

## 2.4.23: Concise Writing

### Learning Objectives

- Discuss strategies to improve concision in writing

At the heart of business is the idea that “time is money.” This may lead you to believe that shorter messages are always better; however, concise writing is not just fast or short. Sometimes your writing must balance the clarity of the message with efficiency.

### Sentence Length and Complexity

With business writing, the main focus is on the reader’s ability to quickly absorb and react to the communication. Concise business writing uses clean, straightforward sentence structure to improve understanding and retention. This is different from the prose of novels or the beat of poetry in which taking pleasure in the complexity of sentences is part of the experience. Business writing uses simpler sentences to be more concise and thus less likely to be misinterpreted.

### ✓ Straightforward Sentences

Grammatically, there are three kinds of sentences. It’s not especially important for you to be able to identify them in order to be a good business writer. However, taking a moment to think about how they work and what they do will help you become more concise and clear.

**Simple sentences** consist of a single independent clause:

Fido fetched. *[A noun and a verb is all it takes to make a simple sentence.]*

Whiskers ate her tuna. *[This adds a direct object, “tuna,” but it’s still a simple sentence.]*

Polly sat on her perch and whistled. *[This includes a prepositional phrase, “on her perch,” and a compound verb “sat” and “whistled,” but it’s still a simple sentence.]*

**Compound sentences** consist of two (or more, but that’s tricky) independent clauses attached by a comma and a conjunction:

Amanita threw the ball, and Fido fetched it. *["Amanita threw the ball" could stand alone as a sentence, as could "Fido fetched it." That structure is what makes this a compound sentence.]*

**Complex sentences** consist of at least one dependent clause followed by at least one independent clause:

While Amanita looked for the ball, Fido chased a grasshopper. *[Even though the part of the sentence before the comma has a subject, “Amanita,” and a verb “looked,” the addition of “while” means it can’t stand on its own as a sentence. “Fido chased a grasshopper” can stand alone, so it is an independent clause.]*

**Compound-complex sentences** — you can probably figure this one out from the name and the example:

While Amanita looked for the ball, Fido chased a grasshopper, and Whiskers looked bored.

### So, Why Does This Matter?

Using compound and complex sentences is great! However, be sure you are not splicing together long strings of clauses that get really hard to follow. Additionally, you should vary your sentence types for more engaging reading.

In order to write straightforward sentences that are appropriate and effective in business communication, there are a few things to keep in mind.

- Be careful not to string together too many ideas in the same sentence. A sentence like this is not only confusing, it also becomes really boring to read and doesn’t sound very sophisticated:
  - **Michael copy edited the report, and the data tables were compiled, and the graphics looked wonderful.**
    - All three of these activities are part of the completion of a report, but they don’t really belong in the same sentence.
  - **Michael copy edited the report while the rest of the team compiled the data tables. The graphics looked wonderful.**
    - By using a connector other than *and*—in this case, *while*—the sentence actually gives more information: that the copy editing and compiling happened at the same time. If you substitute “after which” for “while,” you’re actually telling a

somewhat different story. Also, it's great that the graphics are impressive, but that idea doesn't belong in the same sentence.

- Starting a sentence with a dependent clause can sometimes bury the important news at the back end of the sentence. It's not forbidden to begin with dependent clauses, but be very careful about when you choose to do so. Think about the emotions a reader goes through when faced with a sentence like this:
  - **While we suffered a dismal first quarter because of supply-chain issues, and our stock price wobbled a lot thanks to fluctuations in the Japanese market that caused the company to begin targeting employees for layoffs, the executive team is happy to report that we are on track for a profitable year.**
    - That sentence is almost cruel in the amount of anxiety a reader has to suffer before getting to the good news. The whole point of that sentence is that the company is doing well. Yay! Therefore, the sentence should start with the important part.
  - **The executive team is happy to report that we are on track for a profitable year, even though we suffered . . .**
    - There's a whole different response when the sentence tells the important news first.
- Clear is good; simple can be mind-numbing, so vary your sentence structures. Imagine an entire report full of this:
  - **Profits were up. This is good. Production increased by six percent. Employees received bonuses in two of four quarters. The stock split.**
    - Even though you are reading excellent news, you're about to keel over from the monotony, aren't you? Writing cleanly and concisely doesn't mean writing like a robot. Think about how the small nuggets of information relate to one another, and combine them in sentences that a) make sense, b) put the important news first, and c) show that you take pride in writing well.
  - **We are happy to report that profits are up, and our shares have split. This results from a six-percent increase in production, and we were happy to reward our hard-working employees with bonuses in two of four quarters.**
    - Not only is it possible to read this passage without dozing off, it also gives more information by showing the relationship among the bits of information given.

Finally, watch your wordiness. As you write and edit, ask yourself whether you are using several words when there's one perfectly good one that would suffice. At the same time, be careful of turning a single sentence into a paragraph by stringing together every idea you've ever had. Findings from Goddard (1989) suggest that sentence length is related to reader comprehension. This research suggests that between 20 and 25 words is the maximum for solid comprehension.

| Sentence Length | Comprehension Rate |
|-----------------|--------------------|
| 8 words         | 100%               |
| 15 words        | 90%                |
| 19 words        | 80%                |
| 28 words        | 50%                |

Remember, your goal is not to make your sentences short, your goal is to convey your ideas clearly and to avoid ambiguity. That said, the more complex the material you are discussing, the more straightforward and clean your sentences need to be.<sup>[1]</sup>

| Avoid  | Try                                     | Why   |
|--|---|---|
| I <b>am writing to tell you</b> that the cat ate the mouse.            | The cat ate the mouse.                  | Isn't it obvious that "I am writing"? How else would the reader see this? |
| <b>At this point in time</b> , you need to complete a new application. | You need to complete a new application. | What other time period could we be in?                                    |
| <b>In a very few cases</b> , the amount was refunded.                  | Rarely was the amount refunded.         | Why use a whole phrase when a single word is right to the point?          |

Be careful not to repeat yourself over and over and over.

| Avoid   | Try   |
|---|---|
| It is <b>absolutely essential</b> that we clear these lines of customers quickly. | We have to clear these lines of customers quickly.                                    |
| Those two items are <b>exactly identical</b> , except for the price tag we added. | Those two items are identical, except for the price tag we added.                     |
| It's a <b>true fact</b> that she was late again.                                  | It's true she was late again. <i>(Even better in most cases:)</i> She was late again. |

Finally, become aware of your own bad habits. Do you use “also” too much to show the relationship between ideas? Do you adore the complex sentence type a little too strongly? Do you use “one” (as in “One hopes to understand the meaning of this sentence.”) and then get stuck in a bog of pronouns? Do you start sentences with “What it is, is . . .” Whatever your particular quirks, become aware of them and take care to look for and fix them when you edit your work.

### ? Learn More

For more useful information on how sentences work, and to get some practice in before you start your own writing, check out this reading on Sentence Structure.

## Active and Passive Voice

You’ve probably heard of the passive voice—perhaps in a comment from an English teacher or in the grammar checker of a word processor. In both of these instances, you were (likely) guided away from the passive voice. Why is this the case? Why is the passive voice so hated? After all, it’s been used in this paragraph already (twice now!). When the passive voice is used too frequently, it can make your writing seem flat and drab. However, there are some instances where the passive voice is a better choice than the active.

So just what is the difference between these two voices? In the simplest terms, an active voice sentence is written in the form of “A does B.” (For example, “Carmen sings the song.”) A passive voice sentence is written in the form of “B is done by A.” (For example, “The song is sung by Carmen.”) Both constructions are grammatically sound and correct. Let’s look at a couple more examples of the passive voice:

ACTIVE VOICE: Tamara lost the potential sale in North Dakota.

PASSIVE VOICE: The potential sale in North Dakota was lost.

You may have noticed something unique about the previous passive voice example: the passive voice can be used to “hide” who performed the action. Despite this sentences being completely grammatically sound, we don’t know who lost the sale if we only read the passive sentence. This could be a good way to focus on ways to improve company strategy, rather than focusing on a single person’s performance (and avoid calling out a single employee in a potentially public setting). If, however, it is important that Tamara lost the sale, but we want to focus on the loss rather than who lost it, saying “The potential sale in North Dakota was lost by Tamara,”

The passive is created using the verb *to be* (e.g., the song **is** sung; it **was** struck from behind). *To be* conjugates irregularly. Its forms include *am, are, is, was, were, and will be, had been, is being, and was being*.

Business writing is known for being direct and to the point in most situations, so you should favor active rather than passive verb constructions. But there are occasions when being too direct can make you sound insensitive. Consider the following refusal of a request for a raise:

1. ACTIVE VOICE: You cannot have a raise at this time.
2. PASSIVE VOICE: A raise can not be given at this time.

In this case, the goal of using the passive voice to soften the negativity of the message has made the message sound more considerate. If you are trying to avoid throwing someone under the bus, one strategy is to de-emphasize the actor or subject in the sentence. Bring out your sensitive side by knowing how to tactfully apply passive voice. Reserve passive verbs for the moment you need to say “no” in a message.

A link to an interactive elements can be found at the bottom of this page.

### ? Learn More

For more information on how and why to use the passive voice check out Using the Passive Voice.

1. <http://sites.utexas.edu/legalwriting/2015/04/29/manage-your-sentence-length-2/>

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