UNIVERSITY WRITING PROGRAM

# Four types of Unnecessary words and phrases

Dummy subjects are expletive words—words that take up space without adding meaning—and occur in phrases like *there is*, *there are*, *there was*, *there were*, *it is*, and *it was*. Because they are usually unnecessary and wordy, avoid using dummy subjects whenever possible. (For more details, see the handout on Dummy Subjects.)

* Wordy: *There are many great skiing resorts in Colorado.*
* Concise: *Colorado has many great skiing resorts.*

Nominalizations are nouns that are created from adjectives (words that describe nouns) or verbs (action words). For example, “decision” is a nominalization of “decide” and “argument” is a nominalization of “argue.” The endings of the nominalized forms vary, but many end in “-ion/tion”, “-ment,” “-ity/–ty”, and “-ness.” While they can be useful and effective if used in moderation, they frequently make sentences longer, wordier, and more difficult to understand.

* Wordy: *The conjugation of verbs can be fraught with difficulties.*
* Concise: *Conjugating verbs can be difficult.*

**Infinitive phrases** are phrases that contain verb infinitives (to + verb). While these are useful, they often add wordiness and length to sentences for no reason. Instead of an infinitive phrase, try using finite verbs or noun phrases.

* Wordy: *Our duty was to clean the floor and to wash the dishes.*
* Concise: *We cleaned the floor and washed the dishes.*
* Wordy: *The three-car accident on I-95 has caused traffic to become delayed.*
* Concise: *The three-car accident on I-95 has caused traffic delays.*

Circumlocutions are commonly used roundabout expressions that take several words to say what could be said more succinctly. We often overlook them because many such expressions are habitual figures of speech. In academic writing, though, they should be avoided since they add extra words without extra meaning.

* Wordy: *Owing to the fact that at the present time it is necessary to maintain the wellbeing of everyone, each person has the obligation to wash their hands subsequent to bathroom use.*
* Concise: *Since we currently need to maintain everyone’s wellbeing, each person must wash their hands after using the bathroom.*

The next page contains a list of common circumlocutions along with their concise counterparts. (The attentive reader will recognize a few dummy subjects and nominalizations in the list!)

|  |  |
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| **Wordy** | **Concise** |
| as to/as regards | about |
| at present/at the present time | now, today, currently |
| at the time that | when |
| at this time | now, today, currently |
| at this/that point in time | now/then |
| because of the fact that | because |
| by means of | by, with |
| cannot be avoided | must, should |
| concerning the matter of | about, concerning, regarding |
| considering/due to/owing to the fact that | because, since, why |
| for the reason that | because, since why |
| has the ability/capacity/opportunity to | can |
| in a situation in which | when |
| in actual fact | actually (or delete) |
| in excess of | more than, over |
| in light of the fact that | because, since, why |
| in/with regard/reference to | about, concerning, regarding |
| in the event of | if |
| in the process of | while (or delete) |
| inasmuch as | because, since |
| is able to | can |
| it could happen that | could, may, might |
| it is crucial/important/necessary that | must, should |
| it is possible that | could, may, might |
| literally | actually (or delete) |
| on the grounds that | because, since, why |
| on the occasion of | when |
| presently | now, soon |
| previous/prior to | before |
| subsequent to | after |
| subsequently | later |
| the possibility exists for | could, may, might |
| the reason for/why | because, since, why |
| there is a chance that | could, may, might |
| there is a need/necessity for | must, should |
| this is an example of | this is |
| this is why | because, since, why |
| this serves as a way to | this |
| this shows that | thus, (delete) |
| under circumstances in which | why |
| where X is concerned | about, concerning, regarding |
| whether or not | whether |

Credit: Adapted from the Purdue OWL Guide (https://owl.purdue.edu/) and Christina Thompson (https://blog.dce.harvard.edu/extension/cut-clutter-17-phrases-omit-your-writing-today), 2020.

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