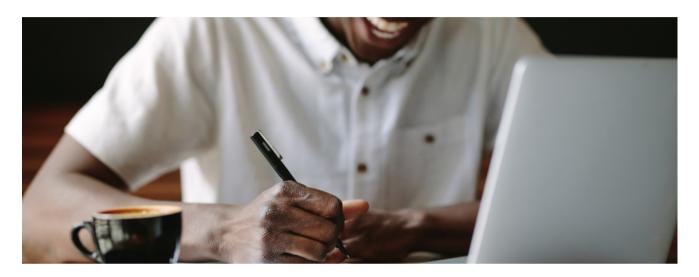# ELIMINATING WORDINESS

La Salle University Writing Handouts

In concise writing words pull their own weight. Each carries meaning essential to the content of the sentence. Try to identify which words add meaning to the sentence and which just take up space. As you revise your work, keep these enemies of concision in mind.

1. WEAK WORDS

Some words are the written equivalent of "um." The word *very*, for example, is the epitome of unnecessary verbiage. Filler words don't provide content and they disrupt the flow of the sentence.

> **Generally speaking** writers can **kind of** rely on **certain** online indexes of journals to basically start their research.

The words in boldface have little to do with the point of the sentence; they can go.

2. REPEATED MEANINGS AND UNNEEDED SYNONYMS

We're used to seeing some words paired: each and every, true and accurate, full and complete. All of these words can work well alone. There is no need to restate the meaning of a word by listing its synonym(s). But redundancy is not just a problem of paired words: it can be harder to spot, but repeated meaning is also a form of wordiness.

> The **end** *result* was *brighter* **in color** than we had hoped, but we *plan* to repaint the wall **in the future.**

This sentence only needs the italicized words, not the bold ones:

> The result was brighter than we had hoped, but we plan to repaint the wall.

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3. PHRASES THAT CAN BE REPLACED BY SINGLE WORDS

If you can think of one word to replace several, use the word. Two phrases in the following sentence can be replaced.

> Clothes that **swirl and slide and move** sensuously around you as you **sway to the music's beat**—that's what disco dressing is.

Pared down, the sentence reads like this:

> Clothes that groove sensuously around you as you *dance*—that's what disco dressing is.

4. NEGATIVES

Anyone who has read an insurance policy statement knows that negative constructions can get confusing. Consider this example:

> Patients should not submit co-payments if they are not notified to do so by this office, **unless** the co-payments do not total $100 during one month.

Taking a sentence out of a negative construction often requires some surgery:

> You should submit co-payments only if you are notified to do so by this office, unless the co-payments total less than $100 during one month

5. MONOLOGUE

Writers get outside the flow of the text to inject notes about structure, spur readers to react, and clarify their intentions. None of these things is terrible, but all can get in the way of the point.

> **Finally, it has been noted that** persons convicted of violent crimes are, **according to most measures**, more likely to return to prison; **as we have seen**, this contributes to **what others have called** the "nothing works" school of criminal justice.

The words in bold needlessly complicate the sentence. Try cutting references to other people's thinking or reactions and convey the meaning through source citation:

> Persons convicted of violent crimes are more likely to return to prison; this contributes to the "nothing works" school of criminal justice.

6. CAGINESS AND BOASTS

Lack of confidence in your argument can also lead to wordiness. Hedging and qualifying have their place in academic writing, but this sentence almost fails to make a point:

> **It is possible that** bare-knuckles boxing **can be definitively seen** as **among** the most safe sports to be involved in.

The opposite is just as bad. Without significant evidence and a command of the entire field, statements like these will get a writer in trouble:

> Bare-knuckles boxing **is the ultimate** safe sport.

7. NONESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Information about whom, when, or where is often nonessential to the meaning of your sentence. Avoid superfluous prepositional phrases when the information is obvious, implied, or irrelevant:

I turned the paper **for English** in **to the teacher** two days late, so **when she got it** the grader took ten points off **from my grade**.

The phrases in bold, set off by prepositions like *for, to*, or *in*, provide trivial information, don't enhance the meaning of the sentence, and interrupt flow. The sentence would be clearer by omitting them:

I turned the paper in two days late, so the grader took ten points off.

8 CLICHÉS

Cliches are phrases that have become meaningless through overuse.

The **powers that be** are **pushing the envelope** with this management initiative.

Though you won't be able to get rid of all of them, you can revise to remove most of them. Consider this revision:

Upper management's initiative is innovative.