



Douglas College

Douglas College Learning Centre

AVOIDING WORDINESS

In both academic and business writing, conciseness is important. Concise writing expresses ideas without unnecessary wordiness. Wordiness not only increases the length of your work without adding meaning, but also makes your writing harder to understand.

When you write the first draft of a paper, it is probably wordy. This is a natural result of trying to get your ideas down clearly on paper, and it happens to even very experienced writers. When you are drafting a paper, you shouldn't worry about wordiness. Instead, you should solve wordiness problems later at the editing stage of the writing process.

This handout shows you how to recognize wordiness and how to revise your writing to be more concise.

Wordiness and How to Correct It

The following sentence is wordy. What words could you take away without losing any of the meaning of the sentence?

The reason why he came to Douglas College was because it was inexpensive in price.

The words *reason*, *why*, and *because* all express the same idea.

Saying something is *inexpensive* includes the idea of *price*.

A more concise version of the sentence might be:

He came to Douglas College because it was inexpensive.

Here's another example of wordiness:

Despite the fact that she was feeling ill, she came to the conclusion that she would go to work.

Despite the fact that is really just a long way of saying *despite*.

Came to the conclusion that is a long way of saying *decided*.

A more concise version of the sentence is:

Despite feeling ill, she decided to go to work.

Now, compare the following pair of sentences. Why can the extra words in the first sentence be left out?

In my opinion, I think the study of Sociology is very fascinating.

Sociology is fascinating.

In my opinion and *I think* just repeat the same idea, so we could take one out. However, *fascinating* is clearly a judgement, so there is no need to include either *I think* or *In my opinion*.

Sociology includes the idea of studying it, so *the study of* is redundant. **Redundant** is a word writing teachers use to describe unnecessary repetition.

Fascinating can be defined as very interesting, so adding *very* is unnecessary.

Concise writing avoids wordiness and redundancy; it is clearer and more interesting for a reader. Work through the exercises in this handout and discuss your answers with your tutor.

Exercise 1: Omitting unnecessary words

Cross out the unnecessary words in the following sentences.

Example:

The children were tired and exhausted after the long climb to the high top of the mountain.

1. The stegosaurus was huge in size.
2. Now she is at school.
3. He was happy and joyful about the great gift.
4. Because of the fact that he got a good grade on the midterm, he decided to take the night off.
5. In the summer season, many Vancouverites like to picnic in Stanley Park.
6. On January 14, in the middle of winter, the weather was freezing cold.
7. I think smoking in public places should be banned.
8. In order to get the true facts of the case, the lawyer interviewed 4 witnesses.
9. Furthermore, Henry VIII also married six different women.
10. Redundancy is defined as unnecessary repetition.
11. New Westminster, which was British Columbia's first capital city, is located on the shores of the Fraser River.
12. The computer is sitting on top of the table.

Causes of Wordiness

Besides redundancy, there are some common issues causing wordiness. If you watch for these issues, you can recognize wordiness more easily. Compare the wordy (W) examples below to the more concise (C) examples. Discuss the differences with your tutor. Don't let the grammatical terminology throw you. What's important is to see the differences between the wordy and concise examples.

Use of vague words which need explanation instead of precise words

W: She talked to him in a loud angry voice.

C: She yelled at him.

W: The crime wave had some bad results that cost people a lot of money.

C: The crime wave had some costly results.

Use of long expressions instead of individual words

W: to come to the conclusion that

C: to decide

W: to put forward the idea that

C: to suggest

Under-use of listing

W: She went to the store and bought a loaf of bread. She also picked up some milk. She also got a newspaper.

C: She bought a loaf of bread, some milk and a newspaper at the store.

W: In the experiment, he poured water in a beaker. Then he boiled the water for 5 minutes. Then he measured the water that was left.

C: In the experiment, he poured water in a beaker, boiled the water for 5 minutes, and measured the water that was left.

If you have problems listing correctly, see the Learning Centre handout titled "Parallelism".

Over-use of passive verbs

W: The criminal was caught by the police, and later the criminal

was convicted by the courts.

C: The police caught the criminal and the court convicted him.

If you need help to better understand the use of active and passive voice, see the Learning Centre handout “Passive Voice”.

Over-use of prepositional phrases

(for example phrases that begin with words like in, at, on, with..)

W: In Edmonton in Alberta at 11:00 p.m. in the evening on the first of June, the northern lights gave a wonderful show to people.

C: In Edmonton, Alberta at 11:00 p.m., June 1, the northern lights gave people a wonderful show.

If you need help to better understand prepositional phrases see Langan, J. Sentence Skills(1st Canadian Edition). p.13 - 14

Over-use of “it” and “there” as meaningless subjects

W: It was exciting to go to the New Year celebrations.

C: The New Year celebrations were exciting.

W: There were thirty-four people in the room who were waiting for the mayor.

C: Thirty-four people in the room were waiting for the mayor.

Over-use of clauses

W: After she had baked the bread, she cleaned up the kitchen.
clause

C: After baking the bread, she cleaned up the kitchen.
phrase

W: McKenzie, who was the first person to cross Canada by land,
clause
ended his trip in Bella Coola, B.C.

C: McKenzie, the first person to cross Canada by land, ended his trip in
phrase
Bella Coola, B.C.

W: The girl who was talented gave a concert.
clause

C: The talented girl gave a concert.
word

Exercise 2: Recognizing wordiness

Put a "W" beside sentences that are wordy. Put a "C" beside sentences that are concise.

1. ____ Barkerville was one of the towns which was established because gold was found nearby.
2. ____ The town was founded by Billy Barker, the first miner to find quantities of gold in large amounts in the area.
3. ____ In the 1870's, Barkerville was the biggest city north of San Francisco and east of Chicago.
4. ____ Barkerville was good with lots of facilities such as a church, a library and a theatre.
5. ____ Several years after the town was founded, it was abandoned. The reason why the town was abandoned was that the gold ran out.
6. ____ When deciding what kind of computer to buy, you need to take your uses for the computer into account. You also need to consider your budget.
7. ____ There are some people who only use computers to do word processing.
8. ____ Some other people have a wide variety of uses for a computer.
9. ____ Computer games use a lot of memory, so if you want to play games on the computer, you should buy one which has a lot of RAM.
10. ____ A good way to begin computer shopping is to list your uses for the computer.

Exercise 3: Revising wordy sentences

Rewrite the following sentences to be more concise.

1. Terry Fox is perhaps one of Canada's greatest modern heroes because of the fact that he did something amazing even though he was disabled and had lost his leg.

2. Terry Fox was born in 1958 in Winnipeg in Manitoba.

3. At the age of 19 years old, Fox was diagnosed by doctors as having an unusually rare form of bone cancer.

4. Doctors decided that they had to amputate most of one of his legs to stop the cancer from spreading to other parts of his body.

5. While he was recovering from the amputation, Fox came up with the idea of the "Marathon of Hope", which he hoped would help him to make a lot of money for cancer research so that cancer could be cured.

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6. He began his run in St. John's in Newfoundland which he started on April 12 in the spring of 1980.

7. He ran at a pace of nearly 40 km. per day and had run 5373 km. when he got to Thunder Bay, Ontario. Thunderbay is a small city in western Ontario.

8. When he was there in Thunderbay, cancer was discovered in his lungs so he ended up having to end his run there in Ontario.

9. It was an inspiration to a lot of millions of people when Fox with his great bravery and devotion to his cause did his great run.

10. With his run, he encouraged Canadian people to contribute money, almost \$25 million dollars, for cancer research so that researchers could look for a cure for cancer.

11. In the end, Fox died in New Westminster in June of 1981, but he has in no way been forgotten.

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12. A mountain in B.C. was named after him, and a high school in B.C. was named after him, too.

13. Every year, cities across Canada hold Terry Fox runs which are named after him and the money is put into cancer research.

14. Another important legacy is the way Fox didn't let his disability get him down; that perhaps is the biggest hope which his marathon provided for many people who suffer from disabilities of all kinds.

Exercise 4: Revising a wordy paragraph

Underline the wordy parts of the following paragraph. Then re-write the paragraph on a separate page. Reduce the wordiness, but be sure you include all the information from the original. Count how many words are in the revised version. Compare the word counts of the original and revised versions.

Canada in Space

Canada does not send space shuttles and rockets into space, so for that reason people tend to forget that Canada has made very significant contributions to space exploration. Because of its large size, Canada has specialized in satellite communications technology. In 1962, Canada became the third country in the world to have a satellite in orbit when it launched Alouette 1 in the early sixties. The Alouette 1 satellite was followed in 1972 by the Anik A-1 satellite which provided coast-to-coast across Canada telephone services. Furthermore, Canada has developed important tools for operating in space like the Canadarm. It was developed first in 1981. The Canadarm is a mechanical robotic arm used by astronauts on the American space shuttle. Canada has also provided the space industry with people to go into space. The first Canadian astronaut was Marc Garneau, who was an astronaut who did research on the space shuttle. A more recent Canadian astronaut is Julie Payette who went into space on the space shuttle in June of 1999. These contributions to the world of the space industry are important ones and should not be forgotten. (187 words)

Exercise 5: Revising a more difficult wordy paragraph

Underline the wordy parts of the following paragraph. Then re-write the paragraph on a separate page. Eliminate the wordiness, but be sure you include all the information from the original. Count how many words are in the revised version. Compare the word counts of the original and revised versions.

The Foot-in-the-Door Technique

Psychologists have identified a number of techniques which are aimed at helping people to persuade others of something. One of these techniques is the “foot-in-the-door” technique. The idea behind the “foot-in-the-door technique” is that if you get someone to do something small for you, they will be more likely to do something bigger for you than if you had started with the request for the bigger thing first. In a pioneering study, researchers went door-to-door and pretended to be members of a non-profit service organization. The researchers asked two groups of people to put a large ugly unattractive sign which said “Drive Carefully” in their front yards. Members of one of the groups of people had been approached previously by different researchers who asked them to perform one of a number of lesser tasks. For example, they were asked to sign a petition which urged politicians to work to get safe driving legislation to make driving safer. Members of the other group of people were being approached by the researchers for the first time. As you might expect, the people who had already expressed a willingness to do the smaller task responded a lot more favorably to the second request than people who had not already been approached on the issue beforehand. Over 55 per cent of those people who had agreed to the initial small request agreed to post the ugly sign, and less than 17 per cent of those who were being approached for the first time agreed to put up the sign. Since this first initial study, other investigators have been examining what kind of initial request is most likely to lead to people complying with the bigger request. Some of the theorists suggest that an initial request only has a real effect on the later request if the initial request changes people’s perceptions about themselves. For example, in the initial study, after complying with the first request, people may

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have seen themselves as “doers”, out to improve driving in their communities. As a result, the second request did not ask them to change their self-concepts; it just asked them to put their preformed self-concepts as “doers” into action. Psychologists’ work on the “foot-in-the-door” technique has been used very widely by people who want to sell things to others. (382 words)

Exercise 6: Revising your own writing

For this exercise, you will revise some of your own writing.

1. Find a paragraph you have written that seems wordy. Alternatively, write a paragraph now about the reasons you chose to come to Douglas College. As you write, don’t worry about wordiness; that is a concern best left until after you have the ideas on paper.
2. Revise the paragraph to increase its conciseness.
3. Rewrite the paragraph on a separate page. Compare the word counts of the original and revised versions.

Conclusion

An important part of your editing process should be to revise your writing to make it more concise. Avoiding wordiness allows you to include a lot of information and ideas in your written work. It makes your writing not only easier to understand but also more interesting.

For more practice, see:

Conrad, R. (1989). *Process and practice: the Canadian writing workbook*. (3rd ed). Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson. p. 46-64.

Fawcett, S. and Sandberg, A. (1992). *Evergreen* (4th edition). Toronto: Houghton Mifflin p. 219-223.

Fawcett, S. and Sandberg, A. (1994). *Grassroots*. Toronto: Houghton Mifflin. p. 26-28.

Hefferman, J. and Lincoln, J. (1982). *Writing: a college handbook*. New York: Norton p. 144-149.

Langan, J. and Winstanley, S. (1997). *Sentence skills: a workbook for writers* (1st Canadian edition). Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson. p. 241-248.