Writing Concisely

At some point in your educational career, you've probably received feedback on a paper that says something like "too wordy" or "be more concise." Being concise can be a difficult task, in part because concision is difficult to

> "I didn't have time to write a short letter, so I wrote a long one instead." – Mark Twain

explain or define. The Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL) describes it as such: "The goal of concise writing is to use the most effective words. Concise writing does not always have the fewest words, but it always uses the strongest ones." Here are a few tips to keep in mind that will help you write more concisely:

Write meaningfully. Eliminate meaningless words and phrases.

Wordy student papers are often cluttered with pointless filler words and phrases, like "I think," "I believe," "really," "very," "basically," etc. When crafting a sentence, you can be more concise by ensuring that every word has a key meaning that contributes to the sentence. A good test: if you can remove a word without altering the meaning of the sentence, do it!

> *Wordy*: I think that basically we need to use fewer words, or our papers will really be much too long.

> *Concise*: We need to use fewer words, or our papers will be too long.

> *Too far*: We need words, or our papers will be long.

In the third example, the meaning of the sentence has been altered. It is no longer about using fewer words, but rather about the existence of words themselves—not a very logical point. The writing is thus not more concise, but merely shorter.

Shorten long phrases.

Oftentimes, lengthy phrases can be expressed in one or two words. In the same way that meaningless words can be eliminated, long phrases that have a simple meaning can usually be reduced to a single word that carries the same meaning. The chart below gives several examples of such substitutions. Words in parentheses indicate a change in form or structure that accompanies the replacement.

Wordy	*Concise*
Because of the fact that, Due to the fact that	Because
In the event that	If
For the purpose of (writing)	To (write)
In order to	To
It is necessary that (we write)	(We) must (write)

Write confidently. Eliminate hesitation and doubt.

When people are unsure of how to express their thoughts, or when they lack conviction in their ideas, they typically spend a lot of unnecessary time (and words) getting to the point. They throw in filler words to buy themselves time to figure out what they want to say. Don't be afraid to commit to your ideas. Besides reducing wordiness, you will also sound more confident and thus more competent. Keep in mind, however, that you cannot state something as fact if it is unknown!

"circumlocution": the use of many words where fewer would do, especially in a deliberate attempt to be vague or evasive

> *Hesitant*: It is possible that one of the potential causes of the dam breaking may have been that there were unusually heavy rains recently, which could have raised the water levels to a point that may have been beyond what the dam could withstand.

> *Confident*: The unusually heavy rains recently may have raised the water levels to a point beyond what the dam could withstand, which would explain the dam breaking.

Combine sentences that are short or repetitive.

When describing something, it is easy to put each piece of new information into its own sentence. The result is usually several short sentences that are structurally similar. Not only does this approach make your writing longer, it also makes reading it tedious. These sentences can be combined by presenting new information in the form of adjectives, or a short descriptive clause, which shortens the text and eliminates repetitiveness.

> *Tedious*: Barack Obama is serving as the current president of the United States. He is the first African American president of the United States. He has also won a Nobel Prize.

> *Concise*: Nobel Prize winner Barack Obama is currently serving as the first African American president of the United States.

For more tips on conciseness, check out the resources listed below.

Works Consulted

Hurm, Nick and Ryan Weber. "Conciseness." *Purdue Online Writing Lab*. Purdue University, 2013. Web.

Writing Center Handouts. "Writing Concisely." *The Writing Center*. University of North Carolina, 2014. Web.