Reducing Wordiness

Writing often conveys ideas that are new or difficult for readers. The following suggestions, adapted from Dr. John Williams's principles of readability, can help you to begin writing with more clarity.

1. The “doer” of the sentence should be in the subject position.

Example: Joe threw the ball. vs. The ball was thrown by Joe.

The first sentence is clearer, because the one doing the action (Joe) is in the subject position at the beginning of the sentence. After the subject, the action is represented by the verb “threw.” This principle is also known as the active voice.

2. Action should be expressed in a verb, rather than a noun.

Avoid sentences that express major actions through nouns derived from verbs (nominalizations), rather than the verbs themselves.

Example: The captain conducted an investigation into the matter.

The major action is conveyed through the nominalization “conducted an investigation.” The sentence would be clearer if written with the major action being expressed through a verb.

Example: The captain investigated the matter.

3. State your point in the affirmative. Avoid the negative.

Sentences that are written in the affirmative have greater strength and are clearer for a reader. Avoid the word “not” where possible.

Example: “Most students study hard.” is clearer than “Not many students don’t study hard.”

Example: “He declined the invitation.” is clearer than “He did not accept the invitation.”

4. Prune sentences of empty expressions.

Get rid of words and phrases that do not contribute directly to the main point of your sentence.

Example: Insofar as he is basically a good man, the President is also undeniably a good leader.

This sentence could be trimmed of unnecessary, overcomplicated or obvious words and phrases.

Example: The President is a good man and also a good leader.