

Writing Concise Sentences

Introduction

“Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.”

William Strunk, Jr. (1918). *The Elements of Style*. Ithaca, New York.

Wordy phrases

Many expressions use too many words to say a simple thing. See if you can shorten the wordy phrase in these sentences, while maintaining the original meaning.

the fact that

I cannot go to the meeting **owing to the fact that** I feel ill. ✗

I cannot go to the meeting **because** I feel ill. ✓

In spite of the fact that I feel ill, I will go to the meeting. ✗

Although I feel ill, I will go to the meeting. ✓

I was **unaware of the fact that** you were leaving. ✗

I was **unaware** you were leaving. ✓

The fact that he had not succeeded puzzled me. ✗

His failure puzzled me. ✓

I would like to **call your attention to the fact that** you need to be finished by noon. ✗

I would like to **remind** you that you need to be finished by noon. ✓

who is/which was

His brother, **who is a member of our club**, will open the meeting. ✗

His brother, **a member of our club** will open the meeting. ✓

The death of Princess Diana, **which was an event that affected us deeply**, will never be forgotten. ✘

The death of Princess Diana, **an event that affected us deeply**, will never be forgotten. ✔

case

In many cases, the rooms were poorly ventilated. ✘

Many of the rooms were poorly ventilated. ✔

It has rarely been the case that any mistake has been made. ✘

Few mistakes have been made. ✔

character/nature

Acts of a hostile character should not be tolerated. ✘

Hostile acts should not be tolerated. ✔

Thoughts of an unkind nature often filled his head. ✘

Unkind thoughts often filled his head. ✔

miscellaneous

We will consider **the question as to whether** he should leave. ✘

We will consider **whether** he should leave. ✔

There is no doubt but that you are very unhappy. ✘

No doubt you are very unhappy. ✔

This Pascal program **is used for grading purposes**. ✘

This Pascal program **is used for grading**. ✔

She is a woman who will go far in her career. ✘

She will go far in her career. ✔

The committee decided **in a hasty manner**. ✘

The committee decided **hastily**. ✔

This is a subject which is very difficult. ✘

This subject is very difficult. ✔

Redundant Words

Sometimes words used are redundant because they convey meaning that other words have already conveyed. See if you can identify the redundant words in these sentences.

Consider the following examples.

I will meet you at 12 midnight. **X**

I will meet you at midnight. **✓**

I will meet you at 10 am in the morning. **X**

I will meet you at 10 am. **✓**

I feel surrounded on all sides by fools. **X**

I feel surrounded by fools. **✓**

The necessary need for that is obvious. **X**

The need for that is obvious. **✓**

We were completely unanimous. **X**

We were unanimous. **✓**

Their ideas were precisely the same. **X**

Their ideas were the same. **✓**

He was shorter in height than his sister. **X**

He was shorter than his sister. **✓**

We should cooperate together. **X**

We should cooperate. **✓**

Each and every one of us should feel privileged. **X**

Each of us should feel privileged. **✓**

The end result will be anarchy. **X**

The result will be anarchy. **✓**

As a person, I feel insulted by that. **X**

I feel insulted by that. **✓**

We were told the song would be repeated again tomorrow. X

We were told the song would be repeated tomorrow. ✓

However!

While the sentences you have looked at can be improved by shortening them, you should not conclude that a paragraph with short sentences is better than one with longer sentences.

A quote by Strunk

"A common violation of conciseness is the presentation of a single complex idea, step by step, in a series of sentences which might to advantage be combined into one."

- William Strunk, Jr. 1918

An example from Strunk

Macbeth was very ambitious. This led him to wish to become king of Scotland. The witches told him that this wish of his would come true. The king of Scotland at this time was Duncan. Encouraged by his wife, Macbeth murdered Duncan. He was thus enabled to succeed Duncan as king. (55 words).

Encouraged by his wife, Macbeth achieved his ambition and realized the prediction of the witches by murdering Duncan and becoming king of Scotland in his place. (26 words).

Short sentences are used in the first paragraph, but the paragraph then becomes longer than necessary.

Writing Concise Sentences Quiz

For each of the following sentences, replace the words in capital letters with one word.

The data was useless OWING TO THE FACT THAT the materials were contaminated.

The committee will discuss THE QUESTION OF HOW the money should be spent.

The decisions were made IN A QUICK MANNER.

IN THE EVENT THAT the designs are rejected, another meeting will be arranged.

IN SPITE OF THE FACT THAT they made a loss, they were still quite optimistic.

For each of the following sentences, delete two superfluous words.

The closure, which was an event the company had anticipated, shocked some investors.

The review was longer in length than required.

For each of the following sentences, delete one superfluous word.

The review was not completed until 12 midnight.

The lawyer explained the necessary need for the inquest.

The judges were completely unanimous.

Answers

Replacing the words in capital letters with one word.

The data was useless **because** the materials were contaminated.

The committee will discuss **how** the money should be spent.

The decisions were made **quickly**.

If the designs are rejected, another meeting will be arranged.

Although they made a loss, they were still quite optimistic.

Deleting two superfluous words.

The closure, an event the company had anticipated, shocked some investors.

The review was longer than required.

Deleting one superfluous word.

The review was not completed until midnight.

The lawyer explained the need for the inquest.

The judges were unanimous.