Writing Concisely

Organizing your ideas logically and paying attention to sentence structure are good first steps toward clear writing. Being concise is also key. This means making sure that every word counts. Here are some techniques for writing concisely.

1.   **Choose a simple word over a complex one.**

> **Before:** The researchers *ascertained* the cause of the viral outbreak.
> **After:**   The researchers *found* the cause of the viral outbreak.

2.   **Be specific. Use a specific word rather than a general or vague one.**

> **Before:** The *leader* called the *group* together.
> **After:**   The *team coordinator* called the *task force* together for a brief meeting.

3.   **Eliminate words that add no meaning. These can include:**

a.   redundant modifiers which imply each other, such **as *past memories, basic fundamentals, true facts, unexpected surprise, final outcome*.** Use the noun without the modifier.

b.   redundant pairs that repeat each other, such as *each and every, full and complete, each and every, hopes and dreams, whole and entire, first and foremost, true and accurate, always and forever.* Choose one word or the other.
c.   common qualifiers such as *actually, really, basically, probably, very, definitely, somewhat, kind of, extremely, practically*.

d.   specific words that imply their general categories, such as *large in size, round in shape, unusual in nature*. Use the specific and lose the general.

4.   **Replace empty phrases with single words.**
> *in the event that . . .* becomes *if*
> *due to the fact that* . . . becomes *because, since, why*
> *despite the fact that* . . . becomes *although, even, though*
> *the reason for* . . . becomes *because*
> *in a situation in which* . . . becomes *when*
> *is in a position to* . . . . becomes *can*

5.   **Eliminate words that explain the obvious or provide excessive detail.**

        Before: Imagine a mental picture of someone engaged in the intellectual activity of trying to learn what the rules are for how to play the game of chess.

        After: Imagine someone trying to learn the rules of chess.

6.   **Reduce the use of prepositional phrases**

Prepositional phrases, especially when they occur in a string, can make a sentence clunky and unclear. Rearranging the sentence can often eliminate unnecessary prepositions.

        Before: The reason *for* the failure *of* the basketball team *of* the University of North Carolina *in* the Final Four game *against* the team *from* Kansas was that *on* that day and *at* that time, some players were frequently unable to rebound the ball.

        After: UNC's basketball team lost the Final Four game against Kansas because it could consistently rebound the ball.

7.   **Avoid "it is" and "there is/are" constructions.**

        Before: *It is the governor who signs or vetoes bills.*
        After: *The governor signs or vetoes bills.*

        Before: *There are four rules that should be observed.*
        After: *Four rules should be observed.*

8.   **Replace Multiple Negatives with Affirmatives.**

        Before: Your audience will not appreciate the details that lack relevance.
        After: Your audience will appreciate relevant details.