10 Techniques for Concise Writing

It’s a fact: Long, wordy writing annoys and frustrates readers. It makes them work too hard to find the essential message. Here are 10 techniques for pleasing your readers with concise yet clear communications.

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1. Cut unnecessary words.
Many words we use in conversation are not necessary, but they don’t distract from our message because our tone of voice complements them. Those same words get in our readers’ way.

Can you spot the unnecessary words in these sentences?

- We will be meeting on Monday morning at 10 a.m.
- We get together to share our ideas on a quarterly basis.

These shorter sentences communicate the same messages with no loss of clarity:

- We will meet on Monday at 10 a.m.
- We get together to share ideas quarterly.

Tip: When you finish a piece, read it in search of words that add nothing to the tone or meaning.

2. Cut introductory words unless your readers need them.
Opening phrases dull the impact of these sentences:

- It is a known fact that reviewing lessons increases learning retention.
- It goes without saying that Margery is an excellent webmaster.

3. Choose shorter words.
Although these sentences have the same word count, readers plod through one of them and skate through the other:

Condense your documents by eliminating unnecessary verbiage.

Shrink your writing by cutting extra words.

4. Say things just once.
In speech, we often say things two different ways to make a point. In writing, that habit leads to redundancy:

I would like to be a more concise writer, to use fewer words in my writing.

The consultant must be dependable, someone we can rely on.

5. Use fewer examples.
You can make a strong argument with one or two powerful examples. Including additional weak examples adds only length—not strength.

Tip: Feel free to include lots of examples, benefits, and reasons in the first draft of your document. Then edit, asking yourself which of those are weighty evidence and which are just extra weight.

6. In instructions, avoid using transitional phrases to connect steps.
Each step should stand on its own. For example, the opening clauses in Steps 4 and 5 should be cut:

Step 4. Once you have completed Step 3, reboot the computer.
Step 5. When you have rebooted, log in using your new password.
7. Avoid repeating phrases.
Structure your bullet points so they start with fresh content, not repeated words.

This 24-word list is repetitive:
- We need to approve the artwork for the postcards.
- We need to laminate the posters.
- We must decide which materials to distribute to visitors.

This 19-word list is concise:
We need to:
- Approve the artwork for the postcards.
- Laminate the posters.
- Decide which materials to distribute to visitors.

8. Use headings rather than sentences for content that works in a column format.
Wordy paragraph version:
The conference center coordinator is Sylvia Hernandez. Her office is in the Lake Street Building on the second floor. You may email her at sylvia.hernandez@ourcompany.com or phone her at Ext. 2040.

Concise heading format:
Conference Center Coordinator: Sylvia Hernandez
Office: Lake Street Building, 2nd floor
Email: sylvia.hernandez@ourcompany.com
Phone: Ext. 2040

Concise format without headings when content is obvious:

9. Use tables and charts rather than paragraphs.
Tables and charts can communicate data instantly. That same data communicated in words could require several dull sentences. Although a table or chart takes time to create, it saves time for readers.

For an amazing variety of formatting options, see the Periodic Table of Visualization Methods at http://www.visual-literacy.org/periodic_table/periodic_table.html

10. Cut whole chunks of text that are not important to your readers.
Things that seem important to you may not interest your readers. Think twice about paragraphs of background, history, implementation steps, explanations, and closing summaries. When you read through such paragraphs, ask “So what?” If the content is not important to your readers, cut it.

Bonus technique: Link to additional information rather than including it in full.
Rather than writing more about conciseness, I am including links to relevant blog posts. The links appear at the bottom of the page (to avoid line breaks that would break the links).

1. Write Concisely? Just Do It!
2. Sixty-Four Thousand Dollar ($64,000) Question
3. Starting Off on the Wrong Foot

Enjoy saying more with less!