Editing for concision

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Once you've got a complete draft of your work, set it aside overnight, or over a weekend if you can, then print a copy and review to cut wordiness. This handout focuses on shorter documents (one-pagers, abstracts, cover letters, etc). Any space you free up with these methods can be used to add more substance targeting audience needs — or you can simply be more brief.

Evaluate repetition between paragraphs.

Before worrying about word-level editing, look at the document as a whole — printing one-sided so you can see the entire thing — and look for any repetition that may be unnecessary. Sometimes whole sentences or clauses can be deleted. Not all repetition is bad, but it can emerge in revision, especially in collaborative writing.

Minimize definitions, long parentheses, and digressions.

Especially for abstracts and summaries, it's okay to leave out less important things. If terms must be defined, be as brief as possible. Do not use footnotes. If citations are necessary, keep them short: last name and date or page number, rather than full names, titles, type of text, etc.

Look for structures that can be converted to lists or tables.

Comparisons written out as prose might be more effective as tables. Lists presented in sentences are more readable with bullets or numbers and indenting. Processes or sequences are often easier to understand as lists.

Though it reduces word count, these changes can make a document longer, so if page length is restricted, stick with in-line presentation. Alternatively, lists of short items can be presented in columns, and/or text can be wrapped around narrow tables.

~~Look for~~ Find these words and ask: "Can I delete them?"

- "that"
- Most adverbs ("very" & words ending in "ly")

It's easy to find a list of phrases like this on the web.

Replace compound verbs with simple verbs.

Look for verbs that use two or more words and replace them with single words.

- fill in → include, clarify
- figure out → identify, determine
- look forward to → anticipate, expect
- is aware of → knows

Reduce repetition ~~that often derives~~ from ~~writing that uses~~ spoken syntax, grammar, or style.

By nature, speech is repetitive. When drafting, getting words on paper matters; when editing, this repetition can be removed.

- Filler we use as we figure out what we are saying: "for the purpose of conversation," "one of the reasons that," "the thing about this," "it might be that we have to"
- Information clear from the context: "the emerging problems from the new buildings," "young children in kindergarten," "the menu for customers to choose from"
- Double verbs, nouns, or adjectives: "planning and forecasting the semester," "identify and determine the causes," "cease and desist the noise," "start and initiate the project," "spacious and open rooms"

In all of these cases, simply deleting the repetition is effective.

Flip negatives to positives.

Not only does this help with tone, it is often shorter and indicates action more clearly.

- We will not require assistance to develop the list. → We will develop the list.
- No new revenue will be required. → Current funding is adequate.
- Ending the program will harm clients. → Continuing the program would help clients.

Ask if hedging is necessary.

Making absolute claims can be a problem ("Our plan will solve this problem immediately"), but hedging with subjunctive mood (would, should, could), constructions like "We hope to" or "Our goal is," or in other ways is not always necessary. Look for hedging and ask if it is needed.

Especially when drafting, multiple forms of hedging can be stacked up.

- Evidence seems to suggest…
- One possible cause is the apparent reluctance…
- We might have to consider…
- We hope to find a tentative solution…

Simply removing one of these solves the problem (and cuts length). If there is need for strong caution or uncertainty, explaining why is better than simply stacking up qualifiers.

Use [Richard Lanham's paramedic method](#) to make verbs more active and reduce wordiness.

This well-known approach, derived from Lanham's *Revising Prose,* argues for writing that identifies its agents, connects them to objects with simple verbs, reduces the amount of weak verbs, and reduces nominalization. So a sentence like this:

> The challenge we face is that the number of potential clients is going up at the same time the number of permanent staff we have to deal with clients' needs is decreasing.

Can become one of these:

- Our staff numbers have declined, though we have more potential clients.
- We have more potential clients, though our staff numbers have declined.
- We have lost staff while numbers of potential clients have increased.

— depending on the focus. The revision also creates room for content that can clarify the argument made or add detail to information presented.

This handout offers more examples and a step-by-step process.