



The Michael and Kathleen Clem History Writing Center

of the

Harrison Ruffin Tyler Department of History

347 James Blair Hall

Write1@wm.edu

www.wm.edu/hwc

Reducing Wordiness

Your professor has just handed back your paper. You see a maze of editing marks and the terms "wordy," "awkward," and "edit" written in the margins. What do those remarks really mean? How can you learn to recognize and eliminate wordiness from your writing? Editing is often the most difficult stage of the writing process, even for experienced writers, but it is a skill that you can acquire. Here are tips for reducing wordiness.

Examples of Wordiness:

-Overuse of Prepositions (at, by, but, also, for, of, in, to, on, with, etc.):

Example: In regards to the effects of the evangelical movement on labor relations, the middle-class wanted to reform the rough-and-tumble workers of the Erie Canal.

Correction: The evangelical movement dramatically changed class relations along the Erie Canal as the middle class strove to reform the canal workers.

Tip: Be clear and concise. Delete excessive prepositions and clunky phrases like "in terms of" or "in regards to" that add no substantive meaning to your sentence.

-Passive Voice: A "passive voice" verb construction hides the real subjects or agents in a sentence. It typically leaves uncertain who did what to whom.

Example: Thomas Chester described the horrible treatment inflicted on African American soldiers. [by whom? Who inflicted the horrible treatment?]

Correction: Thomas Chester described the white officers' horrible treatment of African American soldiers.

-Repetitive Words, Phrases, and Ideas:

Example: Eighteenth-century Philadelphia was unlike modern Philadelphia. Dirty, disease-ridden, and hot, the Quaker City claimed hundreds of lives each year, especially during the summer.

Correction: Dirty, disease-ridden, and hot, eighteenth-century Philadelphia claimed hundreds of lives each year, especially during the summer.

Example: There were symbiotic economic relationships that benefited both communities.

Correction: The communities enjoyed symbiotic economic relationships.

-Multiple Verbs: When two or more verbs are used for the same subject, one can often be eliminated. Use a strong verb that conveys action rather than weak, overused verbs (e.g., be, do, go, say, make, think, etc.).

Example: She did genuinely believe when she spoke for emancipation that . . .

Correction: She argued with conviction that emancipation...

-The Possessive: Use the possessive to eliminate needless words. When using an apostrophe, make certain that you are using the correct singular or plural form.

Example: the mast of the ship...

Correction: the ship's mast...

Example: the Native American's town [singular form refers to one native individual]

Example: the Native Americans' cultures [plural form refers to all Native Americans]

-Meaningless Expressions: Phrases such as "it appears that," "one is struck by the fact that," "first of all," "the fact remains that," or "one can argue that" add nothing meaningful to the sentence. Clichés such as "the handwriting on the wall," "the last straw," and "last but not least" do not convey precise meanings.

Example: It is important to note that September 11 was a defining moment...

Correction: September 11 was a defining moment...

-Long Sentences: Long sentences make it difficult for readers to follow an argument because they usually contain two or more distinct ideas. They are often the result of wordiness, overuse of prepositions, and poor punctuation. If you have a long sentence in your paper, read it aloud and listen for a place to break the sentence in half, insert either a period or semi-colon, and construct new sentences.

Example: Steelworkers faced not only layoffs, shutdowns, and poor pay, which made it hard to make ends meet, and anxiety over their futures and their families, but also the steel companies determined to shut down the mills permanently and they believed that this was necessary because they were unprofitable in the depressed economy and faltering steel industry as a whole.

Correction: Steelworkers and their families faced layoffs, shutdowns, and anxiety over their futures. The steel companies decided to shut down the mills permanently; they argued that the mills were unprofitable due to the depressed economy and steel industry.

Strategies for Editing:

-Read the Paper Aloud: The best technique to help you become a better editor is to read the paper aloud with a pencil in hand. You will be able to hear sentences that do not flow well and long sentences that are hard to follow. Reading aloud will also make your writing more conversational in rhythm.

-Verbalize: If you have a long, wordy sentence or paragraph that you are having difficulty rephrasing, ask yourself: "What is the most important point in this sentence?" Try verbalizing your thoughts and write down a shorter response.

-Use "Find" on the Computer: By using this function you can search for repetitive phrases such as "however," "in addition to," "another," or words that you might overuse when writing about a specific historical topic (e.g., "Protestant" or "Catholic" in a paper on the Reformation).