



University of Vermont Graduate Writing Center Four Strategies to Make Your Writing More Concise

When you have a draft that is ready for editing, these four strategies can help you trim wordy constructions and create sentences that are more clear and concise.

1. **Reduce prepositions:** See how many prepositions (at, of, for, by, as, to, out, in, from etc.) you can eliminate by changing the noun it modifies to an adjective, replacing a “to be” verb like *is* or *was* with an active verb, or summarizing the prepositional phrase with a single adverb.

Original: Planning for the project will take at least three weeks.

Edited: Project planning will take at least three weeks.

Original: One of the notable features of the design is that it emphasizes accessibility.

Edited: Notably, the building design emphasizes accessibility.

2. **Reduce “zombie” nouns or nominalizations:** A nominalization turns a verb into a noun. Although nominalizations can be useful in creating sentence-to-sentence cohesion (e.g., following one sentence that describes how a protein “reacts” with a sentence that starts with “This reaction ...”), too many create lifeless prose. Look for nouns that end in “ion” or “ity.” How many can you convert to verbs?

Bonus: Reducing zombie nouns also reduces prepositions!

Original: The reaction of the students was negative.

Edited: Students reacted negatively.

Original (from the *Boston Globe!*): Cocaine has a capable lethal potentiality.

Edited: Cocaine can kill.

3. **Reduce expletive constructions:** Look for sentences that start with or contain expletive constructions (it is, there are, it was, there were), and see if you can find within the sentence its true verb or action.

Original: It was hypothesized by our group that ...

Edited: Our group hypothesized ...

Original: There was discomfort expressed by participants when ...

Edited: Participants expressed discomfort when ...

4. **Where possible, use active voice:** While some disciplines favor passive voice (e.g., “An experiment was attempted”) to active voice (“We attempted an experiment”) to keep the focus on the action performed, all writing benefits from a read-through to eliminate unnecessarily wordy passive constructions.

Original: The compounds were provided by a biotech company.

Edited: A biotech company provided the compounds.