How to Write Concise Sentences

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Workshop Goals

• Identify what makes sentences wordy

• Determine which strategies are most effective for writing in your discipline

• Practice strategies for concise sentences
Richard Lanham’s “Paramedic Method”
3 Big Problems for Lanham

1. too many “to be” verbs
   “is”, “are,” “was”, “were”

2. Long intro phrases mask main point

3. too many nominalizations = noun forms of verbs
   Ex. *Organization* comes from *organize*
The Paramedic Method

1. Find the prepositions
2. Circle the “is” (to be) verbs
3. Box up nominalizations
4. Use simple active verbs
5. Ask “Who’s performing the action?”
6. Start Fast
7. Eliminate unnecessary words
"An evaluation of the effect of Class C fly ash and ground granulated blast furnace slag (GGBFS) on the properties of ternary mixtures for use in concrete pavements was undertaken and is presented in this paper."
Step 1: Circle the Prepositions
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An evaluation of the effect of Class C fly ash and ground granulated blast furnace slag (GGBFS) on the properties of ternary mixtures for use in concrete pavements was undertaken and is presented in this paper.

3 (of) + 2 (in) + on + for = 7 Prepositions!
Step 2: Circle the “Is” Verbs

“Blah, blah, blah is that…”

• The fact is that…
• This is because…
• “There is” or “There are”
An evaluation of the effect of Class C fly ash and ground granulated blast furnace slag (GGBFS) on the properties of ternary mixtures for use in concrete pavements was undertaken and is presented in this paper.
Find the Action In Scientific Writing

The data offer confirmation of the hypothesis.

This section gives an analysis of the results.

The data confirm the hypothesis.

This section analyzes the results.
Step 3: Box Up Nominalizations

- Noun forms of verbs (mask action)
  - Look for nouns ending in \(-ion, -tion\)

**Ex:** *Communication from communicate*
An evaluation of the effect of Class C fly ash and ground granulated blast furnace slag (GGBFS) on the properties of ternary mixtures for use in concrete pavements was undertaken and is presented in this paper.
Step 4: Use Simple, Active Verb

- Turn the nominalization into a simple, active verb

Evaluation ➔ Evaluate(s)
Step 5: Find the Action

Lanham: Who’s kicking whom?
Who’s Kicking Whom?

Passive Voice

The ball was kicked by Sara.

Active Voice

Sara kicked the ball.
Step 5: Finding the Action

- Eliminate passive voice (if appropriate)

- Keep in mind that the “doer” may be an inanimate object
This paper evaluates the effects of class C fly ash...
Step 6: Start Fast; No Slow Wind-ups!

• Place the subject and action verb close to the beginning of the sentence

• Eliminate long intro phrases
No slow wind-ups!

Another example:

In response to the issue of equality for educational and occupational mobility, it is my belief that there is a system of gender inequality in the school system.
Step 7: Eliminate any unnecessary words/phrases

- Can be done with STEP 6 as you redraft sentence

- In response to the issue of equality for educational and occupational mobility, it is my belief that there is a system of gender inequality in the school system.

- Revised: Gender inequality exists in the school system.
Step 7: Another Example

Mechanical engineering is among the broadest engineering disciplines.
Before

An evaluation of the effect of Class C fly ash and ground granulated blast furnace slag (GGBFS) on the properties of ternary mixtures for use in concrete pavements was undertaken and is presented in this paper.

36 words

After

This paper evaluates the effect of Class C fly ash and ground granulated blast furnace slag (GGBFS) on the properties of ternary mixtures in concrete pavements.

26 words
Putting the Paramedic Method Together…

Before

In response to the issue of equality for educational and occupational mobility, it is my belief that a system of gender inequality exists in the school system.

27 words

After

Gender inequality exists in the school system.

7 words
Putting It Together: Reduce the “Lard Factor”

\[
\frac{\text{# words cut from original}}{\text{Total # of words in original}} = \% \text{ “Lard Factor” (unnecessary words)}
\]

*In Fly Ash Example*

\[
\frac{10 \text{ words removed}}{36 \text{ in original}} = 28\% \text{ unnecessary words}
\]
1) As a means of providing scientists with appropriate tertiary data, the conference is intended to serve as a communication medium for everyone involved in the manipulation and dissemination of research findings.

2) The decision by the managers was that the committee for road improvement would cease its activity for the duration of the term.

3) From the beginning, the writing of this research article was marked by reluctance.
Reflect & Debrief

• Where or when would you use these concise sentence techniques?
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The “wordy” sentence examples are from:
The Purdue Online Writing Lab, [http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/)