Avoiding Wordiness

Don Norwood
“Such preparations shall be made as will completely obscure all Federal buildings and non-Federal buildings occupied by the Federal government during an air raid for any period of time from visibility by reason of internal or external illumination.”
“Tell them that in buildings where they have to keep the work going to put something across the windows.”
Why is wordiness a problem?

- Confuses and/or frustrates the reader
- Causes ambiguity
- Increases word counts
Wordiness = clutter
Types of wordiness

- Unnecessary words
- Confusing phrase and sentence constructions
- Excessive repetition
- Pompous language
- Meaningless jargon
Ways to avoid wordiness

• Remove unnecessary words

• Use active, not passive, voice when appropriate

• Minimize repetition

• Avoid pompous language and meaningless jargon
Original: Although some controversies exist, it seems to be clear that there is a subset of patients who do benefit from intensive induction chemotherapy. (23 words)

Revised: Although controversies exist, some patients seem to benefit from intensive induction chemotherapy. (12 words)
Remove unnecessary words

Original: Strong formal proof of this hypothesis has not been published at this time. (13 words)

Revised: Proof of this hypothesis has not been published. (8 words)
Original: There have been several epidemiologic studies that have shown a drastic decrease in the mortality of liver cancer in second-generation versus first-generation Japanese immigrants. (24 words)

Revised: Several epidemiologic studies have shown a drastic decrease in the mortality of liver cancer in second-generation versus first-generation Japanese immigrants. (20 words)
At the present time → Now
A considerable number of → Many
A majority of → Most
Give rise to → Cause
In close proximity to → Near
In order to → To
It is often the case that → Often
Accurately delineate → Delineate
Specifically excluded → Excluded
Original: Human tumor tissue specimens obtained from prostate cancer patients (9 words)

Revised: Tumor specimens from prostate cancer patients (6 words)
Original: The animal facility has accommodations for up to 500 mice. (10 words)

Revised: The animal facility holds up to 500 mice. (8 words)
Original: The physicians’ decision was to perform immediate treatment administration. (9 words)

Revised: The physicians decided to immediately administer treatment. (7 words)
Passive: Mistakes were made when I created the plan.

Active: I made mistakes when I created the plan.
Original: The results demonstrating common p53 expression were presented by the researchers. (11 words)

Revised: The researchers presented results demonstrating common p53 expression. (8 words)
Original: The WBC count and LDH level were shown to be different in the two patient groups in our study. (19 words)

Revised: We showed that the WBC count and LDH level were different in the two patient groups. (16 words)
Original: If the patients did not pass this evaluation, low-intensity therapy, such as low-dose cytarabine or demethylating agents, was offered to them. (21 words)

Revised: If the patients did not pass this evaluation, we offered them low-intensity therapy, such as low-dose cytarabine or demethylating agents. (20 words)
Original: We measured MAPK expression, ERK expression, PI3K expression, and MEK expression. (11 words)

Revised: We measured the expression of MAPK, ERK, PI3K, and MEK. (10 words)
Original: The mice exhibited resistance to the treatment. The mice also had short overall survival durations. (15 words)

Revised: The mice exhibited treatment resistance and had short overall survival durations. (11 words)
Minimize repetition

Original: Twenty patients had high HDL levels, 14 patients had normal HDL levels, and 8 patients had low HDL levels. (19 words)

Revised: Twenty patients had high HDL levels, 14 had normal levels, and 8 had low levels. (15 words)
Avoid pompous language

Original: Trainees are given enhanced decision participation in key areas of our murine-based studies. (13 words)

Revised: Trainees can make key decisions in our mouse studies. (9 words)
Original: The researchers are considering participating in the performance of numerous trials. (11 words)

Revised: The researchers are considering performing numerous trials. (7 words)
Original: Many physicians utilize this methodology in the clinical setting. (9 words)

Revised: Many physicians use this method clinically. (6 words)
Original: We are examining breast cancer tumorigenesis. (6 words)

Revised: We are examining breast tumorigenesis. (5 words)
Tips

1. Care about the words that are used
2. Imitate writers in high-impact journals
3. Read troublesome passages out loud
4. Use dictionaries and *Roget’s Thesaurus*
“Anything that goes wrong will always be wordier than anything that goes right.”

Sir Harold Evans

Scientific Publications

- http://inside.mdanderson.org/departments/scipub/
- Tel: 713-792-3305
- E-mail: scientificpublications@mdanderson.org
- Location: Mid Campus Building 1