Strategies for Variation

Adding sentence variety to prose can give it life and rhythm. Too many sentences with the same structure and length can grow monotonous for readers. Varying sentence style and structure can also reduce repetition and add emphasis. Long sentences work well for incorporating a lot of information, and short sentences can often maximize crucial points. These general tips may help add variety to similar sentences.

**1. Vary the rhythm by alternating short and long sentences.**

Several sentences of the same length can make for bland writing. To enliven paragraphs, write sentences of different lengths. This will also allow for effective emphasis.

**Example**:

The Winslow family visited Canada and Alaska last summer to find some Native American art. In Anchorage stores they found some excellent examples of soapstone carvings. But they couldn't find a dealer selling any of the woven wall hangings they wanted. They were very disappointed when they left Anchorage empty-handed.

**Revision**:

The Winslow family visited Canada and Alaska last summer to find some native American art, such as soapstone carvings and wall hangings. Anchorage stores had many soapstone items available. Still, they were disappointed to learn that wall hangings, which they had especially wanted, were difficult to find. Sadly, they left empty-handed.

**Example**:

Many really good blues guitarists have all had the last name King. They have been named Freddie King and Albert King and B.B. King. The name King must make a bluesman a really good bluesman. The bluesmen named King have all been very talented and good guitar players. The claim that a name can make a guitarist good may not be that far-fetched.

**Revision**:

What makes a good bluesman? Maybe, just maybe, it's all in a stately name. B.B. King. Freddie King. Albert King. It's no coincidence that they're the royalty of their genre. When their fingers dance like court jesters, their guitars gleam like scepters, and their voices bellow like regal trumpets, they seem almost like nobility. Hearing their music is like walking into the throne room. They really are kings.

**2. Vary sentence openings.**

If too many sentences start with the same word, especially *The*, *It*, *This*, or *I*, prose can grow tedious for readers, so changing opening words and phrases can be refreshing. Below are alternative openings for a fairly standard sentence. Notice that different beginnings can alter not only the structure but also the emphasis of the sentence. They may also require rephrasing in sentences before or after this one, meaning that one change could lead to an abundance of sentence variety.

**Example**:

The biggest coincidence that day happened when David and I ended up sitting next to each other at the Super Bowl.

**Possible Revisions**:

* Coincidentally, David and I ended up sitting right next to each other at the Super Bowl.
* In an amazing coincidence, David and I ended up sitting next to each other at the Super Bowl.
* Sitting next to David at the Super Bowl was a tremendous coincidence.
* But the biggest coincidence that day happened when David and I ended up sitting next to each other at the Super Bowl.

## Concision

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. Writers often fill sentences with weak or unnecessary words that can be deleted or replaced. Words and phrases should be deliberately chosen for the work they are doing. Like bad employees, words that don't accomplish enough should be fired. When only the most effective words remain, writing will be far more concise and readable.

#### 1. Replace several vague words with more powerful and specific words.

Often, writers use several small and ambiguous words to express a concept, wasting energy expressing ideas better relayed through fewer specific words. As a general rule, more specific words lead to more concise writing. Because of the variety of nouns, verbs, and adjectives, most things have a closely corresponding description. Brainstorming or searching a thesaurus can lead to the word best suited for a specific instance. Notice that the examples below actually convey more as they drop in word count.

**Wordy**: The politician talked **about several of the merits of** after-school programs in his speech

(14 words)

**Concise**: The politician **touted** after-school programs in his speech.

(8 words)

**Wordy**: Suzie **believed but could not confirm** that Billy **had feelings of affection for** her.

(14 words)

**Concise**: Suzie **assumed** that Billy **adored** her.

(6 words)

**Wordy**: Our Web site **has made available** **many of the things you can use** **for making a decision on** the best dentist.

(20 words)

**Concise**: Our website **presents** **criteria** **for determining** the best dentist.

(9 words)

**Wordy**: Working as a **pupil under someone who develops photos** was an experience **that really helped me learn a lot**.

(20 words)

**Concise**: Working as a **photo technician's apprentice** was an **educational** experience.

(10 words)

#### 2. Interrogate every word in a sentence

Check every word to make sure that it is providing something important and unique to a sentence. If words are dead weight, they can be deleted or replaced. Other sections in this handout cover this concept more specifically, but there are some general examples below containing sentences with words that could be cut.

**Wordy**: The teacher demonstrated some of the various ways and methods for cutting words from my essay that I had written for class.

(22 words)

**Concise**: The teacher demonstrated methods for cutting words from my essay.

(10 words)

**Wordy**: Eric Clapton and Steve Winwood formed a new band of musicians together in 1969, giving it the ironic name of Blind Faith because early speculation that was spreading everywhere about the band suggested that the new musical group would be good enough to rival the earlier bands that both men had been in, Cream and Traffic, which people had really liked and had been very popular.

(66 words)

**Concise**: Eric Clapton and Steve Winwood formed a new band in 1969, ironically naming it Blind Faith because speculation suggested that the group would rival the musicians’ previous popular bands, Cream and Traffic.

(32 words)

**Wordy**: Many have made the wise observation that when a stone is in motion rolling down a hill or incline that that moving stone is not as likely to be covered all over with the kind of thick green moss that grows on stationary unmoving things and becomes a nuisance and suggests that those things haven’t moved in a long time and probably won’t move any time soon.

(67 words)

**Concise**: A rolling stone gathers no moss.

(6 words)

#### 3. Combine Sentences.

Some information does not require a full sentence, and can easily be inserted into another sentence without losing any of its value. To get more strategies for sentence combining, see the handout on [**Sentence Variety**](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/academic_writing/sentence_variety/index.html).

**Wordy**: Ludwig's castles are an astounding marriage of beauty and madness. By his death, he had commissioned **three castles**.

(18 words)

**Concise**: Ludwig's **three castles** are an astounding marriage of beauty and madness.

(11 words)

**Wordy**: The supposed crash of a UFO in Roswell, New Mexico aroused interest in extraterrestrial life. This crash is rumored to have occurred in **1947**.

(24 words)

**Concise**: The supposed **1947** crash of a UFO in Roswell, New Mexico aroused interest in extraterrestrial life.

(16 words)

# Conciseness for Better Composition

In speech or writing, the term conciseness refers to language that's brief and to the point. To be effective, concise writing must deliver a clear message using an economy of words. Concise writing doesn't waste time with [circumlocution](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-circumlocution-1689843), [padding](https://www.thoughtco.com/padding-composition-term-1691474), or [verbosity](https://www.thoughtco.com/directness-speech-and-writing-1690458). [Repetition](https://www.thoughtco.com/repetition-language-and-rhetoric-1691887), unnecessary jargon, and needless [details](https://www.thoughtco.com/detail-composition-term-1690382) are to be avoided. When you minimize [clutter](https://www.thoughtco.com/ways-to-cut-the-clutter-in-writing-1692721), readers are more likely to remain engaged, understand and remember your message—and even act on it, should that be your goal.

## Before You Start Writing

Whether you're tackling an article, essay, report, [composition](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-composition-english-1689893), or something in a fiction genre, such as a story or novel, the task of writing concisely begins as soon as your project starts. You must first narrow down your topic to bare bones in order to create what's known as a [thesis statement](https://www.thoughtco.com/thesis-statement-examples-and-instruction-1857566). This is a brief explanation that encapsulates the information, theme, or message you're hoping to convey. Even for fiction, having a clear statement of purpose can help keep you focused.

The second step prior to beginning your first draft is to flesh out your thesis with any necessary avenues of research or your story arc in the form of an organized [outline](https://www.thoughtco.com/outline-composition-term-1691364). Once you've got that, prioritize it by the most pertinent points and prune out anything that's not vital. By keeping only the most important ideas, you'll be able to target your writing and not waste time going off on unnecessary tangents. However, you may wish to keep deleted material for future reference.

## The First Drafting

Your priority in writing a first draft should be to get through it from start to finish. You should have already highlighted points you want to cover during the research and outlining phases. You don't have to write your draft in a linear format from beginning to end. Sometimes it's easier to start in the middle and then work your way back to the introduction. Some writers even start at the conclusion. Just remember that editing [clutter](https://www.thoughtco.com/practice-in-cutting-the-clutter-1692770)should be an ongoing process judiciously employed throughout the first draft—and beyond.

Once you've covered the main ground, review the draft to add in pertinent quotes, citations, or dialogue as needed. While the perfect quote from an article, essay, or other published work can save time when composing your narrative, you must be mindful of the ratio of quoted material or paraphrased sources to your own writing. For maximum impact, use only the most relevant quotes. When possible, summarize and paraphrase your research, always taking care to use proper source citations.

At the end of the day, the piece must be in your own words. Plagiarism is easily detected—especially in the digital age. You should also be aware that some editors and teachers will not include extensively quoted material in a final word count. That means if you have an assignment of 1,000 words, all but a very small percentage of those words must be original material.

## After the First Draft

When you're satisfied with the draft, take a break. You've accomplished something significant. And yes, the break is necessary because you'll need to come back to the piece with "fresh eyes" to see what can still be cut or if the work requires restructuring.

Author Elie Wiesel describes the process this way:

"Writing is not like painting where you add. It is not what you put on the canvas that the reader sees. Writing is more like a sculpture where you remove, you eliminate in order to make the work visible. Even those pages you remove somehow remain. There is a difference between a book of two hundred pages from the very beginning, and a book of two hundred pages, which is the result of an original eight hundred pages. The six hundred pages are there. Only you don’t see them."

## Big-Picture Revision

How much revision you'll need to do will depend on the length of your work and how closely you were able to follow your outline. Before making changes, take a step back and compare your thesis statement and outline to the draft, always keeping in mind the old adage, when it comes to concise writing, "less is more."

"Don't use any extra words. A [sentence](https://www.thoughtco.com/sentence-grammar-1692087) is like a machine; it has a job to do. An extra word in a sentence is like a sock in a machine."—From "Notes for Young Writers" by Annie Dillard

Ask yourself if you have sections, points, examples, or paragraphs that stray from your topic. If you do, does this material move the information or story forward? Will the reader still understand the point you're attempting to make if you delete it? For longer works, large-scale trimming of sections or chapters may be necessary. If you're lucky, however, you'll be able to start at the paragraph or sentence level.

Cutting on a large scale is something may writers have a problem with. As mentioned for the outline, it can be helpful to keep deleted material in a separate document that you can later refer to should the need arise. The excess material might even form the basis of a future piece of writing.

"[B]egin by pruning the big limbs. You can shake out the dead leaves later...Cut any passage that does not support your focus...Cut the weakest [quotations](https://www.thoughtco.com/quotation-prose-1691714), [anecdotes](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-anecdote-1689095), and scenes to give greater power to the strongest...Cut any passage you have written to satisfy a tough teacher or editor rather than the common reader...Don't invite others to cut. You know the work better. Mark optional trims. Then decide whether they should become actual cuts."—From "Writing Tools" by Roy Peter Clark

## Reducing Redundancy and Repetition

Once you've honed your message, you reach sentence-level editing. This is where the scissors and scalpel come in—and the hatchet goes back in the closet. Review each paragraph for instances in which you've said the same thing in multiple ways. This occurs fairly often when something has a difficult or explanation.

The solution is either to combine the best parts of redundant sentences or to start over and clarify the point you're trying to make. Don't be afraid to restructure sentences or to condense ideas. The more clearly and cleanly you write, the better your readers will comprehend your message. Look at the following example for reference:

* **Redundant:** The ability of different bird species to eat nuts and larger seeds depends on their beak style and shape. The form of the beak dictates function. The beaks of nut-eating birds must be powerful enough to break hulls and shaped to hold the food as the bird eats. Birds that eat mainly fruit or leaves may not be able to eat nuts due to their beaks being smaller and less forceful.
* **Revision:** Some birds can eat nuts and seeds, others can't. The deciding factor is the size and shape of their beaks. Nut- and seed-eating birds have powerful, curved beaks to hold food and crush hulls. Species that eat mainly fruit or leaves have smaller, weaker beaks.

### Fast Facts: 4 Rules for Concise Writing

1. Avoid jargon.
2. Keep it simple. The less flowery your prose, the more accessible will be.
3. Use shorter words instead of long ones when appropriate.
4. Edit out [empty phrases](https://www.thoughtco.com/ways-to-cut-the-clutter-in-writing-1692721) and delete [common redundancies](https://www.thoughtco.com/common-redundancies-in-english-1692776).

## More Ways to Cut Wordiness

One red flag for redundancy is sentences that are overly long. If you suspect something's overwritten, try reading it out loud. Does it sound awkward to the ear? Do you have to pause to take a breath? Does your meaning go off track? If the answer is yes, there are some things you can do to separate the wheat from the chaff:

* Can your sentence be understood without excess adjectives and adverbs? If so, delete them.
* Changing a verb can create a stronger image.
* Qualifiers and intensifiers—such as "very" and "extremely"—are usually just filler.
* While sometimes it's better to spell it all out, use contractions when you can. It sounds more conversational and less stilted. "That's just the way it is" is preferable to "That is just the way it is."
* Rephrase passive "there is/are" constructions. Eliminating "to be" verbs will make your sentences stronger.
* Cut extraneous instances of "there is" and "that." For example: "There is a rule on the books to cover appropriate fence styles for the homeowners' association" is not as clear or concise as "The homeowners' association rulebook covers appropriate fence styles."
* Review anything in parentheses or between dashes, which can sometimes send a reader off on a winding path. When possible, let the phrases stand alone as sentences.
* Break sentences of more than 25–30 words into smaller sentences.
* While there are exceptions, as a general rule, avoid using the [passive voice](https://www.thoughtco.com/passive-voice-in-english-grammar-1211144).

Look at the following example to see how some of these rules can be applied:

* **Wordy:** Following the author’s study of "The Naval Chronicle" (which goes into detail on the wars with Napoleon), a trip aboard a freighter from California to Central America, and his trip back home to England, the first book in the series was plotted.
* **Revision:**After studying "The Naval Chronicle," which details the Napoleonic Wars, the author took a freighter voyage from California to Central America. He plotted the first book in the series upon returning home to England.

Note that this extra-long sentence is bogged down with a parenthetical phrase in the middle of a series of items. It's also guilty of passive voice, consecutive prepositional phrases, and excessive verbiage. The information reads more clearly and is more easily understood when written as two sentences.

Appropriate Language: Overview

When writing, it is very important to use language that fits your audience and matches purpose. Inappropriate language uses can damage your credibility, undermine your argument, or alienate your audience. This handout will cover some of the major issues with appropriate language use: levels of language formality, deceitful language and euphemisms, slang and idiomatic expressions; using group-specific jargon; and biased/stereotypical language.

The following is a short overview of the different aspects of using appropriate language. Review the other sections of this handout for a more complete discussion.

1. **Levels of formality:** Writing in a style that your audience expects and that fits your purpose is key to successful writing.
2. **In-Group jargon:** Jargon refers to specialized language used by groups of like-minded individuals. Only use in-group jargon when you are writing for members of that group. You should never use jargon for a general audience without first explaining it.
3. **Slang and idiomatic expressions:** Avoid using slang or idiomatic expressions in general academic writing.
4. **Deceitful language and euphemisms:** Avoid using euphemisms (words that veil the truth, such as "collateral damage" for the unintended destruction of civilians and their property) and other deceitful language.
5. **Biased language:** Avoid using biased language including language with a racial, ethnic, group, or gender bias or language that is stereotypical.

### **Accuracy:  The reliability, truthfulness and correctness of the content**

* Where does the information come from?
* Is the information supported by evidence?
* Has the information been reviewed or refereed?
* Can you verify any of the information in another source or from personal knowledge?
* Does the language or tone seem unbiased and free of emotion?
* Are there spelling, grammar or typographical errors?

When you are quoting data or information in your work you must be confident that the information is accurate.  **You need to ask:**

* Is the information reliable and error-free?
* Is there an editor who verifies and/or checks the information?

**Why?**Because:

* Anyone can publish anything on the web!
* Unlike traditional print resources, many web resources will not have editors or fact-checkers.
* Currently, no web standards exist to ensure accuracy.

Indicators that peer-reviewed journal articles from databases like [**JSTOR**](http://www.jstor.org/), **[Questia School](http://www.questiaschool.com/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)**[,](http://www.questiaschool.com/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) and [**ProQuest**](http://search.proquest.com/?accountid=2996)will be accurate:

* Written by college and university scholars - professors, graduate students, and post-doctoral fellows.
* Published in scholarly journals that each have there own criteria for accepting articles for publication.
* Include in-text citations and references so the information can be verified.