

Wordiness

There is nothing technically wrong with a long sentence. They are common and accepted in academia, creative writing, business writing, and most other genres.

However, sometimes a sentence's length interferes with understanding its meaning. When a writer tries to meet an assignment's word count by chaining excessive or redundant words together where they are not needed, they risk confusing their reader. Sentences that only exist to add words to a count are wordy and must be trimmed to ensure understanding.

Like many other guidelines for good writing, wordiness is a subjective judgment call. There is no simple test to determine if a sentence is overly wordy or simply long. That said, many common words and combinations of words can obstruct sentence meaning when they are overused or used inappropriately. The following guidelines can serve as a checklist to help you figure out if your sentences could use some trimming.

Redundancies and Repetition

Many students use redundancies as a comfortable fallback option when they are not sure what else to say. However, redundant words dilute and muddle the meaning of your sentences. In severe cases, a reader may not understand how your concepts connect and relate to one another.

The following sample sentences demonstrate some general methods of how to detect and remove redundant words.

Tip #1: If you remove redundant words entirely from the sentence, the meaning does not change.

Example: "I enjoy power walking quickly in the nighttime twilight under the dark sky."

Revised: "I enjoy power walking at night."

Tip #2: If you can replace a series of words with a single, more specific word, the meaning does not change.

Example: "At this point in time, there are currently far too many prisoners of war, also known as POWs."

Revised: "There are currently too many prisoners of war (POWs)."

You may find yourself skipping over redundant words when you read the sentence out loud. Trust your gut instinct—it is right more often than not! If you're stumbling over these words, your reader will stumble too.

Overused Transitional Phrases

Transitions are critical in an academic paper. They demonstrate connections between topics and create a continuous flow of ideas for the reader. When transitions are overused or used without purpose, they become wordy and frustrating to the reader.

The following words are examples of transitional words and phrases that are easy to overuse.

- Because
- For example / for instance / such as
- However
- Although
- Therefore
- Thus
- Additionally / in addition to
- Also
- Moreover

Example: “Because the weather was cold and rainy, therefore, we decided to stay indoors and watch movies since we didn't want to get wet; additionally, we made some popcorn and cozied up on the couch because we knew it would be a perfect day for a movie marathon.”

Removing the unnecessary transitional words and phrases results in this sentence instead:

“The weather was cold and rainy, so we decided to stay indoors and watch movies. We made some popcorn and cozied up on the couch. It was a perfect day for a movie marathon.”

Overused Paired Synonyms

Some common pairs of words are inherently redundant because the two words have the same meaning; one word should be removed from each pair. Many people use these words in speech without noticing, but they do not need to be used in academic writing, especially if you are working under a tight word count.

- first and foremost
- each and every
- any and all
- hopes and desires / hopes and dreams
- always and forever

- final outcome
- ancient history
- future plans
- free gift
- terrible tragedy
- reflect back

Overused Prepositions

A preposition is a word that describes where, when, or how something happens; they often show connections between two items (usually in time or space). They are some of the most common words in the English language. The problem arises when prepositions are misused and overused to the point of confusion, such as in the following example.

“I work from between 9:00 a.m. to about 5:00 p.m. and take a one-hour break at about noon.”

In this sentence, the words *from*, *between*, *to*, *about*, *at*, and *about* are all prepositions. There are six prepositions in this sentence, which are too many since they’re not all necessary for clarity. We can cut at least half of them.

“I work from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and take a one-hour break around noon.”

In the shortened version, there are only three prepositions: *from*, *to*, and *around*. It’s shorter, more comfortable to read, and more specific.

Informality and Slang

While informality flows easily in speech, writing with informal slang can feel awkward and careless. Slang is typically unacceptable in academic writing, except in niche cases. Since slang terms are also dependent on culture, ethnicity, upbringing, and geography, you also run the risk of offending your reader or being misunderstood when using these words in writing.

Example: “Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* gets hella crazy with its gnarly themes of betrayal, revenge, and the intense struggle with the existential crisis, you know? Since his uncle got totally caught in 4k killing his dad and marrying his mom (ick), Hamlet knows he’s getting slept-on as the heir, but he’s tripping about whether to get payback or just bounce. Honestly, it’s giving *Lion King*.”

Removing all slang from this paragraph results in a cleaner, more serious passage.

“Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* deals with themes of betrayal, revenge, and the inherently human struggle to figure out the meaning of existence. After receiving supernatural evidence of his uncle murdering his father, marrying his mother, and usurping the throne, Hamlet uses his position as the overlooked heir to plot a complex web of revenge. With court sycophants

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern spying on him under the pretense of friendship, Hamlet seeks his form of justice while tragically playing into a greater network of plots that lead to his death.”

Acceptable Wordiness

In certain writing situations, you must add words that feel unnecessary or excessive. The following situations are cases in which longer or wordy sentences are fine.

Extending Contractions

Stretching out contractions is not wordiness—contractions are often not considered acceptable in academic writing. Some examples are provided below.

- can't – cannot
- shouldn't – should not
- wouldn't – would not
- didn't – did not
- isn't – is not

Presenting Detailed Ideas and Concepts

Joining two long concepts together is acceptable if the connection between the concepts is demonstrated. Remember, there is a difference between a long direct sentence and a long aimless sentence.

Example: “The intricate web of connections between socioeconomic disparities and access to quality education underscores the complex, clashing dynamics of modern society's ability to foster equitable opportunities for all its members.”

There may be more concise ways to write this sentence, but there is nothing inherently wrong with its length.

Hedging a Claim

Hedging is when a writer uses less specific words and phrases to soften the certainty of a claim or assertion. Hedging is the difference between "prove" and "suggest," "are" and "seem to be," and "show" and "demonstrate."

Hedging is not considered wordiness because it serves multiple academic purposes. The softened tone allows the reader to acknowledge that the writer is making a claim supported by evidence, not an unassailable factual statement. Hedging also gives the writer some deniability if their claims are proven incorrect, and it offers a possibility for future research to be done.

Example: “The study’s data suggests a correlation between increased coffee consumption and heightened alertness. It’s important to acknowledge that individual responses may vary, and further research is warranted to fully substantiate this claim.”

By saying the data *suggests a correlation* instead of *proves a connection*, the writer leaves room for the results to be interpreted differently.

Conclusion

Wordiness is a subjective judgment. There may be times at which the guidelines in this handout do not apply. If you think that a sentence makes sense—and is clear when you speak it or explain it—it is likely not wordy!

If you think that a sentence is wordy, but you are unsure how to clarify it, ask another student or visit a Writing Center tutor! We are always here to help out.

Activity

The following activity can help you practice trimming down the following wordy sentences.

1. I really love my daughter very much from the bottom of my heart.
2. In my essay paper, I wrote about my absolute hopes and desires.
3. There are possibly only three reasons why she could have done what she did.
4. Water polo is basically a water sport that involves a multitude of players struggling to compete against one another in successfully capturing the ball in the respective goal.
5. After that fight that we had, our amicable friendship is basically ancient history.
6. The honest truth is that I really do not like shrimp very much.
7. About the email you sent me last week on July 3rd about your vacation, I wanted to talk to you in person before responding.
8. If the two groups cooperate together, there will definitely be positive benefits for both.
9. There are some people who think that the metric system is basically un-American.

Answer Key for Activity

Your results may vary depending on your writing style, which is normal and natural! Do not feel obligated to condense sentences beyond what you are comfortable with.

1. I love my daughter.
2. In my essay, I wrote about my desires.
3. There are three reasons she could have done that.
4. Water polo is a multiplayer sport in which the objective is to get the ball in the goal.
5. After that fight, our friendship is history.
6. I dislike shrimp.
7. I want to speak in person before replying to the email you sent on July 3rd.
8. If the two groups cooperate, both will benefit.
9. Some people think the metric system is un-American.