

How to Write Concisely

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Whether you're back in the office or still working remotely, you've probably found yourself in more than one meeting this year that could have been the inspiration for one of those "I survived another meeting that should have been an email" memes. But you have probably also read more than one email this year that should have been ... a shorter email.

If you have something complicated to say, you should always take the space you need to say it. But when your prose is unnecessarily wordy and repetitive, you tax your readers by asking them to focus their

attention on figuring out what you're saying rather than thinking about what you're saying.

In those cases, it's time to edit.

Although it may seem counterintuitive, writing something long often takes less time than writing something shorter. Case in point: The first draft of this article was 500 words longer than the version you're reading. Back in 1690, John Locke captured this challenge in "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding," of which he noted that "to confess the truth, I am now too lazy, or too busy to make it shorter."

It's hard to carve out enough time to write effectively. But even when you only have a few minutes to edit, you can try these three strategies to pare down your prose.

1. Delete words that don't add anything to your sentence.

Many workplace documents are weighed down by the following words: generally, basically, actually, kind of, really, virtually, totally, essentially, completely, practically, literally, and just.

We're (literally) so used to (just) writing these words we may (actually) find that our writing sounds (totally) odd without them. But (generally) once you get in the habit of cutting these words, you (really) won't miss them.

If one of these words is essential to the meaning of your sentence, keep it! But if not, let it go. To decide whether the word should stay or go, ask yourself these questions:

- What is the word adding to your sentence?
- If you cut it, does your sentence lose anything?
- If you keep it, will you dilute your message?

Consider this example:

*Because the pandemic **completely** strained our hospitals, we had to **essentially** reconsider the role of telehealth in our medical system.*

To decide if I want to keep that “completely” and “essentially,” I can ask what those words are adding to my sentence. Did the pandemic “completely” strain our hospitals? Can they be more strained than just ... strained? Is there a difference between “reconsidering” and “essentially reconsidering”?

What if I want to suggest that we did some reconsidering of the role of telehealth, but we didn’t rethink everything? Does essentially help make that point? Not really. Saying we had to reconsider doesn’t imply we had to reconsider everything, so essentially doesn’t help.

In this case, I can’t make the case for either the “completely” or the “essentially.” Rather than adding to my sentence, they dilute my message by making it less direct.

So, should you ever keep one of those words? Let’s consider this example:

*When we want to change suppliers, we **generally** hire an outside firm to vet our options.*

What are we trying to achieve with “generally” there? If we cut it, do we lose anything? If your point is that we “generally” do this, but in some

cases we don't, then you may want to keep the "generally." But a better solution may be to rewrite the sentence to make that point clearer:

When we want to change suppliers, we hire an outside firm to vet our options unless one of our partners has already vetted suppliers.

Bottom line: Keep the words you need; cut or replace the words you don't need.

2. Cut the overlap.

Because we figure out what we think by writing, we often repeat ourselves as we get closer to the best version of our ideas.

Consider this example from my first draft of this article:

When we're figuring out what we think, we tend to repeat ourselves. Sometimes we say the same thing again because we haven't figured out what we want to say.

In the first sentence, I make my point. (We repeat ourselves.) In the second sentence I elaborate on that point by adding the causal link. (We repeat ourselves *because* we haven't figured out what we want to say.) When I revised, I was able to make that causal link into the first sentence and cut the repetition:

Because we figure out what we think by writing, we often repeat ourselves in early drafts.

The revised sentence is almost half the length (16 words) as the original overlapping sentences (29 words).

To find overlapping sentences in your documents, try highlighting repetition as you edit. Here's an example:

Our current staffing problems have been exacerbated by a combination of low salaries and the rising cost of housing. Because it has become more expensive for employees to rent or buy homes in our target cities, we are not able to attract employees with our current salaries, which leads to staffing difficulties. (52 words)

In the first sentence, the author is making a claim: *We can't find staff because we aren't paying people enough to live in our area.*

In the second sentence, the author repeats that claim but adds new details. *Housing costs have gone up for renters and buyers in our target cities.*

If we combine the ideas from both sentences, we end up with this sentence:

Our current staffing problems have been exacerbated by a combination of low salaries and the rising cost of housing for renters and buyers in our target cities. (27 words)

This new version is much shorter.

3. Instead of telling us what you're going to do in a sentence, just do it.

Consider these two sentences:

I will now offer you *three steps we should take to improve our onboarding process.* (15 words)

We should take three steps to improve our onboarding process. (10 words)

When we read the first sentence, our attention is focused on the writer, who is about to offer us something, rather than on the recommendations for the onboarding process. It makes sense that writers include this kind of commentary when they draft a document. We're thinking about what we're doing, and so we tell our readers what we're doing.

But your readers don't necessarily need to follow the journey you took while you were drafting the document. They just need to know where you ended up.

Here's another example, based on one of the sentences we looked at above:

I want to point out that our current staffing problems have been exacerbated by a combination of low salaries and the rising cost of housing for renters and buyers in our target cities.

Readers will know you're pointing out the staffing problems because you're the author of the document that mentions that staffing problems. You don't lose important information if you cut those first few words and start with "Our current staffing problems..."

It's not the end of the world if you use an unnecessary word now and then, write the occasional overlapping sentence, or tell us what you're doing in a sentence before you do it. But the extra words add up. If you make a habit of using these strategies, your writing will be shorter and sharper.



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