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Seven Rules for Avoiding Wordiness¹

Although length specifications in academic assignments seem to encourage wordiness, advanced writing should be *concise*. Seven rules sum up the best-known advice (George Orwell's in his classic "Politics and the English Language") for avoiding wordiness. Although following these seven rules will not guarantee that you are concise, breaking them will ensure that you are wordy.

Rule 1: Avoid ready-made phrases.

Like Frankenstein's monster, "ready-made" writing is stitched together out of dead parts.

Rule 2: Avoid repetition.

Many combinations of verbs and prepositions or adverbs are emphatic but redundant; many adjectives and prepositional phrases are equally unnecessary.

Rule 3: Avoid passive and expletive structures.

Passive and expletive structures soften action, hide the actors, and add colourless bulk.

Rule 4: Avoid circumlocution and pomposity.

There is an atmosphere of well-sounding oratory that likes to attach itself to dress clothes. Away with it. **Albert Einstein**

Rule 5: Avoid euphemisms.

Euphemisms often protect people and things from the unfair associations of an unpleasant name; however, they can also hide the nature of unpleasant things under a fair name.

Rule 6: Use verbs rather than nouns (avoid the Noun Disease).

Writers often avoid strong, simple verbs by joining weak verbs to *nominalisation*, verbs transformed into nouns.

Rule 7: Shorten modifiers.

Simple modifiers can usually replace relative clauses (e.g. those beginning with *that* and *which*) and other longer forms.

¹ The previous title for this document contained the word "habits" in place of "rules." It also contained the number that remains there. This was a mildly satiric reference to a famous book—whose author's representatives, perhaps not amused, requested the title be changed on 30 April, 2012.

Tables of Examples

1. Ready-Mades:

Ready-Made	Meaning	Ready-Made	Meaning
to the extent that	so	in view of	because
with reference to	about	in point of fact	filler
in connection with	about	at this point in time	now
have the effect of	does	in the event that	if
plays a leading role in	does	on a daily basis	daily
rectangular in shape	(it is a shape)	the fact that	filler
reliability factor	(it is a factor)	in the near future	soon
inspection procedure	(it is a procedure)	inasmuch as	because
manufacturing process	(it is a process)	by and large	filler

“Filler” indicates phrases that are meaningless; they should be cut rather than replaced. Many words are used primarily in ready-made phrases; currently *issue* is such a word, so it is wise to be suspicious of any phrase including it:

- There were numerous **issues raised**.
- We made good progress, given the scope of the **issues**.
- There was a lot of **speaking to the issues**.

“Issue” has so many meanings that it is fundamentally meaningless. David Oppenheimer (2006) examined why students raised their level of diction; they admitted that they “made their writing more complex in order to appear smarter,” p. 139). He also studied how this strategy affected audiences: “needless complexity leads to negative evaluations” (p. 151). Note the joke that Oppenheimer worked into the title of his paper (the format is APA 6th edition):

Oppenheimer, D. M. (2006). Consequences of erudite vernacular utilized irrespective of necessity: Problems with using long words needlessly. *Applied Cognitive Psychology, 20*, 139–156. doi: 10.1002/acp.1178

2. Repetitive Elements

Pointless bifurcation:	style <i>or</i> type	simple <i>and</i> elementary
basic <i>and</i> fundamental	reason <i>or</i> purpose	null <i>and</i> void
each <i>and</i> every	issues <i>and</i> concerns	final <i>and</i> conclusive
full <i>and</i> complete	last <i>and</i> final	concept <i>and</i> idea
Redundant Phrasal Verbs:	return back	revert back
erode away	continue on	enter into
fall down	raise up	circulate around
Redundant Adjectives/Adverbs	advance planning	future plans
true facts	consensus of opinion	totally unified
especially unique	absolutely essential	potential hazard
completely eliminated	personal opinion	final outcome

3. Sample Passive Passages:

The passive voice is justified in many situations. Any time the thing acted upon (usually the *object* of the verb) is more important than the agent performing the action (the *subject*), the passive form is useful. Often, though, it is unnecessary, and together with *expletives*, the passive can make passages long and tiresome (expletive pronouns and passive verb phrases are in bold):

All of these public concerns **are conveyed** by the committee through the instrument of policy recommendations which can **be seen** as a tool through which special social issues **are enhanced**.

There are many factors **to be considered**; **it** can **be shown** that these are crucial matters at this point in time. In the event that a decision must **be taken** at an early date, **there** will be special procedures to follow.

4. Circumlocution and Pomposity

Phrase	Translation	Phrase	Translation
a person who	one, he, she	in the event that	if
as of the present moment	now	in the not too distant future	soon
by means of	by	has the capability of	can
in order to	to	possesses expertise in	knows
during the course of	during	prior to the time that	before
in spite of the fact that	although	during the time that	when, while

Pompous	Plain	Pompous	Plain
ascertain	discover	fabricate	make
communicate	talk, write	disseminate	tell
consolidate	combine	endeavour	try
construct	make	expedite	speed, help
initiate	begin	interface	meet, talk
utilize	use	network	meet, talk

Nouns: Inflated	Brief	Adjectives: Inflated	Brief
capability	ability	advantageous	useful
compensation	pay	aggregate	total
compilation	list	erroneous	wrong
conceptualization	idea	expeditious	fast
designation	name	initial	first
implementation	start	optimum	best

5. Euphemisms

Euphemism	Meaning	Euphemism	Meaning
correctional facility	prison	pre-need arrangements	burial arrangements
previously owned cars	used cars	laid to rest	buried
depopulate	kill	deer harvest	deer hunting
revenue enhancements	taxes	pacification	war
interred	buried	negative feedback	scolding
employment terminated	fired	negative impact	hurt
non-passing grade	failing grade	cheese <i>food</i>	(usually neither cheese nor food)

6. Nominalisations

Nominalisation	Verb	Nominalisation	Verb
allocation	allocate	information	tell, inform
assessment	assess	an attempt	attempts
compliance	comply	justification	justify
determination	determine	achievement	achieve
expectations of	expect	the development of	develop
exposure	expose	discovery	discover
hopes of	hoped	use of	use
implementation	use	verification	verify

"Use of" is an interesting case; some writers actually fall into the trap of "using the use of" (e.g., "Bierce's use of irony was the chief tool he used to guide the reader's judgment of his characters"). The difference between "an attempt" and "attempts" may seem unimportant without a pair of contrasting sentences:

7. Long Modifiers

Relative clauses (e.g., those introduced by “that,” “which,” and “who”) are useful, but sometimes a single word can replace a long, cumbersome clause. The “brief” versions below do not convey exactly the same information as the “long” versions, but in many contexts the distinction is trivial.

Long:	Brief:
Fears <i>that are buried deep down inside us</i> can nevertheless control us.	<i>Hidden</i> fears can control us.
The units were <i>priced at a level that was appreciably higher than that applied to many similar products.</i>	The units were <i>expensive.</i>