

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!)

Wordy

as to/as regards
 at present/at the present time
 at the time that
 at this time
 at this/that point in time
 because of the fact that
 by means of
 cannot be avoided
 concerning the matter of
 considering/due to/owing to the fact that
 for the reason that
 has the ability/capacity/opportunity to
 in a situation in which
 in actual fact
 in excess of
 in light of the fact that
 in/with regard/reference to
 in the event of
 in the process of
 inasmuch as
 is able to
 it could happen that
 it is crucial/important/necessary that
 it is possible that
 literally
 on the grounds that
 on the occasion of
 presently
 previous/prior to
 subsequent to
 subsequently
 the possibility exists for
 the reason for/why
 there is a chance that
 there is a need/necessity for
 this is an example of
 this is why
 this serves as a way to
 this shows that
 under circumstances in which
 where X is concerned
 whether or not

Concise

about
 now, today, currently
 when
 now, today, currently
 now/then
 because
 by, with
 must, should
 about, concerning, regarding
 because, since, why
 because, since why
 can
 when
 actually (or delete)
 more than, over
 because, since, why
 about, concerning, regarding
 if
 while (or delete)
 because, since
 can
 could, may, might
 must, should
 could, may, might
 actually (or delete)
 because, since, why
 when
 now, soon
 before
 after
 later
 could, may, might
 because, since, why
 could, may, might
 must, should
 this is
 because, since, why
 this
 thus, (delete)
 why
 about, concerning, regarding
 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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