

Cutting Sentence Length

Wordy sentences are a problem for several reasons: 1) they make your writing seem “waffly” or empty of content; 2) they make your arguments less clear; 3) they add to your assignment length when length is an important consideration. It is always good to eliminate “wordiness” (otherwise known as redundancy).

What is redundancy?

“Wordiness” is the opposite of being brief, concise or succinct. Being succinct, brief or concise means using the minimum number of words to effectively convey an idea. This is a common flaw in student writing. Try not to hide your points in unnecessary wordiness or “waffle”. Consider the two examples below. Which is more concise?

- Productivity actually depends on certain factors that basically involve psychology more than any particular technology.
- *Productivity depends more on psychology than on technology.*

A good strategy is to use the “paramedic method” (Lanham, *Revising Prose*, 1979). This is a set of steps for eliminating redundant or “wordy” sentences.

The Paramedic Method

1. Underline the prepositions (*of, in, about, for, onto, into, between, as*)
2. Bold the verb forms (i.e., action words)
3. Ask, “Where’s the action?” in the sentence
4. Change the “action” into a simple main verb (e.g., “has been required” to “requires”)
5. Move the doer into the subject position at the start of the sentence (“Who’s kicking whom in the sentence?” i.e., who or what is performing the action?)
6. Eliminate any unnecessary slow wind-ups, e.g., introductory phrases that carry no meaning.
7. Eliminate any redundancies (flabby, “woolly” words that add nothing).

Example 1

*The point I **wish to** make is that the employees **working at** this company are **in need of** a much better manager **of** their money.*

1. Where’s the action? (the action is “need” in this example. The other verbs are less important)
2. Simplify the verb (“need” is already a simple verb)
3. Who’s kicking who (subject)? (It is “Employees at this company”)
4. Eliminate windups and redundancy (these are “struck through” below)

~~*The point I **wish to** make is that the employees **working at** this company are **in need of** a much better manager **of** their money.*~~

Becomes:

Employees at this company need a better money manager.

Example 2:

*It **is** widely known that the engineers at Sandia Labs **have become** active participants in the Search and Rescue teams operations in recent years.*

1. Where's the action? (have become active participants)
2. Simplify verb (participated)
3. Who's kicking who (subject)? (engineers)
4. Eliminate windups and redundancy

Recently, engineers at Sandia Labs participated in Search and Rescue operations.

Example 3:

***By applying** the assumption, the interpretation of the cavity expansion scenario in the pressure meter tests **can be described as** two expansion models*

1. Where's the action? (can be described)
2. Simplify verb (describe)
3. Who's kicking who (subject)? (The expansion models)
4. Eliminate windups and redundancy

*In this example is it clearer to **make a second sentence** (this can be added to the 'method')

The pressure meter tests describe two expansion models. This is based on the interpretation of the cavity expansion scenario.

Now do the following exercises yourself. Answers are at the bottom of the page.

*Exercise 1: The future of those **engaged in** studies at the postgraduate level, **seeking** advanced degrees from institutions of higher education, in regards to prospects for desirable employment in teaching positions at best **does not have** a high degree of certainty.*

1. Where's the action? (does not have a high degree of certainty)
2. Simplify verb (is/are [not])
3. Who's kicking who (subject)? (those currently undertaking a postgraduate qualification)
4. Eliminate windups and redundancy

*Exercise 2: Notwithstanding the fact that all legal restrictions on the use of firearms **are** the subject of heated debate and argument, it is necessary that the general public **not stop carrying on discussing** the pros and cons in regard to them.*

1. Where's the action? (not stop carrying on discussing)
2. Simplify verb (should discuss)
3. Who's kicking who (subject)? (the general public)
4. Eliminate windups and redundancy

R. A. Lantham (2000, originally published 1979) *Revising Prose*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Exercise 2: The general public should discuss the pros and cons of firearms despite legal restrictions.

Exercise 1: Those currently undertaking a postgraduate qualification, and seeking a teaching career, are unlikely to get a job. OR: (passive form) It is not certain that those currently undertaking a postgraduate qualification, and seeking a teaching career, will get a job.

