; it is . . . that; etc.

- ex. [There are] many women [who] never marry.
[It is] his last book [that] shows his genius best.
[There is] one segment of the population [which] never seeks aid.

which (which is, who are, that was)

- ex. the plant which I bought — the plant I bought
the car which was going south — the car going south
a person who is attractive — an attractive person
the belief which motivates him — his motivating belief

Check each "of" and "to" for its necessity:

- ex. in order to determine the date of publication of a particular issue (12 words)
to date a particular issue (5 words)

Beware "use" and "the use of": Others words often contain the concept of using.

- ex. He uses the device of foreshadowing. (6 words)
He foreshadows. (2 words)

Through [the use of] logic, he persuades.
His [use of] dialogue is effective.

Eliminate "level", "type" and "quality" as modifiers: They are meaningless.

- ex. high-level officials — high officials
- detergent-type cleansers — detergents
- apprentice-type situations — apprenticeships
- finest quality cloth — finest cloth

Avoid "nature", "kind" and "type" as general nouns:

- ex. of an indefinite nature — indefinite
- puzzling in nature — puzzling
- of a peculiar kind — peculiar
- the most common type of error — the most common error

Break the noun-modifying-noun pattern: Change one noun to an adjective or verb.

- ex. Teacher militancy is not so marked in Pittsburgh. (8 words)
- Teachers are not so militant in Pittsburgh. (7 words)

- Consumer demand is falling in the area of services. (9 words)
- Consumers are demanding fewer services. (5 words)

Avoid multisyllable “show off” words and phrases: Sometimes wordiness isn’t about word count, but clarity.

- izes — optimized, prioritize, finalize, institutionalize, etc.
- I would hope, I would like to express my appreciation, as I am sure you know, very much, as per, contingent upon, mutually beneficial...

Final Note: Avoid wordiness, especially when it obscures meaning, but do not sacrifice warmth in your writing. If all sentences are condensed to abruptness, writing becomes choppy and mechanical. Aim for variety in sentence length without including unnecessary, redundant or muddying language.

[Many techniques and examples taken from:

Baker, Sheridan. The Complete Stylist. New York: Harper & Row, 1984. 177-193.

Scott, DeWitt H. Secrets of Successful Writing. San Francisco: Reference Software, 1989. 55-117.]