

#7) Some Steps Toward Concise Writing

Eliminating wordiness is a crucial part of revising prose. Repetitive sentences, colorless word choices, and dead-weight, “filler” phrases can bore your readers so much that they may simply tune out your ideas. Even after you’ve checked an essay for grammatical correctness, organization, and development through specific details, search for “empty” words you can cut as well as sentences which you can combine to eliminate repetition. Below is some advice from three writing experts on specific methods for cutting wordiness.

1. Cutting “The Really Bad Words”

In his book *The I-Search Paper*, author Ken Macrorie lists what he calls “the really bad words” that add wordiness to sentences without adding content. Cutting these words can help streamline your writing.

Diminishers:

little	rather	sort of	kind of	slightly somewhat
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Intensifiers:

real (-ly)	actual (-ly)	quite	very
deep (-ly)	total (-ly)	too	even
big	a lot	absolute (-ly)	

Words from the Vague Swamp:

thing	area	situation	process
problem	aspect	destination	concerned with
phase	predicament	involved with	

Wordy Sentence: As far as my professor is concerned, the problem of wordiness is the thing she’d really like to see us involved with actually eliminating.

More Concise Sentence: My professor wants us to focus on eliminating wordiness.

2. The Paramedic Method of Revising Sentences

In his book *Revising Prose*, Richard A. Lanham compares the following two sentences.

Jim kicks Bill.

One can easily see that a kicking situation is taking place between Bill and Jim.

Lanham points out that many weak sentences over-use prepositional phrases and “to be” verbs; he advises writers to look for the real action in the sentence by asking themselves “Who’s kicking whom?” He recommends a five-step “Paramedic Method” for eliminating wordiness and adding energy to sentences.

Step 1: Circle the prepositions (such as *on, over, in, by, for, of, to*) in sentences. Can you replace any prepositional phrases?

Step 2: Circle all forms of “to be” verbs in your sentences (*is, are, was, were, am*).

Step 3: Ask “Who is kicking whom?”

Step 4: Put this “kicking” action in a simple, not a compound, active verb.

Step 5: Start quickly—no mindless introductions.

Sentence before Paramedic Method: The fact of the matter is that machines are merely amplifiers of the abilities of workers and exist only as they are able to do the bidding of workers effectively (30 words). Here is a sample revision of this sentence.

Step 1: The fact of the matter is that machines are merely amplifiers of the abilities of workers and exist only as they are able to do the bidding of workers effectively.

Step 2: The fact of the matter is that machines are merely amplifiers of the abilities of workers and exist only as they are able to do the bidding of workers effectively.

Step 3: Who's kicking whom? The primary actions in the sentence are that machines amplify workers' ability and exist to do the workers' bidding "The fact of the matter is that machines are merely amplifiers" is just a long-winded way of saying "Machines amplify."

Step 4: The fact of the matter is that machines merely amplify workers' abilities and exist only to do workers' bidding effectively.

Step 5: "The fact of the matter is that" like "The nature of the case is that," adds nothing to the sentence's content and can easily be cut.

Sentence after Paramedic Method: Machines merely amplify workers' abilities and exist only to do workers' bidding effectively (13 words).

3. A Few Final Notes on Conciseness

In the *The Complete Stylist and Handbook*, Sheridan Baker suggests improving prose by:

- Cutting "there is" and "it is" constructions except when "it" refers to a specific object or animal or is used in idiomatic expressions such as "It is raining."
- Cutting back on "which," "that," and "who/whom."

Examples: [There are] many women [who] never marry.
Many women never marry.

[It is] his last book [that] shows his genius best.
His last book shows his genius best.

To practice streamlining prose before you plunge into revising your own work, try any of the above methods on the following sentences:

1. In the next thirty-five years, it is expected by very many experts that there will be a lot more engineering work to be done than has been done in all of recorded history.
2. Another fact which is revealed by the census statistics is that 72.4 percent of the nonwhite component of the population lives in urban areas.