

5 Ways to Say More in Fewer Words

If time is money, when it comes to business, wasted words are wasted dollars. When your team's writing is long-winded, roundabout, heavy with jargon, and full of fat, useless phrases, they're eating into someone's profit—probably that of your business.

Conciseness: saying more in fewer words is a virtue of all good writing. Conciseness makes documents easier to read and makes them more persuasive and professional. When writing is concise, readers will consider you competent, considerate, and efficient; in other words, worth doing business with.

Here are five tricks that good writers understand for saying more in fewer words:

1) Give your readers only what they need. As always, look at every document from your readers' point of view and clarify the document's purpose before beginning to write: what do your readers need to know? What information is relevant, and what's not, to achieving your document's purpose? Is that interesting quote from 18th century economist Adam Smith relevant? Is that chart you tracked down on the Bureau of Labor's website important? Are those five-year-old statistics useful?

You may wish to include an intriguing nugget of information to show off your research skills, but if that information doesn't serve the readers' purposes, you've simply wasted their time. Be ruthless. Cut what doesn't belong.

2) Avoid jargon and other pompous phrasing. Jargon—trendy, “in-crowd” business language—is often not just wordy, but imprecise and unclear. Pompous writing, which uses fancy words and long phrases where plain and simple wording will do, can annoy and confuse your reader.

- **Wordy jargon:** “At this juncture, we foresee the likely possibility of Acme Anvil Inc. experiencing an equity retreat during the near-future reporting period.”
Concise: “We now expect Acme Anvil Inc. to lose money in the fourth quarter.”
- **Wordy jargon:** “Our new CEO brings to the table a number of best-practice approaches, including the ability to think outside the box, to assist us in achieving our mission-critical goals.”
Concise: “Our new CEO's expertise and imagination should help us achieve our goals.”
- **Pompous wording:** “She engages in the utilization of cutting-edge accounting techniques.”
Concise: “She uses the newest accounting techniques.”

Instead of being plain and direct, jargon and pompous wording force your readers to waste time trying to decipher your meaning. Such writing also comes across as evasive and sometimes even dishonest—as if

you're trying to hide the truth. "Experience an equity retreat," for example, is the weasel's way of saying, "lose money."

3) Use strong verbs. The verb is the muscle of the sentence. You don't want it to be flabby. Often you can replace long phrases with single, straightforward, precise verbs. Here are some ways verbs can go wrong, followed by concise corrections:

Wordy noun-based phrases

"we made a decision"
"I gave consideration to"
"they came to an agreement"
"she came to the conclusion"

Concise Verbs

"we decided"
"I considered"
"they agreed"
"she concluded"

Wordy use of modifying phrases

"she walked in displaying great confidence" "she strode in" or "she marched in"
"the CEO spoke under his breath"
"the company changed its hiring policies in a major way"

Concise Verbs

"the CEO whispered" or "muttered"
"the company transformed its hiring policies"

Wordy passive-voice verbs

"the profits were expected by the CEO to be higher"
"the accident was caused by lightning"
"great service is expected by our customers"

Concise active-voice verbs:

"the CEO expected higher profits"
"lightning caused the accident"
"our customers expect great service"

4) Avoid most intensifiers and de-intensifiers. Intensifiers are words like "very," "really," "relatively," "significantly," and "extremely." De-intensifiers are words like "rather," "somewhat," "quite," "kind of," and "sort of."

Intensifiers and de-intensifiers rarely help a sentence. Take the intensifiers and de-intensifiers (underlined) out of the following sentence, and it loses none of its effect: "It is extremely urgent that we really try to deal with the somewhat challenging issues that are causing problems for our rather overextended factory work force."

Writers who overuse intensifiers come across as trying to pump up weak ideas—as if they lack confidence in the ideas themselves. De-intensifiers, on the other hand, make the writer seem wishy-washy: a "somewhat difficult fourth quarter" is usually just a "difficult fourth quarter" that the writer doesn't want to think about too hard.

Often, intensifiers-plus-modifiers can be replaced by single words:

- **Wordy:** “We have a very large problem.”
Concise: “We have a huge problem.” or “We have a substantial problem.”
- **Wordy:** “It is really important that you deal with this.”
Concise: “You must deal with this.”

5) Put statements in positive form. Sentences centered on words like “not” and “never” are often wordy and difficult to follow, especially when they also contain other negatives, such as “unexpected” and “unusual,” or implied negatives like “forgotten” and “scarce.”

- **Wordy negative phrasing:** “It is not unusual for our sales numbers to reflect a spring downturn.”
Concise positive phrasing: “Our sales numbers often reflect a spring downturn.” (Or, with a stronger verb, “Our sales often drop in the spring.”)
- **Wordy negative phrasing:** “We never see the CEO when she is not dressed casually.”
Concise positive phrasing: “We always see the CEO dressed casually.” (Or “The CEO always dresses casually.”)
- **Wordy negative phrasing:** “Our customers are not likely to forget that we gave them refunds.”
- **Concise positive phrasing:** “Our customers will remember that we gave them refunds.”
- **Wordy negative phrasing:** “We should not fail to consider purchasing domestic steel, which is not at all hard to find.”
- **Concise positive phrasing:** “We should consider purchasing domestic steel, which is abundant.”

Saying more with fewer words is a great way to ensure that your documents are easy to read and understand.

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