

Avoiding Wordiness and Redundancy

Free writing helps us put our thoughts on paper and avoid plagiarism; however, our freely written work can sometimes be redundant or wordy. Instructors often assign strict word counts. With some small revisions, we can avoid redundancy and wordiness to help meet those counts and create stronger writing.

1. Avoid adjectives and adverbs

Descriptors are nice in prose, but in academics, we want to get to the point.

Using clear language with strong verbs and few adjectives helps us clearly articulate our points.

2. Remove unneeded phrases and qualifiers

Prepositional phrases often make sentences complex and unclear. If we can say something without an added phrase, we should.

Example

Wordy: I needed money in order to buy the new bike from the bike shop.

Revision: I needed money to buy the new bike.

(Since it is clear the bike comes from a store, we do not need to add that portion. Additionally, we can reduce the prepositional phrase “in order to,” so we avoid added words.)

Qualifiers like “very” do not add information to the sentence. By eliminating words that add nothing and only take up precious word space, we can save space for the important things we need to say. The same is true for introductory words like “basically.”

Eliminate whole sentences that state the **obvious**. Instead of saying, “In the following paragraph, I will discuss...,” we want a strong transition sentence that moves us to that topic.

Examples

Wordy: The great big, giant, leafy oak tree stood by the lake.

Revision: The tall oak stood by the lake.

Wordy: The young lad ran super fast.

Revision: The boy sprinted.

3. Watch for unneeded relative pronouns

Relative pronouns help us link parts of the sentence. They are the *that*, *which*, *who*, or *whom* of the sentence. Many times, we can eliminate those phrases. If the sentence makes sense without it, we can leave it out completely.

Examples

Wordy: The great big, giant, leafy oak **Wordy:** He was the man who fixed our plumbing.

Revision: He was our plumber.

Wordy: She said that running was healthy.

Revision: She said running was healthy.

Wordy: That was the one that I saw with the blue trim.

Revision: That was the one I saw with blue trim.

Wordy: The green house, which I grew up in, is for sale.

Revision: The green house I grew up in is for sale.

(While these seem like minor revisions, eliminating even small words can provide space for more important writing.)

4. Avoid passive voice

Example

Wordy: The horse was first ridden by John, the protagonist.

Revision: John, the protagonist, first rode the horse.

Passive voice creates long phrases and awkward verb use, which forces us to use many words and prevents clarity. If we make our subject clear, we can avoid wordiness.

5. Be mindful of verb tense

Instead of using complex verbs, we can use simple verb tenses to clearly articulate our points.

Examples

Wordy: I was riding the wave.

Revision: I rode the wave.

Wordy: I have picked apples.

Revision: I picked apples.

6. Prevent redundancy

We only need to say something once. Saying the same thing in different terms is not the most effective way to convey our thoughts. Eliminating instances of sentences that convey the same thought can help cut word count and make writing more precise. Moreover, we can often combine similar ideas in one concise sentence.

Example

Redundant: When I saw him, I was shocked. I was so surprised to see him, I couldn't even run to greet him.

Revision: I was so shocked when I saw him I couldn't even run to greet him.

Staying within a word budget requires some thought and revision, but once we develop writing habits and revision skills geared at avoiding wordiness and redundancy, we can meet those criteria and concisely convey our thoughts.