

Writing in English

Good writing style is quite different in English and French.
Look at this example taken from *Euronews*.

[La mort annoncée de la poliomyélite](#)

Par Francisco Fuentes | Avec Raphaële Tavernier, *Euronews*, Science 20/04/2016

Pour la deuxième fois dans l'histoire de l'humanité, une maladie est sur le point d'être éradiquée. Après la variole, la poliomyélite, cette maladie, très contagieuse provoquée par un virus (poliovirus sauvage) qui envahit le système nerveux et qui peut entraîner une paralysie totale en quelques heures, pourrait disparaître d'ici 2018, selon les derniers chiffres de l'Organisation mondiale de la Santé (OMS)

Here is the English version of the same paragraph.

Smallpox was the first deadly disease to be eradicated. Now, according to the WHO, polio may disappear by 2018. Polio is a highly contagious disease caused by the wild poliovirus, which attacks the nervous system and can paralyse in a matter of hours.

In pairs, make a list of all the main differences.

Verbose is not a synonym for *literary*

If you compare the same piece of writing in the two languages, you will notice that the English version has fewer words, shorter sentences and shorter paragraphs. The choice of vocabulary is generally simpler and less technical in English.

When writing in English, follow these simple guidelines

Style and grammar

1. Over the whole document, make the average sentence length 15 to 20 words.
2. Use words your readers are likely to understand.
3. Use only as many words as you really need.
4. Prefer the active voice unless there is a good reason for using the passive.
5. Use the clearest, crispest, liveliest verb to express your thoughts.
6. Put your points positively whenever you can.
7. Reduce cross-references to a minimum.
8. In letters, avoid fusty (long, worn-out) first sentences and formula finishes.
9. Put accurate punctuation at the heart of your writing.
10. You can be a good writer without learning hundreds of grammatical terms.

Preparing and planning

11. Plan before you write.

Organising the information

12. Organise your material in a way that helps readers to grasp the important information early and to navigate through the document easily.
13. Consider different ways of setting out your information (i.e. graphs, diagrams, etc).

Layout

14. Use clear layout to present your plain words in an easily accessible way.

Adapted and abridged from *The Plain English Guide: How to write clearly and communicate better*, by Martin Cutts (Oxford University Press, 1995).

Some Matters of Style - Omit Needless Words

Read the article below.

Virtually all experienced writers agree that any written expression that deserves to be called *vigorous writing*, whether it is a short story, an article for a professional journal, or a complete book, *is* characterized by the attribute of being succinct, *concise*, and to the point. A *sentence*—no matter where in the writing it occurs—*should contain no unnecessary or superfluous words*, words that stand in the way of the writer's direct expression of his or her meaning and purpose. In a very similar fashion, a *paragraph*—the basic unit of organization in English prose—should contain *no unnecessary or superfluous sentences*, sentences that introduce peripheral content into the writing or stray from its basic narrative line. It is in this sense that a writer is like an artist executing a drawing, and it is in this sense that a writer is like an engineer designing a machine. Good writing should be economical *for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines*, and good writing should be streamlined in the same way that a *machine* is designed to have *no unnecessary parts*, parts that contribute little or nothing to its intended function.

This prescription to be succinct and concise is often misunderstood and *requires* judicious application. It certainly does *not* imply *that the writer* must *make all* of his or her *sentences short* and choppy or leave out all adjectives, adverbs, and qualifiers. Nor does it mean that he or she must *avoid* or eliminate *all detail* from the writing *and treat* his or her *subjects only* in the barest skeleton or *outline* form. *But* the requirement does imply *that every word* committed to paper should *tell* something new to the reader and contribute in a significant and non-redundant way to the message that the writer is trying to convey.

You have just read a 303 word essay on brevity, which is anything but brief! Take out a red pen and remove everything unnecessary. See how few words you can get it down to!

• **Eliminating Wordiness**

• Wordiness occurs when a writer uses more words than necessary to express a thought.

Readers find wordy papers difficult to follow. There are several reasons that wordiness has an impact on clarity:

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1. Verbosity (excess word use) especially in early drafts is often due to the writer trying to put all their ideas down on paper, without thinking too much about how these ideas are expressed. In final drafts, however, writers need to trim wordy passages and be more concise.

2. In an attempt to make ideas sound important, writers may use long words and intricate sentence construction. They think that their writing must be complicated to seem professional or formal. Although these writers may be trying to impress their readers, they often end up confusing them. The best writing is clear, concise, and easy to understand. Your ideas will be more impressive when your reader does not have to work so hard to understand you.

3. When a writer can't find the "perfect" word, s/he may use a long phrase in its place. Some wordiness, then, is the result of a writer's frustration at not being able to find that perfect word.

4. Finally, passive sentence constructions that hide the subject are often wordy. For example, the passive sentence, "The cat was eaten by the dog," has many more words than the active sentence, "The dog ate the cat." One passive sentence is OK; a paper full of passive sentences is full of extra words.

How to Avoid Wordiness

• Revise! Don't be afraid of wordiness in first drafts. Later, when revising and polishing, go through your paper carefully, cutting unnecessary sentences, phrases, and words.

• Have confidence in your ideas. You don't need to make them sound more complex than they really are. Say what you mean completely but concisely; your reader will thank you.

• Write out loud! That is, say what you're writing out loud as you write it, especially if you're having trouble expressing your ideas. Most people don't speak in a wordy way, so if you can say what you mean, transfer it directly onto the page or screen. Sometimes it's easier to find that "perfect" word by talking through several choices.

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• Avoid passive sentence construction. When you use the passive voice, the subject of the sentence *receives* the action expressed by the verb. In other words, the subject is *acted upon*. For

example, "The cat was eaten by the dog." If you rephrase it to make "the dog" the subject, you have used the active voice: "The dog ate the cat."

Methods for Eliminating Wordiness

1. Eliminate unnecessary articles (a, an, the).

Wordy: The evidence we have...

Concise: Evidence reveals...

Wordy: Balancing the sales by Friday is an impossibility without any help...

Concise: Balancing sales by Friday is impossible without extra help...

2. Change prepositional phrases into one word modifiers.

Wordy: The employee with ambition...

Concise: The ambitious employee...

Wordy: The department of marketing...

Concise: The marketing department...

3. Delete unnecessary "that," "who," and "which" clauses.

Wordy: The report that discussed...

Concise: The report discussing...

Wordy: All applicants who are interested in the job must...

Concise: All job applicants must...

Wordy: The system which is most efficient and accurate...

Concise: The most efficient and accurate system...

4. Avoid overusing "it is," "there is," and "there are" (which are weak phrases) at the beginning of sentences.

Wordy: It is important that we agree.

Concise: We must agree.

Wordy: There are four rules which should be observed...

Concise: Four rules should be observed...

5. Use active rather than passive verbs.

Wordy: An account was opened by Mrs. Simms.

Concise: Mrs. Simms opened an account.

Wordy: Your figures were checked by the research department.

Concise: The research department checked your figures.

6. Rescue verbs that are smothered in nouns.

Wordy: The function of this department is the collection of accounts.

Concise: This department collects accounts.

Wordy: He made the statement that he agreed with the concept that inflation...

Concise: He agreed that inflation...

7. Delete unnecessary infinitive phrases (Infinitive = to + verb).

Wordy: The duty of a clerk is to check all incoming mail to record it.

Concise: A clerk checks and records all incoming mail.

Wordy: A shortage of tellers at the Calumet branch...

Concise: A teller shortage at the Calumet branch...

8. Replace wordy introductory phrases with succinct expressions.

Wordy: At this point in time...

Concise: Now...

Wordy: Due to the fact that...

Concise: Because...

Wordy: In accordance with your request...

Concise: As you requested...

9. Omit words that explain the obvious.

Wordy: I received your inquiry. Yes, we do have...

Concise: Yes, we do have...

Wordy: It goes without saying that we are acquainted with your policy and we intend to comply with the return regulations you have explained to us.

Concise: We intend to comply with the regulations.

10. Omit words which repeat, or which add nothing to your message except more words.

Wordy: I would appreciate it if you would bring to the attention of your clients...

Concise: Please encourage your clients to...

Wordy: Dr. Lomas, the Administrator, has, in all correspondence, mentioned that she wants the staff's reports and memos to be concise.

Concise: Dr. Lomas has encouraged staff to submit concise reports and memos.

Center for Academic Excellence, Saint Joseph College, Revised 2009

Shortening sentences

A good rule of thumb is to aim for an average sentence length of between 15 and 20 words, with one point made in every sentence. In general, make sure your sentences are 'active'.

Break up or re-write these long sentences, mending any breaks you create.

The example will help you:

A large number of farmers from the local neighbourhood have said that they are likely to be present at the annual general meeting that has been arranged for next Friday.

Many local farmers will attend Friday's meeting.

1. Although Bradley Hall is regularly populated by students, close study of the building as a structure is seldom undertaken by them.
2. He dropped out of school on account of the fact that it was necessary for him to help support his family.
3. It is expected that the new schedule will be announced by the bus company within the next few days.
4. There are many ways in which a student who is interested in meeting foreign students may come to know one.
5. It is very unusual to find someone who has never told a deliberate lie on purpose.
6. Trouble is caused when people disobey rules that have been established for the safety of all.
7. The subjects that are considered most important by students are those that have been shown to be useful to them after graduation.
8. In the not too distant future, college freshmen must all become aware of the fact that there is a need for them to make contact with an academic adviser concerning the matter of a major.
9. Some people believe in capital punishment, while other people are against it; there are many opinions on this subject.
10. The events should be listed in the order in which they occurred.
11. This insect is so minuscule that it can be visually observed only through a microscope.
12. Sugar is a substance that can be dissolved in water.
13. The pig is an animal that will eat all kinds of food.
14. Discussing the weather situation, the meteorologist said we should expect thundershower activity.
15. Foreign journalists had to submit their news stories to government officials whose task it was to suppress items they considered unfavorable to their country's interests.
16. Needless to say, our predictions have been vindicated by recent events.

Deceptive words and common mistakes

These are called *faux amis* in French. You will find one/some in each of the following sentences.

Translate into English

1. On était dans la même classe au collège, on avait 12 ans.

2. Elle ne travaille pas actuellement, elle est en congé maternité.

3. Il y a une veine de charbon importante dans ces collines.

4. Il assiste à un congrès sur le développement durable.

5. La société a fait 30 % de bénéfices l'année dernière.

6. On lui a accordé un délai de trois semaines pour achever ce travail.

7. Le pingouin a une envergure de 50 cm et une capacité de vitesse de 30 km/h.

8. Elle est sensible aux compliments.

9. Einstein était un physicien hors pair.

10. Il a grandi dans un quartier misérable.

Translate into French

1. The commission decided to close the store.

2. She has a nice figure but terrible acne.

3. I got three books from the library

4. The publican refuses to serve rude patrons.

5. During the bin strike, the refuse piled up on the streets.

6. It was a long journey.

7. He was sacked for coming to work in a vest, he should have worn a suit!

8. Speed limits prevent accidents.

9. The house is in a great location.

10. After weeks of phoning him I eventually gave up.

Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing means rewriting a given sentence using your own words. When we need to use a sentence in our writing that someone else wrote, we paraphrase it. That is, we use the same idea(s) in that sentence and write it differently. In addition to using different words, we use different grammar. Of course, it is important to acknowledge the original source using the proper citation format.

Examples

Original sentence:

PayLess is closed because of the bad weather conditions.

Inappropriate paraphrase:

PayLess is closed because of the bad weather.

This paraphrase has too many words, and "PayLess is closed because of" is simply repeated. It is important to use different words and grammatical structure, while keeping the same meaning of the original sentence.

Appropriate paraphrase:

Since the weather is terrible, the grocery store is closed.

As can be seen in the above example, in addition to using different words, the grammatical structure of the sentence was changed by starting with the second part of the original sentence.

Original sentence:

Some argue that the approximately 11 million undocumented immigrants in the United States ought to receive a path to US citizenship, while others claim that these immigrants need to be deported back to their home countries.

Inappropriate paraphrase:

Some say that the 11 million undocumented immigrants in the United States ought to receive a way for citizenship, while other people say that the immigrants should go back to their countries.

The inappropriate paraphrase is too close to the original sentence. Several words are the same and the complex structure of the sentence is the same. Deleting some words from the original sentence is not enough to write an appropriate paraphrase.

Appropriate paraphrase:

Although some individuals maintain that undocumented immigrants should go back to their countries, others defend these immigrants' right for a path to citizenship.

The appropriate paraphrase uses a different structure for the sentence, and most words are different from the original.

Summarizing

A summary should be a short version of a longer original source. Its main goal is to present a large amount of information in a short and concise text that includes only the most important ideas of the original text.

Examples

Original text:

"The movement toward education by computer is developing fast. Massive Open Online Courses, called MOOCs, are changing how people learn in many places. For years, people could receive study materials from colleges or universities and take part in online classes. But such classes were not designed for many thousands of students at one time, as MOOCs are." (MOOCS Are Moving Forward, VOA)

Inappropriate summary:

Computer education is growing fast. MOOCs are influencing how we study. People received materials from universities for a long time to be able to take classes online. MOOCs are the only ones thousands can take at a time.

The inappropriate summary is almost as long as the original text, which is a characteristic of a paraphrase. A summary needs to be concise.

Appropriate summary:

According to a Voice of America article, a fast-growing MOOCs movement allows thousands to take online classes at once, changing how we learn.

The appropriate summary keeps the original main idea and it is much shorter than the original text.

Exercises: Paraphrasing

Paraphrase the following sentences.

1. The student requested that the professor excuse her absence, but the professor refused.

2. There will be a music concert next to Vienna coffee shop. Would you like to go?

3. International Center is hosting English Conversation classes. They help non-native speakers of English practice their English speaking skills.

4. The office of International Students and Scholars at Otter University is located in Schleman Hall.

5. The car that was pulled over by the police officer yesterday had just had an accident. That driver is not careful.

Read the following passages carefully and paraphrase them.

6. "In the United States, about six out of ten students in graduate schools are women. The same is true of today's young adults who already have a degree beyond college. As a result, the Census Bureau expects that more women than men will hold professional positions as doctors, lawyers and professors." (Women Edge Past Men in Getting Doctorates)

7. "A Human Rights Commission, also known as a human relations commission, is a body set up to investigate, promote or protect human rights. The term may refer to international, national or subnational bodies set up for this purpose, such as national human rights institutions or (usually temporary) truth and reconciliation commissions." (Wikipedia)

• 8. "Of the more than 1000 bicycling deaths each year, three-fourths are caused by head injuries. Half of those killed are school-age children. One study concluded that wearing a bike helmet can reduce the risk of head injury by 85 percent. In an accident, a bike helmet absorbs the shock and cushions the head." (Consumer Reports)

Exercises: Summarizing

Summarize the following texts:

1. "Experience in an international setting is a marketable commodity. Many employers seek the wide range of knowledge, adaptability and experience that international students acquire. Companies in the U.S. are increasingly looking to hire employees who not only have multi-cultural language skills, but those who can also help communicate, negotiate and conduct business across different cultures. The

United States is not the only country seeking strong candidates when hiring; international students are in high demand elsewhere, as well.” (International Student)

2. “The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) works to create viable systems to define, monitor and evaluate literacy levels and acquisition at the national and international level. UNESCO not only monitors global literacy levels, notably through the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) and the EFA Global Monitoring Report, but also evaluates the effectiveness of literacy programmes and the impact of increased literacy on individuals and societies. Nevertheless, there is a lack of reliable and comparable cross-national data on the state of literacy.” (UNESCO Education)

3. “To bring Europe back to growth and create new jobs, we need more entrepreneurs. The Entrepreneurship 2020 Action Plan is the Commission’s answer to challenges brought by the gravest economic crisis in the last 50 years. It is a blueprint for action to unleash Europe’s entrepreneurial potential, remove existing obstacles and revolutionize the culture of entrepreneurship in the EU. It aims to simplify the creation of new businesses and to create a much more supportive environment for existing entrepreneurs to thrive and grow.” (EU Entrepreneurship Action Plan)
