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A short guide to writing concisely for Postgraduate Taught students

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Writing concisely

What is concise writing?

When you write at university, tutors expect you to write concisely, by which they mean something like “Getting your point across with as few words as possible, and with no unnecessary material.”

What do I need to focus on to make my writing more concise?

Use concise language, sentences and punctuation

Reduce wordiness. For example, “of paramount importance” simply means “important”.

Train yourself to improve your punctuation

Missing or misplaced punctuation can affect the clarity of your academic writing. If the tutor has to waste time making sense of your sentences, they will not concentrate on your ideas. If you are unclear about how to use commas, semicolons, and colons, look at the ASC publication Short Guide to Punctuation.

Always be aware of long sentences

Long sentences are more difficult to understand. There is no rule that says how long a sentence should be, and it is helpful to have a mixture of shorter sentences and longer ones. However, if the sentences are too long, your points will get lost. It is a good idea to be especially aware of:

- sentences with too many clauses
- fragments which do not have a subject and are therefore not actually sentences. In the following example, for instance, a sentence is followed by a fragment.

This project was “real life research”, and it formed part of a larger in-house study of patient and carer issues.

Which aimed to identify a range of unmet patient needs.

Not a sentence

Ensure that your structure is logical and easy to follow

This is a big topic. You might want to look at the ASC Short Guide to Essay Planning and Structure.

Edit objectively and rigorously

Editing is not a job to be just done once. It requires several stages. Here is a suggested strategy that clearly distinguishes between writing your work and then editing it. Editing is a completely separate process.

Three Stages

A Writing stage

B Editing stage

C Proofreading stage

A Writing stage

1st draft: You begin to express your ideas, organising them and putting them together under different section headings. The writing is rough because you need to work through what you think, what your argument is, what theoretical material you are going to use, and how it is going to be organised.

B Editing stage

2nd draft for overall direction:

Once you have made a rough draft, you can revise it to see that it matches your overall argument and topic and that each section carries your argument forward.

You are looking at the overall shape of your document, checking that it makes sense and that the sequence of your argument is clear and natural. Does it do what the briefing sheet asked you to do? Have you understood the marking criteria?

3rd draft for clarity and redundancy:

This focuses on the individual sections of your discussion. You will rewrite them as necessary, making sure that each section is totally clear and contains all the relevant material. Get rid of all irrelevant words and repetition (sometimes described as “redundancy”). This might be a good time for check for consistency in use of tenses and style.

C Proofreading stage

4th draft: You will be proof reading and checking for errors. You should also concentrate on grammatical mistakes and punctuation. You will be checking that all your references are correct and constructing your bibliography according to the requirements of your School.

Does all of the above seem a long process?

But you will find it is much more effective to go through your work systematically, fully focused on just one part of the writing and editing process at a time.

If you are up against word limits, you may need some special techniques. The ASC has produced a short guide called *How to Edit Within Word Limits*. You can download this from our website.

Help with proofreading

This tip comes indirectly from the crime writer MJ Hyland. It's another way to become objective when looking at your own work.

- Choose a really ugly type style ie, a font such as Georgia, or Garamond.
- Select the individual chapter or section that you are proofreading.
- Now switch it into the ugly font.
- Take up the ugly font to a large point size eg, 18pt or 22pt.
- Then read each big word, correcting your proof as you go.

You will notice how strange and alien your typed words seen in a large and ugly typestyle. What you have done is to distance yourself from your writing.

Finding a way of standing back from your writing, losing that immediate ownership, will make it so much easier to find mistakes.

A checklist for somebody - friend or family - who has kindly agreed to read your work for you!

You may ask a friend or relative to read your essay, report or dissertation before you submit it. Ideally they should be somebody who is not on your course and therefore not familiar with the topic.

Questions you might want to ask the critical friend:

- Can you follow my argument?
- Is the writing clear even if you don't know much about the topic?
- Did you feel as if you were being guided through the document?
- Are there any parts where the writing feels too personal, or not sufficiently objective?
- Are there any sentences that are too long or hard to follow?
- Is there anything you had to read more than once?

Final test for being concise

Try this out on your own writing. When you are talking about "the writer" in the following passage, you are just talking about yourself and learning to become objective about your work.

- Try to say out loud what the writer actually means. Can you say it in a shorter, simpler way?
- Highlight any words that you think are unnecessary. Does the writer say the same things in different ways? Where could you make cuts?
- Are there any words that feel out of context, or affect the clarity?
- Try re-writing one of the sentences. Use fewer words and make the meaning clearer.

Last-minute panic!

You have two days before you submit the essay and you are 1753 words over limit. What is your strategy?

Last-minute cuts

You have two choices. Cut small slivers throughout your essay or cut a large chunk. Clearly, your decision depends on time available to you and marking criteria.

You may be able to solve the problem by cutting some of your longer quotations and giving references instead. This will depend to some extent on the conventions of your subject discipline.

If you cut a large chunk, make sure it is largely redundant material you are cutting. There is no point simply throwing away marks. When you've made the big cuts, check the final product against your assignment's marking criteria – have you continued to hit all your criteria, despite your cuts?

If you have to cut thin slivers throughout the essay, make sure that you keep the continuity of the arguments. This continuity-checking can be quite time-consuming in itself.

Three Final Tips

1. Expand your vocabulary so that you can choose your words more precisely. Aim to use the appropriate terminology in your discipline.
2. Cut out any words that are imprecise, or not completely necessary.
3. Think about the clearest way to express the points you want to make. Avoid trying to sound impressive or “academic”, just aim to be accurate.

Conclusion on writing concisely

You really can improve the flow of sentences and paragraphs by paying attention to the words that you use, the sentence structures, the punctuation, and by being rigorous about editing. It is a process and it does take time. Set aside a few days in which to do it.

Further References

On Writing Concisely

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Edgbaston, Birmingham,
B15 2TT, United Kingdom

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