



W. L. Adams Center for Writing Clarity & Conciseness

Guidelines for Clear & Concise Writing

Conciseness is the ability to state a thought clearly in a minimum of words. This practice requires time and effort, but clearly communicates important ideas. *The Chicago Manual of Style, 17th edition*, recognizes that English is an “analytic language” that relies on thoughtful, appropriate word order to convey clear meaning.¹ Writing concisely holds your reader’s attention, making them more likely to read and understand the entire document.

Omit wordy phrasing.

- Wordy phrases nearly always contain extra words. To find wordy phrases, look for variations of “There is” and “It is” at the beginnings of sentences.
 - **Wordy Phrasing:** There was a man named Napoleon who conquered Europe.
 - **Concise Phrasing:** Napoleon conquered Europe.

Use active rather than passive voice.

- The use of passive voice when the active would work effectively often results in extra words and backward sentence constructions (object-verb-noun).
 - **Passive:** The experiments were verified by the scientists.
 - **Active:** The scientists verified the experiments.

Do not overuse vague pronouns.

- Don’t use *this, it, which, that, these, or those* unless you are sure the reader understands precisely to what or whom the pronouns refer.
 - **Vague:** This includes geometric and organic shapes.
 - **Specific:** This painting includes geometric and organic shapes.

Avoid misplaced modifiers.

- Misplaced modifiers occur when writers do not place a word or phrase in the correct location in the sentence.
 - **Misplaced Modifier:** While traveling to the colonies, hardships delayed the European settlers.
 - **Revised Sentence:** While travelling to the colonies, European settlers overcame hardships.

¹ “English Sentence Patterns,” *Chicago Manual of Style*, 17th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 294-306.

Replace jargon with fresh phrasing appropriate to your audience.

- Unnecessary “in-group” words may come across as jargon, which can block communication if the reader is unfamiliar.
 - **Jargon:** You should do your business website analytics on a weekly basis to revise and optimize your SEO protocols.
 - **Revised:** You should analyze traffic to your business website each week and make adjustments so search engines can find your site easily.

Simplify explanations.

- Avoid overstating the obvious or providing explanations of common knowledge.
 - **Overstated:** Throughout history, communication has always been important.
 - **Revised:** Throughout history, people have improved the ways they communicate.

Make your point clearly with a minimum of words.

- Brevity is an effective tool for reaching your reader. Avoid the “Too Long Didn’t Read” effect.
 - **Wordy phrasing:** In today’s fast-paced society, the majority of us often hurry too much as we conduct our daily lives, not pausing to ask ourselves the question, “What can I do that is meaningful to help the rapidly declining environmental quality due to climate change in our world?”
 - **Concise phrasing:** Today, we often hurry through our daily lives, not pausing to ask ourselves, “How can I best respond to climate change in a meaningful way?”

Bibliography

The Chicago Manual of Style. 17th edition. University of Chicago Press, 2017.

