

CONCISENESS

By

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1. INTRODUCTION

Effective communication requires not only having relevant information to transmit but also good packaging of the information. Relevant information can be and does get watered down if and when it mixed with irrelevant non-function words. Think of high quality grains that are sold mixed with chaff; that is, without winnowing. A text is said to be concise when it contains only those words that are functional in the delivery of the intended message. In other words, a concise text contains the optimal number of words required to deliver message. To go back to our analogy of grains, concise message is grains that are free of chaff.

2. JOSEPH WILLIAM'S PRINCIPLES OF CONCISE WRITING

Joseph Williams (1990), has proposed two principles of concise writing. They are:

- 1) Compress what you mean into the fewest words possible; and
- 2) Do not state what your reader can easily infer.

To illustrate a wordy and, therefore, in-concise writing, he gives the following example:

In my personal opinion, we must listen and think over in a punctilious manner each and every suggestion that is offered to us.

William demonstrates that the twenty-three words sentence contains many words that are redundant, that is, not useful. The sentence can be reduced to six words without any loss of meaning. Applying the two principles of concise writing, we are able to delete words that do not contribute to the meaning. After applying the two principles, we end up with one of the two concise sentences:

- 1) We must carefully consider every suggestion
- 2) We must carefully consider each suggestion

3. SOURCES ON INCONCISE LANGUAGE

Williams (1990) identifies a number of sources of wordiness. The sources he identifies are:

- 1) Redundant pairs;
- 2) Redundant modifiers;
- 3) Redundant categories;
- 4) Meaningless modifiers;
- 5) Belabouring a point; and
- 6) Using a phrase rather than a word with a corresponding function.

To these six sources of in-concise language, we may add two more, namely:

- 7) Nominalisations
- 8) Same-function words in the same expression; and

In order to write concisely, we need to stay clear of the usages that lead to the in-concise language. This can be done by observing the following:

- 1) Use only one member of a redundant pair;
- 2) Do not use a redundant modifier;
- 3) Do not use a redundant category;
- 4) Do not use a meaningless modifier;
- 5) Do not belabour an issue;
- 6) Use a word rather than the corresponding phrase;
- 7) Do not use nominalisations; and
- 8) Do not use same-function words in the same sentence.

4. HOW TO WRITE CONCISELY

a) Use only one member of a redundant pair

A redundant pair is a group of two words that have the same meaning such that if one member of the pair is used, the second member becomes irrelevant or redundant. In other words, using the second word does not add new information to the expression. Such pairs include: full and complete, true and accurate, hope and trust, each and every, first and foremost, so on and so forth, various and sundry, and basic and fundamental.

In the utterance “full and complete”, the words “full” and “complete” serve the same purpose. It is inconceivable that something that is “full” could be “incomplete” or something that is “complete” could at the same time not be “full”. Consequently, using the word “full” after the word “complete” is inconsequential in terms of meaning. Likewise, using the word “complete” after “full” is of no value. We should, therefore, use only one of these words and not both of them.

b) Do not use a redundant modifier

A modifier is a word or a phrase that gives information on another word or a group of words. Adjectives, which give information on nouns, are modifiers. So are adverbs because they provide information on verbs. Modifiers may also give information on a phrase or a sentence.

A redundant modifier is the one that gives information that is already contained in the word which is being modified or qualified. Since the information in the modifier is already contained in the word being modified, the modifier is redundant or irrelevant. Such modifiers should not be used.

Redundant modifiers include “completely” in “*completely* finish”, “past” in “*past* memory”, “basic” in “*basic* fundamentals”, “free” in a “*free* gift”, and “terrible” in a “*terrible* tragedy”.

Let us explore the modifiers in the above expressions are redundant:

Completely finish:

To “finish” an activity or any phenomenon implies “completing” it just as “completing” something implies “finishing” it. We infer one from the other. It is inconceivable, for instance, to “finish” an exercise and still have the exercise is “incomplete”. Indeed, such a situation is a contraction in terms. Therefore, qualifying the verb “finish” with the adverb “completely” is redundant.

Past memory:

By definition, memory is repository in the mind of a phenomenon or phenomena which has been witnessed. Hence, the meaning rendered by the word “past” is already contained in the word “memory”. That is why using the word “past” before the word “memory” does not add to the meaning of expression that contains the word “memory”.

Terrible tragedy:

According to the *Cambridge Advanced learners' Dictionary*, a “tragedy” is “a very sad event or situation, especially one involving death or suffering...”. Since a “tragedy” is a “terrible event or situation”, it is not possible to have a tragedy that is not terrible! Thus, it is redundant to describe any tragedy as “terrible”

Free gift:

A “gift” is something that is “given for free”. In other words, the attribute of “given for free” is already contained in the meaning of the noun “gift”. Consequently, the word “free” purported to be a modifier in the expression “free gift” does not add anything to the meaning of the noun “gift”. “Free” is superfluous in the expression in the expression “a free gift”. To put it differently, it is a redundant modifier.

One example that I have occasionally used in my classes to demonstrate the notion of redundant modifier is a “female girl”. Since girls are necessarily female, the example

sounds so odd to students that it leads to laughter. The word “female” in the expression is not only redundant but bizarre. I rough in the point by asking students whether they have ever met a “male girl”.

c) Do not use a redundant category

Some words imply categories in which they belong. In other words, the reader can infer the category without the category being mentioned. For instance, when we see the word “afternoon”, we know that the word refers to time. It is, therefore unnecessary for a writer to give us that information. To do so is to waste time and energy because the information is accessible without being stated. Providing it does not contribute to communication. Consequently, when we use words which imply their categories, we should avoid mentioning the categories. Failure to do so, leads to language that is unnecessary wordy.

Let us look at the following sentence in Williams (1990):

During that period of time, the Adam’s apple area of his neck looked enlarged in size, pink in colour, smooth in texture and shiny in appearance.

There are several words in the sentence which specify categories that we can infer from the members of the categories. “Period” is part of “time” and, therefore, we can infer it without its being mentioned. Moreover, we know that “Adam’s apple” refers to an “area of the neck”. In other words, it is a member of the category “areas of the neck”. Once someone mentions “Adam’s apple” it is redundant to state that it is an area of the neck. The sentence mentioned that the Adam’s apple was “enlarged” and then purports to supply further information by stating “in size”. A section of the human body, or a section of anything else, can not be enlarged in anything else except size. Therefore, “in size” does not provide the reader with new information; the reader has already inferred the information from the word enlarged. The sentence also mentioned that the Adam’s apple was “smooth” and then adds, “in texture”. “Smoothness” is an aspect of texture. Put differently, “texture” is a category that includes such members as “smooth”, “rough” and “course”. Consequently, adding “in text” does not provide new information. Finally, the

sentence states that the Adam's apple was "shiny" and adds "in appearance". "Appearance" is a category that includes members such as "shiny", "dull" and "bright". Once we know that something is shiny, we immediately know that the reference is to appearance.

When we eliminate the category words from the sentence, we end up with a leaner construction, that is:

During that period, the Adam's apple looked enlarged, pink, smooth and shiny.

We can eliminate words showing categories by changing an adjective into an adverb. Once more I use an example from Williams (1990):

The holes must be aligned in accurate manner

We can make the sentence concise by changing the adjective "accurate" into the adverb "accurately". The change results in the following two concise expressions:

- 1) The holes must be accurately aligned; or
- 2) The holes must be aligned accurately

We can also reduce redundancy and achieve conciseness by changing an adjective into a noun and then dropping the original noun. For example, the sentence:

According to the our Constitution, coordinating agricultural activities is the responsibility of county governments

can be changed into:

According to our Constitution, coordinating agriculture is the responsibility of county governments.

Below are fifteen sentences which have redundant categories. In each of the sentences, the word referring to the category together with the preceding preposition is italicized:

- 1) James is six feet tall *in height*.
- 2) She has bought a car that is very beautiful *in appearance*.
- 3) I don't eat honey; I find it too sweet *in taste*.
- 4) Your hands are rough *in texture*.
- 5) Elizabeth has moved into a house which is large *in size*.
- 6) I want a shirt that is bright *in colour*.
- 7) I'm sweating because I have walked for two kilometers carrying a brief case that is heavy *in weight*.
- 8) There was a huge object which was round *in shape*.
- 9) Today, I went to the library *at an early time*.
- 10) Why don't we meet in the morning *time*.
- 11) I last saw her during the holiday *season*.
- 12) I wish Peter was honest *in character*
- 13) He appears to be *in a* confused *state*
- 14) Her anger was extreme *in degree*
- 15) I have always said he is a man *of* a strange *type*

When we eliminate the redundancies in the above sentences, we get the following corresponding concise constructions:

- 1) James is six feet tall.
- 2) She has bought a very beautiful car.
- 3) I don't eat honey; I find it too sweet.
- 4) Your hands are rough.
- 5) Elizabeth has moved into a big house.
- 6) I want a bright shirt.

- 7) I'm sweating because I have walked for two kilometers carrying a heavy briefcase.
- 8) There was a huge, round object.
- 9) Today, I went to the library early.
- 10) Why don't we meet in the morning?
- 11) I last saw her during the holiday.
- 12) I wish Peter was honest.
- 13) He appears to be confused.
- 14) Her anger was extreme.
- 15) I have always said he is a strange man.

d) Do not use meaningless modifiers

Some people get accustomed to using modifiers in a manner that does not contribute to meaning. This habit is more common in spoken than written language. Modifiers that are often used in a meaningless manner include:

As well

By the way

Kind of

Really

Practically

Actually

Generally

Certainly

For example

Now that

Absolutely

To illustrate meaningless use of qualifiers, let us look at the following five sentences:

- 1) If I *actually* pass my examinations and *actually* get a job, I will *actually* start saving early so that I *actually* buy a house by the time I am thirty five years.
- 2) Tell viewers why *really* the Government is *really* doing what is doing after *really* promising people that it will *really* create many jobs every year.
- 3) I would *generally* like to be successfully so that I *generally* assist people who are *generally* disadvantaged in society.
- 4) Tell viewers *for example* what the Ministry *for example* is doing *for example* to stem the destruction of *for example* school property by students.
- 5) Today is *absolutely* Tuesday.

The messages in the above sentences could have been better rendered the corresponding sentences below:

- 1a) If I pass my examinations and get a job, I will start saving early so that I buy a house by the time I am thirty five years.
- 2a) Tell viewers the Government is doing what it is doing after promising people that it will create many jobs every year.
- 3a) I would like to be successful so that I assist people who are disadvantaged in society.
- 4a) Tell viewers what the Ministry is doing to stem the destruction of school property by students
- 5a) Today is Tuesday.

It is important to note that the modifiers we have exemplified above are not always redundant, that is, they are not inherently redundant. If a speaker keeps on referring to Jane as Susan and eventually Jane says: “I’m actually Jane.”, Jane will have used “actually” in a functional way. We will understand Jane to be saying: “Contrary to what you call me, I’m called Jane”. Likewise, if we are discussing some project we are doing together, and in the course of our discussion I say, By the way I’m travelling to Dubai next week, I will use “by the way” in a functional way. Finally, if you tell me that it is 12.00

noon and on quickly glancing at my watch I discover it is 1.00, and I say, It's actually 1.00, I will have used "actually" in a manner that is not superfluous.

e) Do not belabour an issue

Sometimes, instead of expressing a thought concisely, people use too many words that do not contribute to the meaning of the expression. Let us look at the following sentence taken from Williams (1990):

I love working in the garden busying myself with activities such as planting different species of garden plants, tendering colourful flowers, pruning and arranging bushes, applying fertilizers at the base of flowers and other plants and watering the garden especially when it is not raining.

The long sentence expresses the idea of "gardening". Communicating the idea would have been accomplished by simply writing:

I love gardening.

Let us consider a second example:

Read this document very keen and try to locate spelling, grammatical and stylistic mistakes but also errors concerning place names, peoples' titles and dates of events and then effect all the necessary corrections.

The sentence has thirty three words. However, the message contained therein can be rendered in only three words, namely:

Edit this document.

f) Use a word rather a corresponding phrase

Another source of in-concise language is using a phrase instead of a word that has the same meaning as the phrase. There are many phrases that can be replaced with single words. Using the relevant single word instead of the corresponding phrase reduces the number of words in an expression. Such a reduction of words is good for our goal to achieve conciseness.

Phrases that share meaning with single words and which, therefore, can be replaced by the relevant single words include:

The reason for
For the reason that
Due to the fact that
Owing to the fact that
In light of the fact that
Considering the fact that
On the grounds that
This is why
Despite the fact that
Regardless of the fact that
Notwithstanding the fact that

The first sentence in each of the following sets of sentences has a phrase that can be replaced by a word bearing the same function as the phrase. In the second sentence of the set a single word is substituted for the phrase in the first sentence. Both the phrase in the first sentence of the set and the word replacing it in the second sentence are italicised:

- 1) The *reason for* my not attending the seminar yesterday is that I was unwell.
- 1a) I did not attend the seminar yesterday *because* I was unwell.
- 2) I couldn't make it to the University today *for the reason that* I was held up in a meeting.
- 2a) I couldn't make it to the University today *because* I was held

up in a meeting .

3) *Due to the fact that* it was raining, I couldn't come to class.

3a) I couldn't come to class *since* it was raining.

4) He did not pay me *owing to the fact that* their salary has been delayed.

4a) He did not pay me *because* their salary has been delayed.

5) I could not travel *in light of the fact that* all the tickets were sold out by the time I got to the booking office.

5a) I could not travel *since* all the tickets were sold out by the time I got to the booking office.

6) *Considering the fact that* he did not attend many of his classes, he failed 1) his examinations.

6a) He failed his examinations *because* he did not attend many of his classes.

7) The meeting was postponed *on the grounds that* some key people did not turn up.

7a) The meeting was postponed *because* some key people did not turn up.

8) *Despite the fact that* it was raining heavily, the students attended the lecture in large numbers.

8a) The students attended the lecture in large numbers *although* it was raining heavily.

9) I will read the book *regardless of the fact that* I'm very busy.

9a) I will read the book *although* I'm very busy.

10) *Notwithstanding the fact that* I did not study literature, I enjoy reading drama.

10a) I enjoy reading drama *although* I did not study literature.

g) Avoid Nominalizations

In the following three pairs of sentences, alternative (a) contains a nominalization whereas alternative (b) uses the corresponding verb. In each of the three pairs alternative (b) is more concise and, consequently, a better option stylistically.

- 1) The inauguration of the President will take place within the next two weeks.
- 1a) The President will be inaugurated within the next two weeks.
- 2) The Ministry will make a decision on the matter in tomorrow.
- 2a) The Ministry will decide on the matter tomorrow.
- 3) Our discussion concerned next week's trip to Zanzibar.
- 3a) We discussed next week's journey to Zanzibar.

Please note that the 1), 2) and 3) which have the nouns “inauguration”, “decision” and “discussion” all of which are created from verbs through the process of nominalization are longer than the corresponding sentences in 1a), 2a), and 3a). Sentences 1a), 2a) and 3a) are concise whereas sentences 1), 2) and 3) are not.

Nominalisation is the process of creating nouns from other parts of speech. Many nouns created through nominalization come from either verbs or adjectives. Below are nouns created from verbs through nominalisation:

Verb	Corresponding noun
Administer	Administration
Adjust	Adjustment
Collect	Collection
Injure	Injury
Meditate	Meditation
Imitate	Imitation

Using a noun created through nominalisations forces one to also use a preposition and sometimes a verb before the noun. For instance, we say “make a decision on” (four words) when we use the noun “decision”. If we use the corresponding verb, that is

“decide” we will just one word instead of four. Let us look at the following two sentences, one containing a noun created through nominalisation and the second containing the corresponding verb:

1) We have made a decision on how to use the money.

1a) We have decided how to use the money.

As can be clearly seen, we achieve conciseness when we use the verb (Sentence 1a) then when we use noun created through nominalization (Sentence 1a). For that reason, whenever possible we should use verbs rather the nouns created from them through nominalization. For instance, instead of using the expressions in the left column which contain nouns created from nominalization we should use the expressions in the right column which contain verbs:

Expressions to be avoided

Expressions to use

Conduct an investigation

Investigate

Carry out an interrogation

Interrogate

Give an urgent report

Report urgently

Make a quick decision

Decide quickly

Offer a suggestion

Suggest

Issue an announcement

Announce

Conduct a careful examination

Examine carefully

Cause a drop in the morale

Demoralise

Carry out an implementation

Implement

Give an advice

Advise

To appreciate why the forms with the verbs are concise as opposed to the forms containing the noun created through nominalization, note the difference in the number of words in the corresponding expressions in the two columns.

The process of nominalization is also used to create nouns from adjectives as shown below:

Adjective	Corresponding noun
Correct	Correction
Just	Justice
Legal	Legality
Whole	Wholeness
Black	Blackness

As in the case of verbs and the nouns created from them, expressions containing adjectives are usually shorter than expressions containing nouns created from the adjectives. Let us look at the two pairs of sentences below:

- 1) Mrs. Hassan's effectiveness in teaching enables her students to pass examinations with flying colours.
- 1a) Mrs. Hassan's effective teaching enables her students to pass examinations with flying colours.
- 2) His fair treatment of the orphans earned him praise.
- 2a) His treatment of the orphans with fairness earned him praise.

Sentences 1a) and 2a) both of which use adjectives are shorter, that is more concise, than sentences 1) and 2) respectively which employ nouns created from the adjectives. These illustrations help us to conclude that, when we are faced with the option of using either an adjective or a corresponding noun, we achieve better results by using the adjective rather than the noun.

I would like to make a case for using adverbs of manner. There are occasions when one has to choose between using an adverb of manner created from an adjective or a noun created from the same adjective. In such cases, expressions containing the adverb are

more concise than the expressions using the corresponding nouns. Let us look at the following pair of sentences:

- 2) Treat the workers with fairness to avoid legal consequences
- 1a) Treat the workers fairly to avoid legal consequences

Sentence 1) has nine words whereas Sentence 1a) has eight words; in other words, Sentence 1a) is shorter and, consequently, more preferable as compared to Sentence 1).

Note that Sentence 1) would have been longer than it is if we used two nouns, that is, one created from the adjective “fair” and the second from the adjective “legal”, thus:

- 1b) Treat the workers with fairness to avoid consequences of the law.

Sentence 1b) has eleven words, that is, two more words than Sentence 1) and three more words than Sentence 1a). We achieve the optimal conciseness in Sentence 1a) by using the adverb “fairly” instead of the noun “fairness” and the adjective “legal” instead of the noun “law”.

In spite of the above advocacy for verbs, adjectives and adverbs rather than nouns created through nominalisation, there are isolated instances where the expression with the noun is more concise than the expression with, for instance, a verb. For illustration, let us take a pair of sentences with one sentence containing a noun and the second containing the corresponding verb:

- 1) I’m going to get a birth certificate for my daughter.
- 1a) I’m going to get a certificate indicating when my daughter was born.

Sentence 1), which contains the noun “birth” but functioning as a qualifier in “birth certificate” is shorter and more direct than the sentence 1a) which uses the past form of

the verb “bear” in the long-winding direct object “certificate indicating when my daughter was born”.

h) Do not use same-function words

Many instances of in-concise expressions in both spoken and written language arise from use of the same-function words. Often times, I have heard very respectable television broadcaster telling viewers, “At the end of this news bulletin, we will *sample some* of your views”. The problem with such a statement from a stylistic and specifically conciseness point of view is that “sample” and “some” have the same function in semantics. They have the same meaning. “Some” of something is a “sample of that something. If one has met “some” Kenyans in Rio de Jenairo, they have met a “sample” of Kenyans in Brazil. A researcher who has interviewed a “sample” of South Africans, has interviewed “some” South Africans.

In the following seven set of sentences, I demonstrate that the italicised words in the first sentence of each set have the same function. I demonstrate the fact by using the first italicised word in the second sentence of a set and the second italicised word in the third sentence of the set. (Members of the same set share a numero). I intend to show that each member of a set has the same meaning as the other members of the same set in spite of using, in the second and third sentences, only one of the italicised words occurring in the first member of the set.

1) *Some* of these challenges *include* water shortage, snake bites and lack of pasture.

1a) Some of the challenges are water, snake bites and lack of pasture

1b) The challenges include water shortage, snake bites and lack of pasture

2) *First*, let me *begin* by saying that I am glad that you have all attended this meeting.

2a) First, let me say that I am glad you have all attended this meeting

2b) Let me begin by saying that I am glad that you have all attended this meeting

3)The meeting was attended by *among others*, Kenyans, Tanzanians, Ugandans, *etc*

3a) The meeting was attended by, among others, Kenyans, Tanzanians and Ugandans.

3b) The meeting was attended by Kenyans, Tanzanians, Ugandans, etc.

4)The meeting *included* the chairman, secretary, treasurer, *among others*.

4a) The meeting included the Chairman, secretary and treasurer.

4b) The meeting was attended by, among others, the chairman, the secretary and the treasurer.

5) Please *come back again*.

5a) Please come back

5b) Please come again

6) The thesis *focuses* on tone *only*.

6a) The thesis focus on tone.

6b) The thesis is on tone only.

7) At the end of this news bulletin, I will *sample some* of your comments.

7a) At the end of the this news bulletin, I will sample your comments.

7b) At the end of this bulletin, I will read some of your comments.

In each of the sets given above, the first sentence of the set which contains two same-function words or phrases is longer than Sentences a) and b). The illustrations clearly show, therefore, by leaving out one of the same-function word or phrase from an expression we end up with words thereby achieving conciseness.

i)

5. CONCLUSION

We should not spend more time, toner and printing paper than is necessary by writing texts that are longer than they should be. We should, as much as possible, try to use the optimal number of words necessary to express what we intend to express. In other words, we should be economical with language which to say we write concisely. Doing so requires no magic. It only requires us to identify usages that lead to in-concise language and then consciously avoid them. This chapter has identified many of offending usages and demonstrated how to circumvent them.

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