

# Concision: Making every word count

*The most valuable of all talents is that of never using two words when one will do.*

Thomas Jefferson

There are many reasons why you should strive to make your writing concise. The most imperative reason is that the authorities require it. Grant applications, congress abstract submissions, and scientific journals all have strict word limits: failure to meet these limits is the first criterion for rejection. The most compelling reason for being concise, however, is that being concise helps us to communicate more efficiently. When we eliminate clutter and noise, we make it easier for our readers to see our arguments and hear our message. Remember that the burden of communication is on the writer's shoulders—we cannot expect our readers to sift through our texts to try to find something worth keeping. Our readers are busy people with projects and lives of their own, and concise writing shows respect for them.

A well-written manuscript should have no unnecessary paragraphs. A well-written paragraph should have no unnecessary sentences. And a well-written sentence should have no unnecessary words. The key word here is unnecessary—when we eliminate unnecessary paragraphs, sentences, and words, we eliminate distractions so readers can focus on what is essential.

Concision is closely related to simplicity, and the two aspects overlap. Many of the practices discussed in the section on simplicity (e.g., avoiding nominalization and the passive voice) will help keep your writing concise. In this section, we will focus on avoiding redundancy (unnecessary repetition), on eliminating empty words and phrases, and on replacing wordy expressions with shorter ones that convey the same meaning.

## Avoiding redundancy

There is nothing wrong with repetition. Indeed, it is best to repeat key words and terms throughout your manuscript (see the next section, *Fluidity: Keeping the thread*), and it is a good idea to repeat key parts of your message to make sure that everybody grasps it. Unnecessary repetition, however, clutters your text, diluting your message. Redundancy often affects a single word, but it can also involve a phrase, a sentence, or even a whole paragraph. Redundancies make your writing inefficient, adding useless words to your word count and subtracting from the number of useful words you can use to communicate your ideas. Appendix VIII lists some common expressions that contain a redundant element.

### Exercise 65

*Eliminate the unnecessary repetitions in these sentences.*

- 1) The myth that cell phones cause considerable electromagnetic interference in hospital environments still persists.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 2) They completely eliminated salt from their diet.  
\_\_\_\_\_

*Continue*

- 3) We implanted a titanium metallic hip prosthesis.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 4) The only other alternative choice that is available would be to fuse the three vertebrae together.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 5) Stevens and colleagues introduced a new technique to extract the enzyme.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 6) A study is currently underway to determine whether the drug is safe.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 7) Sphenoid meningiomas can cause visual problems, loss of sensation in the face, or facial numbness.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 8) Aspirin is absolutely essential in the management of myocardial infarction.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 9) We detected a malignant carcinoma in his right kidney.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 10) They used genetic engineering to create a genetically modified transgenic organism that incorporated genetic material from another species.  
\_\_\_\_\_

### Eliminating empty words and phrases

Some words and phrases are practically devoid of meaning. Instead of helping your flow of ideas move forward, these words and phrases distract readers from your message and increase word

counts. Revise carefully to detect them and eliminate them from your writing. Appendix IX lists empty phrases that often clutter formal writing.

#### Exercise 66

*Eliminate the empty words and phrases from these sentences.*

- 1) She published her doctoral thesis in the year 2011.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 2) Apart from the presence of local tenderness in the left abdomen, there were no remarkable findings.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 3) Complications are not uncommon.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 4) There were serous fluid inside of the pleural space.  
\_\_\_\_\_

- 5) Arthroscopy was performed and the existence of a paralabral cyst was confirmed.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 6) The abdominal CT showed two large, 6 cm lesions that were round in shape.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 7) All of the procedures were done under local anesthesia.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 8) It has long been known that oxidative metabolism occurs in both the cytoplasm and mitochondria inside of the cells.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 9) We estimated that about one out of ten patients would refuse to participate.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 10) Comorbidities were greater in number among older patients.  
\_\_\_\_\_

### Replacing wordy expressions

Many wordy phrases can be replaced by shorter ones or even by a single word that has the same meaning (see Appendix X). English language education often encourages the use of these expres-

sions and constructions to show proficiency and increase fluency. In scientific writing, though, it is best to be simple and direct. Moreover, shorter alternatives help you to meet word counts.

#### Exercise 67

*Replace the wordy expressions in these sentences with shorter alternatives.*

- 1) About three-quarters of patients on sustained low-efficiency dialysis received treatments on a daily basis.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 2) For the purpose of increasing vasculogenesis, chemokine injection at the site of injury could attract bone-marrow-derived cells.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 3) Abstract submissions must be received no later than October 12.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 4) A great number of the experimental animals failed to survive.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 5) This result would seem to suggest that the left angular gyrus might possibly mediate a spatial representation of number.  
\_\_\_\_\_

*Continue*

- 6) We determined the hepatitis C virus genotypes in order to define the genotypic profile and examine the relationship between genotype and the prevalence as well as severity of liver disease.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 7) The presence of this allele has been associated with protective effects against many disease conditions, including but not limited to development of asthma, juvenile arthritis, multiple sclerosis, and liver damage from hepatitis C infection.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 8) The patient continued to exhibit hypotension in spite of the fact that we administered vasoactive drugs.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 9) They identified a new murine lectin-like gene in close proximity to CD94.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 10) Due to the fact that patients in the placebo group were older and sicker than those in the treatment group, the difference in mortality, although significant, may not be meaningful.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 11) The rate of infections was higher in comparison to the group receiving macrolides.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 12) There are many germs that can cause pneumonia.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 13) It is interesting to note that this is not true in the vast majority of cases in the laboratory environment.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 14) In light of the fact that all of the patients who died had lesions in close proximity to the great vessels, in all probability it is unlikely that...  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 15) We have insufficient knowledge to settle the question as to whether or not this increase in nicotinic receptor levels is accompanied by changes in receptor function.  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Exercise 68**

*Make these sentences more concise.*

- 1) There are many conditions that can affect the nervous system.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 2) It has been well established that cocaine is harmful to your health.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 3) The study took place in the month of January of the year 2013.  
\_\_\_\_\_

- 4) His gallbladder was full of stones that were brown in color.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 5) Prof. Thomas, MD, PhD, and colleagues discovered a new, previously unknown species of *Giardia*.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 6) The belief still persists that all cases of cholecystitis require surgery.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 7) The end result was two different cells that were exactly identical.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 8) All traces of the thrombus were completely eliminated from the internal carotid artery after 2 h.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 9) Lesions that were smaller in size were followed periodically.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 10) The alternative choice was to deliver the particles with a syringe.  
\_\_\_\_\_