Revising for Concision

Even though academic writing can seem wordy, the best academic writing communicates everything relevant in as few words as possible. Trying to fulfill high word counts or create paragraphs with a fixed number of sentences can lead to wordiness, which can confuse the reader and cloud our ideas. Instead, writers should strive to be precise and concise in their writing.

Changes at the global level:
Before focusing on details at the sentence level, look at your paper as a whole and try to identify and delete any repetitive content. Read each body paragraph aloud and locate its topic sentence. Make sure that all sentences within a paragraph relate to the topic sentence and remove or relocate sentences that do not.

Changes at the sentence level:
After reviewing your entire paper, study sentences in your draft one-by-one to see what you can delete without losing meaning. When reviewing your sentences, use the list of tips for precise and concise writing below, and consult the detailed explanations with examples for more guidance. Note that these strategies are merely suggestions; for example, not every "this" *needs* to be followed with a specific noun, and not every embedded question *needs* to be replaced. However, these tips might help you see that even a small change can make a big difference.

Replace words and phrases:
1. Delete weak adverbs.
2. Delete redundant words and phrases.
3. Change longer verb phrases into stronger, single-word verbs.
4. Change negative constructions into positive ones.
5. Follow "this", "that", "these", or "those" with a noun.
6. Use specific nouns and phrases to be precise in meaning.

Revise sentence structure:
7. Keep your subjects and main verbs as close together as possible.
8. Watch for sentences and clauses beginning with "it is", "this is", or similar constructions. 9. Replace wordy embedded questions with more specific noun or verb phrases.
10. Eliminate unnecessary metadiscourse.

Additional Tips

1. Delete weak adverbs. Sentences without them often have the same meaning:

Wordy	Change	Concise
We found the proposal <u>quite</u> feasible.	Delete "quite"	We found the proposal feasible.
The remark, though unkind, was <u>very</u> accurate.	Delete "very"	The remark, though unkind, was accurate.

Other weak adverbs that can usually be removed include: *extremely, fairly, definitely, entirely*

2. Delete redundant words and phrases:

Wordy	Change	Concise
<u>Any</u> student could <u>randomly</u> sit anywhere.	Delete "any" and "randomly". If students could sit "anywhere," seating was clearly "random."	Students could sit <u>anywhere</u>.
My essay will discuss all the <u>new</u> and <u>recent</u> studies in the field.	Delete one of the redundant adjectives. Both "new" and "recent" have the same meaning.	My essay will discuss all the <u>recent</u> studies in the field.

3. Change longer verb phrases into stronger, single-word verbs:

Wordy	Change	Concise
The scene <u>is taking</u> place at night, in front of the capitol building.	Use the simple tense "takes" instead of progressive "is taking".	The scene <u>takes</u> place at night, in front of the capitol building.
The friar <u>is knowledgeable</u> that Juliet is alive.	Use one verb, rather than "is" + an adjective.	The friar <u>knows</u> that Juliet is alive.
First, I will <u>talk about</u> the growing problem of media censorship.	Change a two-word verb into a one-word verb.	First, I will <u>discuss</u> the growing problem of media censorship.

4. Change negative constructions into positive constructions:

Wordy	Change	Clear & Concise
Housing for partnered students is not unworthy of consideration.	Delete "not" and "un-".	Housing for partnered students is worthy of consideration.

5. Follow "this", "that", "these", or "those" with a noun:

Wordy	Change	Clear
This contributed to the lack of believability in the story.	Add a specific noun after "this" which matches the topic.	This duplicity contributed to the lack of believability in the story.

6. Use specific nouns and phrases so sentences to be precise in meaning instead of raising more questions:

Wordy	Change	Clear & Concise
One of my extracurricular activities is doing thoughtful things for other people.	What do you mean by "doing thoughtful things"? Who are "other people"?	One of my extracurricular activities is doing community service for a local women's shelter.
The economic situation of Anne Moody was also a crucial factor in the formation of her character.	What kind of economic situation?	Anne Moody's poverty was also a crucial factor in the formation of her character.

7. Keep your subject and main verb as close together as possible. It's easier for your reader to absorb information if they see the subject and verb at the beginning of a sentence:

Wordy	Change	Clear & Concise
In Johnson (2014), the main purpose of the researcher's social experiment that observed college students who take SOCI 600 was to	Rearrange the sentence so that the main verb follows the subject as closely as possible.	Johnson (2014) measured SOCI 600 students' responses to certain stimuli in a social experiment.

measure their responses to certain stimuli.		

8. Watch for sentences or clauses that begin with "it is", "this is", or similar constructions.

Sentences can often be made more direct with strong subjects and verbs at the beginning:

Wordy	Change	Clear & Concise
The Book of Ruth was probably written in the fifth century B.C. It was a time when women were considered the property of men.	Join the two sentences, replace "it is" with "when".	The Book of Ruth was probably written in the fifth century B.C., when women were considered the property of men.
It is frequently considered that _____ *Hamlet* _____ is Shakespeare's most puzzling play.	Make *Hamlet* the subject of the sentence.	*Hamlet* is frequently considered Shakespeare's most puzzling play.
There are two pine trees which grow behind this house.	Delete "there are" and "which".	Two pine trees grow behind this house.

9. Replace embedded questions with clearer noun or verb phrases:

Wordy	Change	Clear & Concise
HIV-AIDS education should be focused on sexual education, but the facts about what the disease is and how it affects people are just as important.	Transform the embedded question into the noun phrase.	HIV-AIDS education should be focused on sexual education, but the facts about the disease and its effects are just as important.
The extent of the conversation is what drives the plot.	Transform the embedded question to the verb phrase.	The extent of the conversation drives the plot.

10. Delete unnecessary metadiscourse. These are words or phrases that comment on the main content of the sentence.

Wordy	Change	Clear & Concise

<u>It is important to note that</u> these guidelines are not universally applicable. <u>We can say without any doubt that</u> these results have important implications for our field.	Delete the word or phrase that comments on the main content of the sentence, if it is not necessary.	These guidelines are not universally applicable. These results have important implications for our field.

These tips are adapted from Barnet, S. and Stubbs, M. (1980). *Barnett and Stubbs Practical Guide to Writing. Little,* Brown and Company.