

The Writing Center @ KUMC

WORDINESS

Why is it so hard to be concise in writing? Why is it so easy to be wordy? There probably isn't one answer, since every writer is different and always needs to develop skills and knowledge. Being wordy isn't a sin, as someone has said, but it is a way of self-expression. One that often comes at a cost.

Wordiness is especially vexing in medical, nursing, and allied health professions writing. These areas need to be concise (meaning in a few words) and clear (free from ambiguity or encumbrance). No reader wants to work through run-ons, strings of prepositions, and impenetrable blocks of nouns. This is not to say that long sentences don't belong in scientific/technical prose. There's a time and place for everything. But a style that lacks a focus or talks around content rather than come straight to the heart of the matter feels wasteful, excessive, or annoying.

Here are seven strategies to use when you **write** and especially when you **revise**.

1. Be Simple & Direct

When you begin a first draft, use simple declarative sentences. Convey info or ideas as plainly as possible. You can always revise for sophistication or complexity later.

2. Break It Down

When you need to convey complex info/ideas, use multiple sentences to break it down into small chunks for the reader. Again, revise to address any issues.

3. Eliminate Words

There's a range of unnecessary words we unconsciously or uncritically use that can be cut. These are "qualifiers" such as "actually," "basically," and "somewhat." There are other unneeded words called "modifiers": a word, phrase, or clause that gives information about another word, phrase, or clause in the same sentence. Modifiers appear at the beginning or end of sentences.

Example: “After consulting a number of current studies, research in this area has been sparse.” [This is a *dangling* modifier because “after consulting” doesn’t modify “research.”]

Revision: “After consulting a number of current studies, we determined that research in this area has been sparse.” [The subject “we” is modified by “consulting.”]

4. Change Negatives to Affirmatives

In the negative form, sentences usually require more words. Readers will either stumble over them or gloss over the meaning. In either case, negatives may be unnecessary and likely redundant.

Example: Included in this policy are guidelines not included in previous policies.

Revision: Included in this policy are guidelines omitted from prior standards.

5. Use the Active Voice

The active voice usually uses less words than the passive voice. While there are good reasons to use the passive (e.g., when the person/thing doing some action is not known), the active conveys info quickly and clearly.

6. Know Your Focus

Whether you use an outline or idea map, a clear idea of your topic will help to eliminate wordiness. It also helps to ask questions as you draft/revise to keep you focused on the true topic. While most biomedical topics are complex, any good piece of writing should have a single focus from start to finish.

7. Know Your Audience

Many writers become verbose and unfocused because they are talking to themselves or to no one in particular. Always identify who you are writing to and for, e.g., an expert audience or a general audience. Think about your purpose, who is interested in the topic, your view of the topic, and what you want to accomplish. When you know your audience (and there can be more than one), you will avoid most of the pitfalls that lead to wordiness.

Though it’s not listed as a strategy, **reading good prose** should be one of your habits. Find material with strong writing! Incorporate as many lessons as you can!