

Trimming Prose for Clarity & Concision

Too often, those revising journal articles are confronted with the dictum: "Please respond to the reviewers' comments, and cut 500 words from your article." A paradox if there ever was one! However, cutting just two words out of each sentence of an 8,000-word document can cut an entire page of prose. Consider the following when attempting to do as much (and, remember, adhering to a strict word count is hardly the only reason to work on editing at the sentence-level; these suggestions result in papers that are far clearer):

Suggestions for Editing Academic Prose¹

Look for...

...Redundant doublings/lists (Usually indicated by words that appear following conjunctions *and/or*.)

Example: The reporter's questions were careful and cautious.
Diagnosis: If it says the same thing, delete it.
Revision: The reporter's questions were cautious.

...Unneeded pronouns (Usually indicated by *there/it*, especially at the beginning of sentences.)

Example: It was clear from the speaker's tone that he is passionate about his work.
Diagnosis: If there are fewer words that say the same thing, change them.
Revision: The speaker's tone displayed his passion for his work.

...Floating pronouns (Usually indicated by *that/which/who*.)

Example: Her belief is that there is too much fat in fast food.
Diagnosis: These words often take up unnecessary space and can be replaced by shorter phrases that mean the same thing.
Revision: She believes there is too much fat in fast food.

...Unnecessary prepositional phrases (Usually indicated by *by/of/to/for/toward/on/at/from/with/as*.)

Example: There had been major changes to the manuscript related to the feedback given to the author.
Diagnosis: Indicates wordiness or clutter; can often be consolidated or eliminated.
Revision: After receiving feedback, the author made major changes to the manuscript.

¹ Adapted from Wendy Belcher, *Writing Your Journal Article in 12 Weeks* (London: Sage, 2009)

...Passive constructions or inexact words (Usually indicated by conjugations of verbs *to be, do, make, or have.*)

Example: Poor sportsmanship has been tied to bad coaching.

Diagnosis: There are some instances where passive construction is preferred, especially when we don't know or it isn't important who is doing the action; in all other cases, try to be more exact.

Revision: Bad coaches produce poor sportsmanship.

...Nominalizations (Usually indicated by words ending in *ent/ence/tion/ize.*)

Example: The teacher's improvement was due to the development of better lesson plans.

Diagnosis: Often signals vague subjects/verbs; try to replace by unnominalized form of verb.

Revision: The teacher improved after developing better lesson plans.

...Negatives (Usually indicated by *not/no.*)

Example: Not only does the painting not have an adequate color palate, but it also does not have strong character linear patterns.

Diagnosis: Can signal a weak noun or adjectives; try replacing with something stronger.

Revision: The painting suffers from a meager color palate and weak linear patterns.

...Adverbs (*Very* or words ending in *ly.*)

Example: They resolutely believed that Margaret would very successfully complete her dissertation.

Diagnosis: Often signals a weak verb; replace with something stronger.

Revision: They were confident that Margaret would complete a successful dissertation.



Exercise: Using the strategies for trimming prose (above) edit the following paragraph. How many words can you remove? A sample revision and explanation is on the next page.

A journal is costly and expensive to produce, and it is the editor's responsibility to balance content and costs. As a result, it should not be surprising to you when you are asked to make your paper shorter by removing text, or even removing a table or graph. It is important that you take such requests seriously and try very hard to help the editor. The construction of journal articles often results in redundant repetitions from section to section that might be cut out. The ways in which the captions of figures repeat words and phrases that are also found in the methods section is one example. It is not always necessary to include all columns in a table. And, obviously, in our digitally enhanced age, figures, graphs, charts, tables, etc. can often be provided as supplemental materials on the Internet; they need not appear in print at all. As far as prose itself goes, writers must make it a practice to shorten and tighten their prose wherever and whenever possible. These changes will not only increase the chances that their work is selected for publication, but they will also make writing more easily understandable. (Words: 195)²

² This paragraph is adapted from Thomas M. Annesley's "Top 10 Tips for Responding to Reviewer and Editor Comments," *Clinical Chemistry* 57:4 (2011), 551-554. Of course, I made his prose far worse than in the original.

Sample Revision

Journals are expensive to produce, and editors must balance content and costs. To assist editors, writers should expect to cut papers by removing text, tables, or graphs. Writers can start by eliminating redundancies between sections. For example, figure captions may repeat phrases found in methods sections. Columns might be removed from tables. Other materials might appear only in digital supplements. Writers must also tighten prose when possible. Shorter prose increases the legibility of writing and augments its publication potential. (Words: 79)

Debrief of sample revision (sentence numbers refer to original, not revised, passage):

Sentence 1: A journal is costly and expensive to produce, and it is the editor's responsibility to balance content and costs.

- "Costly and expensive" = redundant (costly, especially because it is an adverb, eliminated)
- "It is the editor" = vague pronoun (replaced with editor)
- "Journals" and "editors" made plural to eliminate unnecessary articles
- Responsibility = nominalization (just say what editors *do*)

Sentence 2: As a result, it should not be surprising to you when you are asked to make your paper shorter by removing text, or even removing a table or graph.

- Inserted a stronger subject (removing "as a result") and removed the negative construction ("it should not") to replace it with "should expect"
- Removed doubling of "removal" to make series shorter

Sentence 3: It is important that you take such requests seriously and try very hard to help the editor.

- Whole next sentence consolidated and moved to clause at beginning of previous sentence (likewise, the subject of subsequent sentences was altered for consistency/flow)

Sentence 4: The construction of journal articles often results in redundant repetitions from section to section that might be cut out.

- "Redundant repetitions" = redundant (replaced with "redundancies")
- "From section to section" = unnecessary prep phrase and repetition (replaced with "between sections")
- "That might be cut out" = floating pronouns (eliminated)

Sentence 5: The ways in which the captions of figures repeat words and phrases that are also found in the methods section is one example.

- "Ways in which" = floating pronouns (here, eliminated; could also be replaced with shorter "how")
- "Captions of figures" = unnecessary prepositions; (replaced with figure captions)
- "Words and phrases" = redundant doubling (phrases are made up of words; used only phrases)

Sentence 6: It is not always necessary to include all columns in a table.

- "It is not always necessary" = vague pronoun (replaced with columns, a more exact subject leading to stronger verb)

Sentence 7: And, obviously, in our digitally enhanced age, figures, graphs, charts, tables, etc. can often be provided as supplemental materials on the Internet; they need not appear in print at all.

- “Obviously” = not only an adverb, but its meaning is an indication that you are, for some reason, pointing out the obvious and the entire phrase can likely be eliminated
- Long list of things in digital supplement replaced with “other materials”
- Eliminated repetitive clause following semicolon (unnecessary repetition)

Sentence 8: As far as prose itself goes, writers must make it a practice to shorten and tighten their prose wherever and whenever possible.

- “As far as prose itself goes” = unnecessary clause (eliminated)
- “Make it a practice” = weak verb (replaced with tighten; “shorten” also removed as it is implied by tighten)

Sentence 9: These changes will not only increase the chances that their work is selected for publication, but they will also make writing more easily understandable.

- “Not only...but also” = unnecessary negative construction (removed, resulting in stronger subject and verb)
- “These changes = nominalization (removed)
- “More easily understandable” = “legibility”
- Juxtaposed final concepts in sentence to end with idea writer wishes to be more salient