Clarity and Concision

Clarity and concision are important in scientific writing. Because the ideas and concepts in scientific writing are so complex, they need to be presented to readers in a way that’s understandable and precise. This handout offers suggestions and strategies for reducing wordiness and improving clarity.

Eliminate:

**Writing zeroes**
Writing zeroes are words that do not add meaning or clarity to writing. Usually, writing zeroes can be eliminated without changing the surrounding sentence.

- For example: “In the course of our study, we discovered...” becomes “In the course of our study, We discovered...”

Below are some common writing zeroes that can be eliminated from your writing:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The presence of</th>
<th>As a matter of fact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It should be pointed out that</td>
<td>I/we might add that</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is noteworthy that</td>
<td>In the course of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is interesting to note that</td>
<td>The fact that</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Expletives – it is/was or there is/are/was/were*

*Notice that several of the writing zeroes above start with “it is.”* Keep an eye out for this and for sentence construction that begins, “there is.” Often, these constructions indicate a writing zero.

**Prepositional phrases**
Prepositional phrases are those that begin with prepositions like in, with, for, over, through, at, by. Often these phrases provide extraneous information and can be eliminated.

**Adjectives and adverbs**
Like prepositional phrases and writing zeroes, adjectives and adverbs often complicate sentences without adding meaning or clarity. Below are some common adjectives and adverbs that can usually be removed.
Adjectives: Comprehensive, detailed, fundamental, specific, particular, somewhat, kind of, sort of, type of...
Adverbs: Very, really, basically, definitely, actually, practically, generally...

Trim Bulky and Redundant Phrases:

**Redundancies/Tautologies**
Below are words commonly used together. The words in parenthesis are redundant. You can simplify your sentences by removing the tautology.

(already) existing  introduced (a new)  (empty) space start
(alternative) choices  mix (together)  (out)
(at the) present (time)  never (before)  had done (previously)
(basic) fundamentals  none (at all)  (still) persists
(completely) eliminate  now (at this time)  (end) result
(continue to) remain  period (of time)  (final) outcome
(currently) being  (private) industry  (currently) underway
(separate) entities  (various) differences  each (individual)

**Circumlocutions**
Avoid indirect and roundabout writing. Direct writing is more concise and allows your ideas to be more clear for readers.

**Bulky**  **Trim**
At this point in time  now
At that point in time  then
Has the ability to  can
Has the potential to  can
In light of the fact that  because
In the event that  if
Owing/due to the fact that  because
The question as to whether  whether
There is no doubt but that  no doubt

**More circumlocutions**
the reason for  =because, since, why
for the reason that
considering the fact that
on the grounds that
this is why
on the occasion of
in a situation in which
under circumstances in which

as regards
in reference to
with regard to
concerning the matter of
where _______ is concerned

it is crucial that
it is necessary that
there is a need/necessity for it is
important that
cannot be avoided

is able to
has the opportunity to
has the capacity for

it is possible that
there is a chance that it
could happen that
the possibility exists for

Simplify sentences and get to the point:

Verb phrases

Often writers use complex verb tenses that result in 2 or more verbs when a simple verb tense will do.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bulky</th>
<th>Trim</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>are aware of/have knowledge of</td>
<td>know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>are taking</td>
<td>take</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>are indications/indicative of</td>
<td>indicate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>are suggestive of</td>
<td>suggest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>can be compared to</td>
<td>resemble</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Needlessly complex words

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Possible Substitute</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nouns</td>
<td>Familiarization</td>
<td>Familiarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Utilization</td>
<td>Use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbs</td>
<td>Facilitate</td>
<td>Cause</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Finalize</td>
<td>Finish/end</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Utilize</td>
<td>Use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjectives</td>
<td>Individualized</td>
<td>Individual</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Adverbs/Prepositions

| Firstly, secondly, thirdly | First, second, third |
| Heretofore | Previous |
| Hitherto | Until now |
| Therewith | With |
| Amongst | Among |

Nominalizations
Nominalization occurs when words that are not nouns become used as nouns, often at the beginning of a subject or noun phrase. Often, this results in overly complex and convoluted sentences that would be more clear with a distinct action.

- For example: “The discovery of the researchers was that the frontal lobe showed increased activation.” *Discovery* is a nominalization of the verb *discover*. A more direct, active construction, without the nominalization reads, “Researchers discovered increased activation in the frontal lobe.”

Common nominalizations include
- Establishment, measurement, development, collection, discovery, movement, reaction, completion, failure, refusal, discussion, investigation...

*Spend time editing:*

**Editing tips for clarity and concision**
1: Dedicate one read-through solely to cutting. No additions allowed.
2: Use the Find/Search feature in Word/Adobe to hunt wordiness down
3: Search and/or circle:
   - redundancies and zeroes you know you’re prone to
   - any instance of expletives (*it* + *be* verbs or *there* + *be* verbs)
   - any preposition beginning a phrase
   - adverbs, especially “very” and “really”

References
1. The Writing Center at CU Denver. Clarity and concision. 2015.