

Writing Clearly and Concisely

“A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts.” (Strunk and White, 2020)

It is difficult to improve on this frequently quoted guidance from Strunk and White’s classic *Elements of Style*. Writing concisely does not mean stripping your work of nuance and complexity. It doesn’t mean that your writing has to become reductive or simplistic. Instead, it involves making conscious decisions about which words to use, and how to make your chosen words work.

Effective academic writing is clear, precise and communicates successfully with its intended audience. Adhering to inflexible writing ‘rules’ is unlikely to produce the kind of coherent, consistent prose you need; however, it can be helpful to have some concrete suggestions to guide you.

Don't conflate formality with authority

It’s easy to assume that excessively formal writing conveys authority. Academic writers often make the mistake of hiding behind jargon and overly complicated language in an attempt to sound authoritative. Whilst florid and colourful prose can be effective in the right context, your writing needs to communicate your ideas with clarity and precision. It is better to work on saying what you need to say clearly and effectively.

Here are some examples to illustrate how this might look on the page:

“Thus it is absolutely vital for us that we henceforth consider that X is to be designated the most efficient and best equipped means by which we can thereby approach this issue.”

Concise version: “The evidence suggests that X is best way to approach this issue.”

“There exists but a nugatory disparity between the respective expostulatory theses of Reed (2018) and Cale (2016).”

Concise version: “Reed (2018) and Cale (2016) make similar arguments.”

“I singlehandedly leveraged the process of implementing an innovative new ambient lighting solution.”

Concise version: “I changed a lightbulb.”

Making every word count

It is entirely possible to communicate complex information with very few words, and without relying on elaborate phrasing and technical intricacies.

Story telling and persuasion with minimal words

Examples	Why does it work?
Think different (Apple, 1997-2002)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Constructs a narrative which divides people into passive, unthinking 'sheep' and dynamic, intelligent, free-thinking individuals.• Plays on the antithetical human needs of belonging among, and differentiation from, others.• Flatters the viewer by offering them the change to purchase entry into an elite group of consumers, defined by autonomy and superior intellect.• At the same time, manipulates the viewer by exploiting their fear of not belonging to this group.
It is. Are you? Launch campaign slogan for the Independent newspaper, 1986)	

A note on 'writing rules'

Orwell's '[Politics and the English Language](#)' is a standard, if contentious, recommendation for guidance on concise language. If you feel that you need clear rules, his are a good place to start:

"One can often be in doubt about the effect of a word or a phrase, and one needs rules that one can rely on when instinct fails...

- Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
- Never use a long word where a short one will do. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it...
- Never use a... jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
- Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous." (Orwell, 1946)

References

Orwell, G. (1946) 'Politics and the English Language', *Horizon*, 13 (6) 1946, pp. 252-265.

Strunk, W. and White, E.B., (2020) *Elements of Style* (New York: Open Road Integrated Media).