

CONCISE WRITING: HOW TO OMIT NEEDLESS WORDS

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This article is all about concise writing, summed up in the timeless phrase “Omit needless words.” We’ll examine some of the best advice on writing concisely, define what concise writing is and isn’t, and describe 11 writing habits that encourage concision.

“OMIT NEEDLESS WORDS” AND *The Elements of Style*

In 1920, William Strunk Jr. published *The Elements of Style*. This was a groundbreaking work for writers, as it was the first English style guide—emphasizing, among other things, the importance of concise writing.

Since then, Strunk’s style guide has been adapted and edited several times; in 1959, E. B. White doubled the book’s length with his own advice.

The Elements of Style has this to say about concision:

Omit needless words.

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. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subject only in outline, but that every word tell.

In the 21st century, this advice still rings true as a concise (see, they're doing it!) definition of concise writing.

WHAT CONCISE WRITING IS

Concise writing is writing that has trimmed excess. It is writing that practices the prescription to “omit needless words.”

The key phrase here is “needless words.” These are words that muddy your writing: they distract the reader from central ideas, fail to carry their weight in meaning or impact, or cloud the reader’s picture of the world you are building. Even if you can’t point to these needless words, you’ll know they’re there, because they make writing feel loopy, slack.

Again, concision is *not* about writing in a clipped or spare fashion. Concise writing simply means writing that is clear, vivid, and impactful—writing in which every word carries its weight. This is true whether you’re writing in simple phrases or long lyrical sweeps.

And so the opposite of concise writing is *not* long writing; it is wasteful writing, writing that fails to display an economy of language.

OMIT NEEDLESS WORDS: 11 ELEMENTS OF CONCISE WRITING

Below are 11 writing habits that will tend to maximize the impact of each word you write. Some are positive patterns to consider adopting. In other cases, it’s easier to understand concise writing when you see what *not* to do. Learning to identify common mistakes that lead to wasteful writing will help you greatly with writing concisely.

1. USE CONCRETE LANGUAGE AND EXPRESSIVE VERBS

The easiest way to write concisely is to use descriptive language. If you can condense an idea into a single word, it often makes more sense to use that word than to overstate it in 10 words. Expressive language goes hand-in-hand with concision.

One of my favorite authors, Ruth Ozeki, has mastered expressive language. Let's look at the opening passage from her novel *All Over Creation*:

Concise example:

“It **starts** with the **earth**. How can it not? **Imagine** the **planet** like a **split peach**, whose **pit forms** the **core**, whose **flesh** its **mantle**, and whose **fuzzy skin** its **crust**—no, that doesn't **do justice** to the **crust**, which is, after all, where **all of life takes place**. The **earth's crust** must be more like the **rind** of the **orange**, **thicker** and **more durable**, quite unlike the thin **skin** of a **bruisable peach**. Or is it? Funny, how you never **think to wonder**.”

Active verbs are in orange, nouns are in aqua, and adjectives are in red.

This paragraph is filled with nouns and active verbs, which are the core of expressive language. With a little bit of connective tissue (prepositions, pronouns, articles, etc.), those nouns and verbs combine into a beautiful image of our planet as a peach.

Notice, also, the frequency of each word category. Ozeki uses an equal amount of concrete nouns and verbs; additionally, she occasionally uses adjectives, though only about one-fourth as frequently as nouns and verbs. This expressive language comprises half of the entire passage.

What would a wordy, inexpressive version of the same passage look like? I've tried my best to recreate the verbose, unconcise alternative:

Wasteful example:

“This **story**, in the same manner as any other **story**, **begins** with our **planet**. **Imagine** it: **sawed in half** like **fruit**, its **layers corresponding** to the **fleshy interior** of a **peach**, perhaps, or an **avocado**. No, never mind that. What would the **crust** be—where **all of life takes place**, despite our **never-ending violence**? How silly.”

Active verbs are in orange, nouns are in aqua, and adjectives are in red.

In this example, there are far more of those connective words. Further, many of the nouns and verbs are far from expressive: “story,” “corresponding,” and “never-ending violence” are concepts without specific images, and the reader isn't clear on what the narrator is trying to compare.

When you're struggling with a sentence, focus on the nouns and verbs; often, you need very little else.

The gist: words can carry a lot of weight, so let them. When you're struggling with a sentence, focus on the nouns and verbs; often, you need very little else.

2. WRITE IN THE ACTIVE VOICE

In our previous examples, we only highlighted the active verbs. It's also possible to write in the *passive voice* but doing so is generally less concise.

In an active voice sentence, the subject *does* the action (the verb). In a passive voice sentence, the verb *happens to* the subject.

In active voice writing, the subject *does* the action. In passive voice writing, the action *happens to* the subject.

Active voice: My wife visited the beach.

Active voice: The rain is drenching us.

Passive voice: The beach was visited by my wife.

Passive voice: We are being drenched by the rain.

Passive voice phrases always use the verb "to be" in some form.

- Be
- Are
- Is
- Was
- Been
- Were
- Being

Passive voice has a place in writing, but it often adds excess to your sentences. The passive voice waters down your verbs, making them less direct and impactful. Let's take a quote from *The Princess Bride* and move it into the passive voice:

Active: Hello. My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die.

Passive: Hello. I am named Inigo Montoya. My father was killed by you. You are encouraged to prepare to die.

Hopefully this gives a sense of passive voice writing: it tends to feel wordy, bureaucratic, impersonal. In active voice writing, the subject takes action. In passive voice writing, action happens to a passive subject, and that makes for alienating reading.

As a note, scientific and bureaucratic writing intentionally use the passive voice: writers in these fields *want* to be speaking impersonally, and so they change phrases like “The government requires your tax payment” to “Your tax payment is required” or “The five of us identified a new protein” to “A new protein was identified.” But this is rarely the goal in more creative and expressive forms of writing.

Don’t swear off passive verbs entirely, just use them sparingly. When you do use the passive voice, use it to offer important descriptive details.

For example, here’s a great use of the passive voice, from the US Declaration of Independence:

Appropriate use of passive voice: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

The passive voice emphasizes “men” and “equal,” shifting the lens from the Creator to Mankind himself. For its time (1776), this sentiment is rather radical, as it actively called for representative democracy in a world largely ruled by divinely chosen kings.

You can also use passive voice when something happens outside of the subject’s control. For example, if your character gets hit by a large beach ball, despite being in line in a coffee shop, then the passive voice makes perfect sense.

Appropriate use of passive voice: As he turned from the cash register to scan for a seat, he was struck by an enormous beach ball, perhaps eight feet in diameter.

Here, passive voice properly highlights something *happening to* a passive subject: being hit by an unexpected beach ball. But concise writing is rarely a series of these kinds of accidents: the character above took other actions, like “turned from the cash register,” that would read very badly in passive voice (“As the cash register was turned away from by him...”).

The bottom line: be careful about the passive voice, as it often creates needless words.

3. WATCH FOR NEEDLESS REPETITION

A surprising amount of writing repeats itself. Redundancies occur inevitably in writing but learning to recognize and condense them is a necessary element of concise writing.

Redundant language is language that doesn't provide new or unique information. For example, if I started writing about the green grass, that would be rather redundant, since grass—unless otherwise specified—is green. If this greenness is somehow unusual, then perhaps it makes sense to write about, but if the green grass is just a background part of the world I'm building, I don't need to tell you it's green—and you don't need to be told, either.

We also let redundancies slip when relying on colloquial turns of phrase. A lot of the phrases we use in English are redundant, especially transition statements and verbal colloquialisms. To give you an example, the chart below lists common English phrases on the left, with concise synonyms on the right.

| Instead of... | Say... |
|----------------------------------|-------------------|
| In my honest opinion, I think... | I think... |
| A total of 26 watermelons | 26 watermelons |
| Previous experience | Experience |
| Free gift | gift |
| New discovery | Discovery |
| Collaborated together | Collaborated |
| Close proximity | Proximity |
| Period of 6 years | 6 years |
| The reason why is that... | The reason is,... |
| Repeat again | Repeat |
| In the event that... | If... |
| Circle around | Circle |
| Biography of their life | Biography |
| The hot summer sun | The summer sun |
| One and the same | The same |

After seeing these examples, you may notice how easily redundancies slip past us. We speak many of these phrases without thinking about them; but as writers, we have to start noticing when our words aren't working. Limiting your use of adjectives, adverbs, and colloquial phrases is a good place to start: each is a hotbed of redundancy, as we'll discuss.

4. LIMIT YOUR USE OF ADVERBS

I've just mentioned a crucial rule for concise writing: limit your adverbs and adjectives. What do I have against these parts of speech? It's nothing personal, but when writers omit needless words, adverbs are often the first to go.

What are adverbs? They are words that modify verbs or adjectives. Adverbs act like adjectives for verbs (and sometimes for adjectives), offering additional information about *the way the verbs are performed*.

Let's look at a simple sentence that uses an adverb:

Sentence with adverb: The dog sat lazily on the couch.

Here, the adverb "lazily" modifies the verb "sits." As the author of this sentence, I have decided that the dog's laziness is crucial information for the reader.

However, I have also used an extra word to describe that laziness. The English language has a lot of words: we often don't need to use an adverb because there's a verb that denotes the same thing. The following adverb-less sentences all convey the same information, in fewer words:

- The dog rested on the couch.
- The dog relaxed on the couch.
- The dog lounged on the couch.
- The dog lazed on the couch.

Each of these examples portrays different aspects of laziness, without ever using the word "lazily."

Adverbs often violate [the "Show, don't tell" rule of writing](#), as they present excess information instead of inviting the reader to visualize the scene directly. See the following two examples for "Show, don't tell" alternatives to our initial sentence:

- The dog curled into the couch.
- The dog sighed and sank deeper into the couch cushions.

The issue is not word count; it's that "lazily" works—well, lazily. It tells your readers what to know rather than inviting them into the world you're

creating, or at least looking for a verb that could carry its weight. It's a tiny, missed opportunity.

Don't forswear adverbs entirely, in part because "entirely" is an adverb. But the thesaurus is often your friend as a writer, and if a shorter equivalent exists, you should use it most of the time. If you can't find the right verb, then go ahead and use an adverb: I don't think there's a simple English synonym for an activity like "surf ironically." But for phrases like "destroy completely" ("obliterate," "annihilate," or simply "destroy") or "descend suddenly" ("plummet," "tumble," "fall") you've definitely got some options.

5. DON'T OVERUSE ADJECTIVES

Overuse of adjectives can also threaten concise writing. You don't want an adjective to do a noun's work; if there's a noun that's easy to visualize, you don't need adjectives to modify that noun.

For example, you don't need to tell us about the color of a fire hydrant—unless that color is notably different.

Unnecessary: They drove past the red fire hydrant.

Most readers, at least in the United States, will assume that the fire hydrant is red.

Better: They drove past the fire hydrant.

Or, necessary again: They drove past the aquamarine fire hydrant.

What an unusual color for a fire hydrant! Perhaps this is a doorway to other, equally discolored objects throughout the city. Perhaps the road paint is green, the stop signs are indigo, and the streetlights shine like spider's silk in moonlight.

Of course, this doesn't apply just to colors. Adjectives can be used in any of the following ways:

- Physical traits: furry, soft, lukewarm, etc.
- Emotional traits: happy, excited, suspicious, etc.
- Quantities: three flowers, six moons, two roommates, etc.
- Comparison: the tastier drink, the ugliest house, the hottest day, etc.

Overuse of adjectives leads to a muddy, overemphatic style that, in extreme cases, feels like the writer is having readers' experience for them:

Muddy: We savored the cool creamy white-and-red strawberry milkshakes, an almost sinfully delicious relief on a sweltering midsummer July day. Consider which adjectives really matter for *the reader's own* experience:

Better: We enjoyed strawberry milkshakes in the July heat.

Let your nouns do most of the work and bring in the occasional adjective to help paint a more vivid picture.

Writers need adjectives more frequently than they need adverbs, but don't overuse them: hopefully, fewer than half of your nouns will carry adjectival modifiers. Let your nouns do most of the work and bring in the occasional adjective to help paint a more vivid picture.

6. ONE IDEA PER SENTENCE

In *ye olde days* of classic literature, writers often wrote sprawling sentences that covered a wide range of images or ideas without pause. Just take a look at the opening sentence of *A Tale of Two Cities*:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

These are classic lines in Western literature, and they work partly because their chaos and jumble nicely mirror the chaos and jumble of the French Revolution. However, we strongly encourage you *not* to write this way unless you've got an extremely good reason. To juxtapose numerous big concepts in a breathless jumble worked for Dickens in this instance, but it's much less likely to work for modern sensibilities, and even here it makes for confusing and almost overwhelming reading.

The key word is “breathless”: in prose like the above there’s no chance for us, as readers, to collect our thoughts. This is where “one idea per sentence” comes in as good advice.

Let’s take a sentence that says too many things and see how we might rework it.

Confusing: The car’s totaled; you’ll never fix it, and even if you could I don’t know how that helps me find work since no one’s hiring, not since the bauxite mine closed.

Easier to read, but now choppy: The car’s totaled. You’ll never fix it. Even if you could, I don’t know how that helps me find work. No one’s hiring, not since the bauxite mine closed.

Clearer: The car’s totaled; you’ll never fix it. Even if you could, how does that help me find work? No one’s hiring, not since the bauxite mine closed.

The reworked example above takes care *not* to chain together choppy declarative sentences—which can be one risk of overapplying a “one idea per sentence” style—and manages to convey each core idea with more clarity and focus.

7. AVOID QUALIFYING SENTENCES

Qualifying sentences exist to modify another sentence, adding contributing details. They often end up adding needless words.

Wordy: Clifford is a dog. He is big and red.

Concise: Clifford is a big red dog.

The wordy example above has a second sentence tacked awkwardly after the first sentence, providing information that the first sentence *could* provide.

In general, try to limit your use of qualifying sentences. Instead, combine descriptions into single sentences, and omit needless words from there.

8. DON’T OVERRELY ON AUXILIARY WORDS

Auxiliary words are “connective tissue” words. They don’t tell you the main information, but they help provide direction, clarifying the relationship between nouns and verbs. Most sentences require a little bit of connective tissue, but only write auxiliary words when needed; there are many opportunities for you to omit needless words here.

The following are types of auxiliary words:

- **Auxiliary verbs:** these are verbs which indicate action while also modifying the main verb of a sentence. In English, the main auxiliary verbs are *be*, *do*, and *have*. In the sentence “I can help you,” “can” is the auxiliary verb because it modifies “help,” the main verb. (“Help” is the main verb because it is the main action. “I can you” isn’t a sentence, but “I help you” is.)
- **Prepositions:** words that provide direction for verbs. These words indicate *how* a verb affects a noun. Some prepositions include: for, from, to, in, out, on, off, among, with, without, across, about, above, below, since, under, and through.
- **Conjunctions:** words that connect or separate nouns. The three conjunctions are “and,” “but,” and “or.”
- **Determiners:** These are words which exist solely to indicate something. Definite determiners include words like “that,” “these,” “who,” and “which.” (“A,” “an,” and “the” are articles, which is the “indirect” form of a determiner. Articles are grammatically necessary; non-articles are often optional.)
- **Pronouns:** these are words that stand in place for nouns. You should only use pronouns if the noun has already been used, and you should use them primarily for stylistic purposes—to avoid awkward repetitions or to write dialogue, for example. Some pronouns include: he, his, her, hers, they, theirs, who, your, and it.

Auxiliary word bonanza: My dragon has a tail that is very long and that stretches above my roof, and which could probably touch a passing jet if it was following a flight path that was passing low to the ground somewhere nearby us.

Better: My dragon’s long tail stretches above my roof and could probably touch a passing jet with a low flight plan.

Try to write sentences that are mostly nouns, verbs, and adjectives, and use auxiliary words when they are grammatically necessary or present crucial information.

9. LIMIT TURNS OF PHRASE

The English language has countless idioms, colloquial expressions, and vernaculars. In other words, turns of phrase—a great opportunity to omit needless words.

A turn of phrase is any sort of expression that the audience won't understand from context alone. The phrase means something that the words themselves don't denote, such as the phrase “under the weather,” which means “sick.”

Many figures of speech are both wordy and clichéd. Occasionally, you can work a figure of speech into something tongue-in-cheek, but often, using them in your writing simply substitutes others' generalities for your own specifics.

Clichéd: When he blew off our date, it only added fuel to the fire.

Better: I grew even angrier at him when he didn't show up for our date.

Here's a great list of [common idioms to avoid](#) for most English dialects. Turns of phrase simply don't carry the same weight that concise writing does, so let your words speak for themselves.

10. LIMIT THE USE OF FANCY WORDS

In general, this article advises using fewer words where possible, but this is certainly not an absolute rule. Simple multi-word phrases are often significantly clearer than obscure, esoteric words that say the same thing. Simple writing is more concise—in the sense that the reader can more easily glean meaning—even if it uses more words overall.

Too fancy: Clandestinely, Jordan lamented being the school's cynosure.

Readable: Secretly, Jordan regretted being the school's center of attention.

Although the “smart-sounding” sentence is concise, it's far from readable. And longer words often carry connotations you may not want:

“clandestinely” isn’t actually a great word choice in the first sentence above, because it usually means “secretive in the manner of professional spies” rather than “secretive in the manner of shy high school students.”

Concision means maximizing what we offer readers for their time and effort. Big words sometimes help with this: if we write “a clandestine meeting” rather than “a meeting conducted in an environment of secrecy,” we’ve helped our readers. But a habit of using big words runs counter to concision. Use “fancy” words sparingly when they illuminate something that simpler language cannot.

11. AVOID OVERSTATEMENT

Overstatement is any sort of excessive, superlative description. It’s not just a red car, it’s the *reddest car on the road*; it’s not just a warm day, but *the hottest day imaginable*.

Overstatement aims at maximum impact—but it actually reduces impact, by diminishing the writer’s legitimacy. It’s like someone who bangs the table after everything he says: can we take this person seriously? Is everything *that* emphatic?

Overwritten: My passion was all-consuming, surpassing, mind-numbing, a raging bonfire that engulfed the entire universe and collapsed all of reality into a single infinitely beguiling point: him.

Better: I felt overwhelming passion for him.

Hyperbole can be an effective [literary device](#). However, you should use superlative descriptions sparingly. The imagery in your writing should do the work for the reader, *showing* them the red car or hot day rather than *telling* them that it’s a huge deal.

ARE THESE CONCISE WRITING TIPS UNIVERSAL?

In other words, should you abide by all of these tips, all the time? *Not at all*. Writers break the rules all the time, testing the barriers of language and

meaning. However, in order for us to break the rules, we must first learn the rules.

And our rule-breaking should be within an overall goal of best using the reader's time and attention—which is what concise writing and “omit needless words” is all about. That's not a rule worth breaking.