

Department of Scientific Publications

Avoiding Wordiness

Don Norwood



A history lesson

"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."

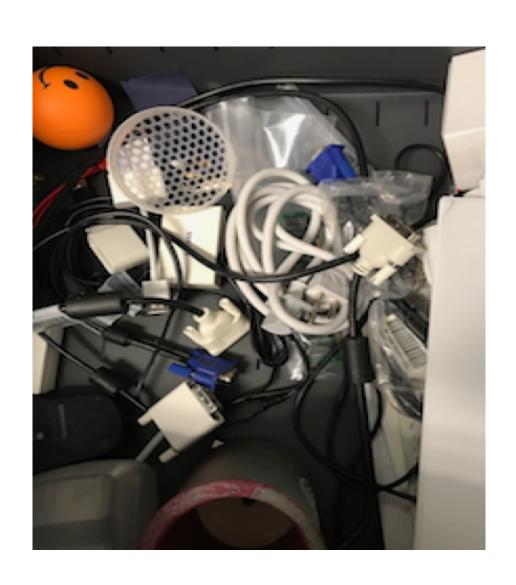
A history lesson

"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)

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 firstgeneration 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 \rightarrow 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)

Minimize repetition

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)

Minimize repetition

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)

Avoid pompous language

Original: The researchers are considering participating in the performance of numerous trials. (11 words)

Revised: The researchers are considering performing numerous trials. (7 words)

Eliminate meaningless jargon

Original: Many physicians utilize this methodology in the clinical setting. (9 words)

Revised: Many physicians use this method

clinically. (6 words)

Eliminate meaningless jargon

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

Food for thought

"Anything that goes wrong will always be wordier than anything that goes right."

Sir Harold Evans

Resources

Evans H. *Do I Make Myself Clear? Why Writing Well Matters*. New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company; 2017.

Zinsser W. On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction. New York, NY: HarperCollins; 2001.

Scientific Publications

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