

Reducing Wordiness

“In concluding, it’s been a privilege for ourselves to conduct yourselves through the in-flight experience today, and I do hope that you’ll re-favor ourselves with the esteem of your forth-coming custom going forward” – Arthur Shappey, *Cabin Pressure*

WHEN WORDINESS HIDES BIGGER PROBLEMS

“Wordiness” can sometimes hide bigger problems with a writer’s ideas or organization. Below are some examples of ways that wordiness can impact (and be impacted by) the content of a paper.

1) Unclear prioritization: The level of importance of the ideas in the sentence is unclear. This often results when the writers themselves does not know what they want to emphasize. For example:

Because of British colonialism, Ireland has had identity issues with which Irish writers have struggled for centuries, without coming to a conclusion as to what it means to be Irish.

Revision Option 1: Despite centuries of identity politics, Irish writers have never reached a consensus about what it means to be Irish.

Revision Option 2: Due to the erasure of their cultural heritage under British colonialism, Irish writers have struggled for centuries with what it means to be Irish.

Note that the two revisions emphasize different contextual information, even though the core idea of the sentence stays the same (Irish writers don’t agree on what it means to be Irish).

2) Nonessential information: a related problem is when a writer includes information in a sentence that is not necessary to the sentence’s meaning. This makes it difficult for the reader to pick out the essential information.

Frantz Fanon, who wrote Black Skin, White Masks, was born in the French Caribbean and worked as a psychiatrist in a mental hospital in Algeria during the Algerian Revolution, and it was there that he formed the theories he explains in his most famous work The Wretched of the Earth.

Revision Option 1: Frantz Fanon developed his ideas for *The Wretched of the Earth* while working as a psychiatrist during the Algerian Revolution.

Revision Option 2: Frantz Fanon was born in the French Caribbean. He trained as a psychiatrist in France, and was stationed in colonial Algeria, where he developed the ideas for his most famous work, *The Wretched of the Earth*.

Note that Revision Option 2 uses more sentences, but is still less wordy than the original.

3) Obscuring the actor: Sometimes, it is necessary to obscure the person or thing performing the action in a sentence, such as when avoiding the first person or when the person or thing performing the action is an unknown. However, such a strategy is less engaging and less clear than using the simple active voice, or writing about people actually doing things. (For more on this topic see the Passive Voice handout).

It has been claimed that violence is necessary in the face of colonial injustice.

Revision: The Irish Republican Army claimed that violence is necessary in the face of colonial injustice.

Note that the revision is not only more active, it is a much clearer and more precise statement.

OTHER CAUSES OF WORDINESS

Sometimes, wordiness comes as a reflex or a misapplication of the standards of academic writing, such as...

1) A refusal to use “I.” Some disciplines (mostly in the sciences) still frown on using personal pronouns in formal writing, but using these pronouns often makes writing clearer. Check with your instructor.

The argument of this paper is that Emma should be read as an early feminist text.

Revision: I argue that *Emma* should be read as an early feminist text.

2) Nominalizing. Turning verbs and adjectives into nouns requires more words to fit the nouns together.

We conducted an investigation into the case and made the discovery that the guilt of the parties involved was due to the vandalism of property.

Revision: We investigated the case and discovered that the parties involved were guilty of vandalism.

3) Phrases that can be replaced by single words. Precision of vocabulary can be elusive in the early stages of drafting, but it is something to pay attention to during the revision process.

But the thing is, we've taken away all the things that can possibly have happened, so I suppose that the only thing that's left, even though it seems really weird, must be the thing that did happen, in fact.¹

Revision: Once you have *eliminated* the *impossible*, whatever *remains*, however *improbable*, must be the *truth*.²

4) Redundancy. Redundant words sometimes fall right next to each other (“each and every,” “fair and balanced,” etc.). In these cases, deleting one word will fix the problem. In other cases, redundancy lies in repetition of meaning rather than repetition of words.

Jane Austen’s heroines *have many trials and tribulations as they* struggle to find suitable husbands *to marry*.

5) Strings of prepositional phrases. These are easy to fall into when you are trying to cram lots of details into one sentence, but they usually just end up confusing the reader.

The state legislature in Arizona voted to ban public schools from teaching ethnic studies to their students despite protests against the ban by famous authors.

Revision: The Arizona state legislature banned ethnic studies in public schools despite protests by famous authors.

6) Unnecessarily complicated or formal vocabulary. While technical terms may be necessary for precision, needlessly complicated language makes writing stilted, awkward, and hard to understand.

*Ladies and gentlemen, as you can see, our onboard transit process today has now reached its ultimate termination.*³

Revision: Ladies and gentlemen, the plane has landed.

7) Weak words and caginess. Often, words can be deleted without affecting a sentence’s meaning.

Generally speaking, it is possible to say that (A)ction movies with female leads are kind of rare.

8) Clichés. Clichéd phrases should not replace common, simple language.

He really knocked it out of the park with his presentation, except for that slide that stuck out like a sore thumb.

Revision: His presentation was excellent, except for that one incongruous slide.

¹ Martin Crieff (played by Benedict Cumberbatch) *Cabin Pressure*, series 3 episode 2

² Sherlock Holmes (also played, at times, by Benedict Cumberbatch), *The Sign of the Four*

³ Arthur Shappely (played by John Finnemore) *Cabin Pressure* series 2 episode 4.