
GUIDE TO CONCISE WRITING

THE SOURCE
FOR CLEAR,
EFFECTIVE WRITING

**Webster's
New World**

ROBERT HARTWELL FISKE

GUIDE TO CONCISE WRITING

Robert Hartwell Fiske

Webster's New World

New York London Toronto Sydney Tokyo Singapore

*To my parents,
who patiently endured a younger man's polysyllabic words
and worse*

First Edition

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About This Book

This is a reference book and, like all such books, is meant to be referred to, not read through. Although I've long thought works of reference, dictionaries in particular, to be among the most spellbinding books, I cannot expect everyone to agree.

I do wish, as any writer would, that this were a work of creation instead of compilation; still, whether you refer to or read through the book, it will help you write and speak more clearly. It will also help you understand humankind more keenly. You should begin to question more and believe less, to complain more and condemn less, to achieve more and conceal less. With this book, you can become a work of creation.

The *Guide to Concise Writing* consists of two parts. In the first part, I suggest how to identify and correct wordiness. I also discuss why we are wordy. The second part of the book, "The Dictionary of Concision,"* is a compilation of several thousand wordy phrases followed by concise alternative expressions and real-world examples. I show each sentence example in its original, wordy version and then in a revised, concise version.

In replacing a wordy phrase by one less wordy or by a single word or in deleting the phrase altogether, I have tried to show how wordiness can encumber clarity and that it can be corrected. The sentence examples have been edited only to remedy the wordiness diagnosed; rarely are they syntactically and stylistically indefectible.

I don't claim that the entries I've compiled are unfailingly inferior to the alternatives I suggest. All the alternatives are merely proposed; they are not inarguable. In your own writing, you may at times find that an alternative suggested here, though less wordy, does not work so well.

Finally, as sole author of this book, I am solely accountable for any errors or, if I may be so charitable, oversights that these pages may hold. Although I have tried to be as thorough as possible and to include as many entries, and alternatives to them, as time would allow, I don't doubt that I have overlooked some. Anyone who finds an error or omission is welcome to share his discovery with me, and in a revised edition, I will gladly include any correction.

*Concision: the quality or state of being concise; conciseness.

PART ONE

The Perfectibility of Words

Words are flawed, but they can easily be fixed. Words exist to be thought and then formed, to be written and then revised, and even to be said and then denied. They can be misused and neglected or cared for and corrected.

Inadequate though they may be, words distinguish us from all other living things. Only we humans can reflect on the past and plan for the future; it is language that allows us to do so. Indeed, our worth is partly in our words. Effective use of language—clear writing and speaking—is a measure of our humanness.

When they do their work best, words help people communicate; they promote understanding between people. And this, being well understood, is precisely the goal we should all aspire to when writing and speaking. As obvious as this seems, it is not a goal we commonly achieve.

Words often ill serve their purpose. When they do their work badly, words militate against us. Poor grammar, sloppy syntax, abused words, misspelled words, and other infelicities of style impede communication and advance only misunderstanding. But there is another, perhaps less well-known, obstacle to effective communication: too many words.

We often believe that many words are better than few. Perhaps we imagine that the more we say, the more we know or the more others will think we know, or that the more obscure our writing is, the more profound our thoughts are. Seldom, of course, is this so. Wordiness is arguably the biggest obstacle to clear writing and speaking. But it is also more than that.

- Wordiness is an obstacle to success. Almost all professional people know that success in business partly depends on good communications skills, on writing and speaking clearly and persuasively. Businesspeople who cannot express themselves well are often at a disadvantage in the corporate world.

- Wordiness is an obstacle to companionship. Few of us enjoy being with someone who speaks incessantly or incoherently. Wordiness in others may make us impatient; it may annoy us, and we may think it rude. Worse than that, when we have difficulty understanding someone, sooner or later we may not care what it is that he tries to convey. We lose interest in what a person says and, ultimately, in who a person is.
- Wordiness is an obstacle to self-knowledge. A superfluity of words conceals more than it reveals. We need time to be silent and still, time to reflect on the past and think about the future; without it, no one is knowable.

Wordiness is an obstacle to these goals and others. Whatever your profession, whatever your personality, wordiness is a condition for which we all should seek a cure.

OF POLISH AND PANACHE

Usually, in reading someone's writing, we see more words than we need to, and in listening to someone speak, we hear more words than we care to. For example, how often have you heard someone say *at this juncture* or, worse still, *at this moment in the history of my life* when a simple *now* would serve? These two phrases are flawed; they are two and eight words longer than they need be. The extra words are not needed to convey the thought; in truth, they interfere with the conveyance of thought.

These are but two of the wordy phrases that we overindulge in when writing and speaking. Though it may be hard to fathom, the English language contains thousands of wordy phrases that dull our understanding of and interest in whatever is being expressed.

Wordiness is a flaw of style—in how we express our language. Today, the style is prevailingly shoddy. In almost everything we read and hear, there is a complexity instead of simplicity and obscurity instead of clarity. This is particularly inexcusable in written material, where words can be reworked.

Few of us write well effortlessly. Typically, we have a thought, and then we write it down in whatever form it first occurred to us. Looking at our sentence further, though, we are usually able to improve on it. By reducing the number of words in a phrase, substituting a single word for a phrase, or deleting extraneous words or phrases, we are able to polish our sentence, to simplify and clarify our thought.

Reducing the number of words in a phrase

- The real test, however, lies in *the degree to which* the man's performance at his regular job improves.

The real test, however, lies in *how much* the man's performance at his regular job improves.

- *Insofar as* the implementation of bank projects *is concerned*, the situation is going back to normal.

As for the implementation of bank projects, the situation is going back to normal.

- There is ample *evidence to support that* adult services are degrading to women, dangerous to children, and can become an unwitting accomplice to violent crimes and deviant sexual behavior.

There is ample *evidence that* adult services are degrading to women, dangerous to children, and can become an unwitting accomplice to violent crimes and deviant sexual behavior.

Substituting a single word for a phrase

- The practice *is in violation of* perjury laws requiring candidates to attest that every signature was signed in person.

The practice *violates* perjury laws requiring candidates to attest that every signature was signed in person.

- *Despite the fact that* Hanson PLC has revenues of over \$12 billion, its corporate staff is exceedingly lean.

Although Hanson PLC has revenues of over \$12 billion, its corporate staff is exceedingly lean.

- I think *to a large extent* this kind of problem is a function of our society's inability to talk about sexuality in a reasonable way.

I think this kind of problem is *largely* a function of our society's inability to talk about sexuality in a reasonable way.

Deleting extraneous words or phrases

- The more sophisticated savings institutions were *located* in places like Boston, New York, and Los Angeles.

The more sophisticated savings institutions were in places like Boston, New York, and Los Angeles.

- He or she must develop strategies to resolve potentially disruptive or dysfunctional conflict *situations*.

He or she must develop strategies to resolve potentially disruptive or dysfunctional conflicts.

- The Japanese government is not supplying much *in the way of* guidance concerning comparative advantages involved in investments in particular countries.

The Japanese government is not supplying much guidance concerning comparative advantages involved in investments in particular countries.

A further benefit of applying some polish, of expressing ourselves more concisely, is that mistakes in grammar and word usage often are corrected as well. For example, we *compare* one person or thing *to* or *with* another, not *against* or *versus* another. The correct phrase is *compare to* or *compare with*, not *compare against* or *compare versus*; *to* and *with* both have one syllable fewer than *against* and *versus*. Fewer syllables count; life is short.

- The investigators will analyze the new data and *compare* them *against* computer models in an effort to link unequivocally the Arctic's perturbed chemistry to its ozone loss.

The investigators will analyze the new data and *compare* them *with* computer models in an effort to link unequivocally the Arctic's perturbed chemistry to its ozone loss.

Likewise, the correct expression is *center on*, not *center around*.

- Much of their behavior *centers around* doing things to please others in an attempt to earn approval.

Much of their behavior *centers on* doing things to please others in an attempt to earn approval.

But there are more telling examples.

Say *the reason is* or simply *because* instead of *the reason is because*, and you are at once concise and correct.

- A common *reason* people join groups *is because* they work near one another.

A common *reason* people join groups *is* they work near one another.

- *The reason* you explore what-ifs sequentially *is because* few solutions to business problems can be achieved by making a single change.

You explore what-ifs sequentially *because* few solutions to business problems can be achieved by making a single change.

The familiar *but rather* or *but instead* is also solecistic. Use *but* or *rather* or *instead*, for each alone does the job.

- It was not lack of sales that led to the downsizing of the project *but rather* the delays caused by a turnover of contractors.

It was not lack of sales that led to the downsizing of the project *but* the delays caused by a turnover of contractors.

- Ericsson has not reduced its investments in the data processing field, *but* it has, *instead*, obtained greater resources with which to further develop and strengthen the advanced DP technology that constitutes its communications systems.

Ericsson has not reduced its investments in the data processing field; *instead*, it has obtained greater resources with which to further develop and strengthen the advanced DP technology that constitutes its communications systems.

One final example is using *for example*, *for instance*, *like*, or *such as* along with *and others*, *and so forth*, *and so on*, *and such*, *and the like*, *et al.*, or *etc.* You don't need both sets of expressions to convey your meaning; use one or the other.

- These codes are used to change formats, *for example*, fonts, printer colors, etc.

These codes are used to change formats, *for example*, fonts and printer colors.

- We have to give it the serious attention that we give illicit drugs *such as* heroin, cocaine, *and so on*.

We have to give it the serious attention that we give illicit drugs—heroin, cocaine, *and so on*.

I grumble about grammar because mistakes in it invariably vitiate one's style of writing and, like wordiness, often arrest the reader's flow of thought.

A good writing style starts with polish, but it does not stop with it. Style must also have presence and personality. Along with polish, then, a writing style would be a good deal improved by panache, which is as creative as polish is corrective. Panache means writing with variety as well as with balance, writing heedful of sound as well as of sense, and writing interestingly as well as enthusiastically. All this is panache, and it is far more than this.

With a dollop of polish and a dash of panache our words will approach perfection.

CLUES TO CONCISION

There are several clues to realizing a clear and concise writing style. By being vigilant, that is, by rereading and rewriting your material, you will become increasingly adept at identifying superfluous words.

Further, the more words you know and have at your command, the more concise you can be. You will repeatedly discover, in the definition of one word, two or three others that you may have faithfully relied on to express a thought. For example, *like* means *in the same way that*, *never* means *under no conditions*, *halve* means *cut in half*, *share* means *have in common*, *with* means *in the company of*, *how* means *the process by which*, and *cynosure* means *center of attention*. By becoming well acquainted with the meanings of words, you will see that a single word often says as much as a string of words.

The key is to question. Ask yourself whether each word in every sentence that you write is needed. More than that, is it vital? Does it contribute to or interfere with the meaning of your sentence? Does it add anything to your meaning that another, perhaps adjacent, word does not?

Eventually, this constant questioning becomes second nature. Not only will you start writing better, you will start speaking better. When you start correcting yourself even as you speak, in midsentence, you are well on your way to achieving the consciousness of a creator.

As you question, be especially aware of phrases containing prepositions, verbs, and nouns and of extraneous adjectives and adverbs. Euphemisms, circumlocutions, clichés, idioms, and polysyllables are also frequent offenders.

Preposition phrases

All preposition phrases are suspect, particularly those longer than two words. A preposition phrase usually can be reduced to a single word or deleted altogether. We depend on these three- and four-word preposition phrases because we are unfamiliar with the meanings of so many one-word prepositions.

Consider a few examples:

Over the duration of the project, we expect there will be some disruption due to noise, dirt, and dust.

Over the duration of is one of those four-word preposition phrases; it is an excrescence. *During* is all that is needed.

As a result of last year's ONA process, a host of new network services will become available to providers of enhanced services *in the very near future*.

In the very near future is certainly a murky preposition phrase. Far better is the more clear *soon* or *shortly*.

I think it is premature to relinquish our destiny to the hands of fate, for indeed much progress has been made *in the past*, and much more is still possible *in the future*.

In the past, like *in the future*, is often needlessly used. The context of the sentence usually makes the tense clear.

We have used the MSE and the RMSE *for the purpose of* measuring how much fluctuation remains after a model has been built.

For the purpose of -ing is unpardonably wordy. Use the simpler *to*.

In the event that you are not sure whether a particular problem is an emergency, we encourage you to call the Plan for advice.

In the event that usually can be reduced to *if* or *should*.

We should be moving *in the direction of* finding psychotherapeutic measures to help correct this sexual disorder whenever the patient wishes it to be corrected.

In the direction of means *toward* in this sentence, though the phrase also can mean a monosyllabic *on*, *to*, or *with*.

You can even set these switches *in such a way that* the RAM area can be read from but not written to.

In such a way that is a long-winded way of saying *so* or *so that*.

There are a number of theories *as to* how firm value is affected by a firm's capital structure design.

As to, like *as regards*, *in relation to*, *with reference to*, and other equally dull devices, usually means an unadorned *about*, *for*, *in*, *of*, or *on*.

Verb phrases

Many verb phrases are redundant. In these phrases, two words (generally, a verb followed by a noun) do the work of one (the noun made into a verb).

Consider the following examples.

***to arrive at*, *to come to*, and *to reach* phrases**

- Space probes are reluctantly *reaching the conclusion* that there is little likelihood that intelligent life is out there in the empty spaces beyond our solar system.

Space probes are reluctantly *concluding* that there is little likelihood that intelligent life is out there in the empty spaces beyond our solar system.

- Several economists predict that the expansion will *come to an end* in what is now its seventh year.

Several economists predict that the expansion will *end* in what is now its seventh year.

to be phrases

- He *is lacking in* sensitivity.

He *lacks* sensitivity.

- Unlike computers, which depended on the Cold War and the space race for the funds that drove their development, U.S. biotech *is dependent on* the flow of various health-care payment streams.

Unlike computers, which depended on the Cold War and the space race for the funds that drove their development, U.S. biotech *depends on* the flow of various health-care payment streams.

to express and to voice phrases

- In one letter, dated June 15, 1892, Cather *expresses regret* that friendships between women are looked upon as unnatural.

In one letter, dated June 15, 1892, Cather *regrets* that friendships between women are looked upon as unnatural.

- The government of Israel *voiced disapproval of* the decision.

The government of Israel *disapproved of* the decision.

to give phrases

- The rest of the equation is to give people from diverse backgrounds a chance *to give expression to* their different views of the world.

The rest of the equation is to give people from diverse backgrounds a chance *to express* their different views of the world.

- The continuing strong demand for our products and improving trends in component costs *give us encouragement* that this will be another year of significant growth in revenues and earnings.

The continuing strong demand for our products and improving trends in component costs *encourage us* that this will be another year of significant growth in revenues and earnings.

to have phrases

- This measure *has the appearance of* reasonableness, but its application would have to be monitored to make sure it did not induce high turnovers by employers to cut labor costs.

This measure *appears* reasonable, but its application would have to be monitored to make sure it did not induce high turnovers by employers to cut labor costs.

- Any disruption of normal computer operations may *have a considerable impact on* the running of the business.

Any disruption of normal computer operations may *considerably affect* the running of the business.

to make phrases

- The code is moved into place by *making use of* the system Monitor block move subroutine, MOVE.

The code is moved into place by *using* the system Monitor block move subroutine, MOVE.

- The column does not *make a distinction* between having chronic pain as a symptom and being a "chronic pain patient," that is, having a chronic pain syndrome.

The column does not *distinguish* between having chronic pain as a symptom and being a "chronic pain patient," that is, having a chronic pain syndrome.

to place and to put phrases

- As a result, the women's groups now *put heavy emphasis on* fielding candidates for open seats and *on* identifying incumbents who might be vulnerable.

As a result, the women's groups now *heavily emphasize* fielding candidates for open seats and identifying incumbents who might be vulnerable.

- Excess supply within the next few years would *place pressure on* the cartel to maintain production restraint and keep average prices low.

Excess supply within the next few years would *pressure* the cartel to maintain production restraint and keep average prices low.

to take phrases

- I would like to *take this opportunity* to thank all of you who aided my candidacy.

I would like to thank all of you who aided my candidacy.

- Their forecasts are best prepared when they *take* the functional area forecasts *into consideration*.

Their forecasts are best prepared when they *consider* the functional area forecasts.

Noun phrases

These are flaccid phrases that often begin with *a* or *the* followed by a noun and end with *of*. They can easily be made firm, as the following examples show.

(a; the) -ance of and (a; the) -ence of phrases

- *Maintenance of* this flow is assured by their willingness to rubber-stamp the decisions of their benefactor.

Maintaining this flow is assured by their willingness to rubber-stamp the decisions of their benefactor.

- When a number of investment proposals perform essentially the same function so that *the acceptance of* one proposal necessarily means rejecting the others, we are dealing with mutually exclusive investments.

When a number of investment proposals perform essentially the same function so that *accepting* one proposal necessarily means rejecting the others, we are dealing with mutually exclusive investments.

(a; the) -sion of and (a; the) -tion of phrases

- *The inclusion of* families is crucial if nurses are to become a source of help rather than an addition to families' difficulties.

Including families is crucial if nurses are to become a source of help rather than an addition to families' difficulties.

- *The installation and testing of a new product, the conversion of* user files, and training users are not small matters.

Installing and testing a new product, *converting* user files, and training users are not small matters.

(a; the) -ment of phrases

- For more than a decade, Motorola invested in *the development and marketing of* cellular systems and phones around the world.

For more than a decade, Motorola invested in *developing and marketing* cellular systems and phones around the world.

- To the masses, a good government is one that prevents the strong from exploiting the weak, which is best done by *the punishment of transgression*.

To the masses, a good government is one that prevents the strong from exploiting the weak, which is best done by *punishing* transgression.

(a; the) -ing of phrases

- Personal computers were meant to give people more flexibility in *the processing of* information.

Personal computers were meant to give people more flexibility in *processing* information.

- Organizing at the middle level means *the making of* specific adjustments in the organizational structure and *the allocating of* the resources acquired by top management.

Organizing at the middle level means *making* specific adjustments in the organizational structure and *allocating* the resources acquired by top management.

the ... of phrases

- You have to deal with *the issues of* betrayal, anger, rejection—all these things.

You have to deal with betrayal, anger, rejection—all these things.

- In other situations, *the practice of* rotating managers of work teams on a normal schedule can stimulate a group.

In other situations, rotating managers of work teams on a normal schedule can stimulate a group.

Adjectives and adverbs

By coupling adjectives and adverbs to perfectly good nouns, verbs, or adjectives, we often diminish the force and effectiveness of our writing. Powerful writing is taut; it admits no weak word, no superfluous adjective or adverb.

Consider these examples.

active; actively

- Individual managers need to be *actively* involved in the human resource planning process.