

Wordiness: Common Causes and Cures

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Most upperclassmen cite wordiness as a weakness in their writing. Reading their first papers confirms their assessments. Even though high school and first-year composition students have been told repeatedly that their writing is wordy, no one has shown them the simple mechanics of recognizing and curing wordiness.

Many students blame wordiness on having to meet assigned length requirements. But a student's verbal meanderings in search of additional content are easily distinguished from wordiness as a stylistic trait. In fact, reducing wordiness can result in *longer* sentences that contain more, not less, information (Locker, *Business and Administrative Communication*, Chapter Four, all recent editions).

Diagnosing the Causes

Most writers and teachers recognize and correct wordiness on a case-by-case basis. But to recognize wordiness in their own work, students need help. My solution is to teach them to look for the common linguistic units, or environments, that create or foster wordiness. One of the most reliable harbingers of wordiness are elevated levels of prepositions.

Phrasal verbs. A preposition tagged on the end of a verb is actually a “particle.” Examples:

- “come *up with*”
- “put *up with*”
- “find *out*”
- “look *in on*”
- “make *up*” (“invent” or “reconcile”?)

Two student exercises foster awareness of such verbal constructions. First, have students list possible synonyms for “come up with” (the list will be *long*). Also, have them construct a list of phrasal verbs. They may initially struggle, so tell them to just experiment with adding prepositions to single-word verbs. If you hear laughter, someone has probably suggested “feel up” (for which you recommend substituting “fondle”).

Prepositional phrases are popular among developing writers, even grad students who are attempting to raise their text's register. Experienced business and technical writers recognize prepositional phrases as evil. Consider several situations involving prepositions:

Prepositional phrases that could be replaced by possessives.

Example: “The decision of the judges” becomes “the judges' decision.” People needn't be involved; “the results of the experiment” becomes “the experiment's results.”

Prepositions used needlessly with dates and times.

Example: “The meeting on September 30” becomes “the September 30 meeting,”

Prepositional phrases that can simply become adjectives.

Example: “The meeting on September 30 about the budget” becomes “the September 30 budget meeting.”

Prepositional phrases that replace adverbs.

Example: “In an efficient (or timely) manner” becomes “efficiently” (or “promptly”).

Prepositions resulting from nominalization can be fixed with gerunds.

Example: “The completion of this form is required” = “Completing this form is required.” Teach students to be alert for “-tion” words. They cause wordiness (and are pompous).

The search for prepositional phrases, especially those used with nominalization, should steer students to other wordy expressions that result from choosing nouns over verbs. Example: “Our group took a survey of 50 students.” Attempting to remove the prepositional phrase should guide students toward changing “survey” from a noun to a verb: “Our group surveyed 50 students.” (Note: There may be an intermediate step that uses a passive verb—“Fifty students were surveyed . . .” Revise that to active voice.)

Nouns used in place of verbs

As just noted, using a noun to convey the message compels developing writers to add another, usually meaningless, verb to the sentence, as in “take a survey.” Other examples:

- “reach an agreement” = “agree”
- “make a correction” = “correct”
- “reach a decision” = “decide”
- “take a picture of” = “photograph”

Again, students asked to list similar expressions should produce a very long list,

Redundant words and phrases

Redundancy can be sneaky, especially when a student has superior grammar skills. Examples:

- “past experiences” or “prior experiences” are generally just “experiences.”
- “the following examples ~~that will be discussed~~ show . . .”

Remember that redundancy is easily missed because, as a reader, you don’t have to process the words (because you’ve just processed them in a different form).

“It” clauses

Another place to look for wordiness is anywhere you find the word “it,” which is 100% content-free. “It” simply occupies the spot demanded by our grammar. We can’t say “Is raining.” We must provide a subject—“It is raining.” Replace “it” with a gerund:

“It is important to restart the computers after each class.”

Change to

“Restarting the computers after each class is important.”

Counting spaces shows that only three were gained. But that isn’t the point. Counting words shows that two were eliminated, which is somewhat more to the point. Importantly, though, the essence of the message—restarting the computer—became the subject.

Jargon

Watch out for common clichés:

- “In order to establish unity” = “To establish unity”
- “Due to the fact that” = “because”
- “as well as” = “and” (unless making a comparison)

Note the phrasal verb “watch out for”; I could have said “Correct common clichés.”

Existential verbs

Any time students are relying heavily to the base verb “be,” there is a likelihood of wordiness. The mere existence of something is seldom the point, and a carefully chosen verb will usually tighten the text:

“There are many products for removing spots effectively.”

becomes

“Many products remove spots effectively.”

Unnecessary words

Last on my list (but first on Locker’s) is simply removing unnecessary words. The problem is that you have to recognize them as unnecessary and edit student work aggressively.

Examples:

- “Americans will soon have to choose between biomass fuels ~~when they are~~ at the pump.”
- “They ~~have no lack of~~ remorse when they do something ~~that is~~ wrong.”