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Concise Academic Writing

Tips and tools for reducing word count and
writing concise academic and scientific texts



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Tips and tools for reducing word count and
writing concise academic and scientific texts



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1. What is your *role* at the university? What is your *field of research*?
2. Is it the *word count* or the *conciseness* that interested you most about this workshop and why?
3. How big of a problem are *word count limits* for you and with what kinds of writing?
4. Is it *easier or harder* to write concisely in English than in another language?
5. What *challenges* do you face when it comes to writing for academic purposes in English in general?



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Shorter often
means better.



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Today's workshop:

1. Words
2. Phrases
3. Grammar
4. Keep sentences short.
5. Numbers
6. Punctuation and formatting
7. **Exercise:** Shorten these sentences.
8. Structure
9. Lanham's Paramedic Method
10. **Exercise:** Try Lanham's Paramedic Method
11. Abstract template
12. Resources

<https://www.hb.se/en/staff/my-employment/competence-development/academic-communication/writing-concisely/>





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Words



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Delete “the”

Original:

The clarity of your writing depends on both **the** content and **the** style.

(13 words, 70 characters)

Revised:

The clarity of your writing depends on both content and style.

(11 words, 62 characters)



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When "the" is
necessary

there is **only one**

there is **only one in that context**

we have **already mentioned** it

to say something about **all the things** referred
to by a noun

to refer to a **system** or **service**



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Eraser “that”

Original:

We found **that** pupils **that** are taught by older teachers score higher.

(12 words)

Revised:

We found pupils taught by older teachers score higher.

(9 words)



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Revise *needless* transitions

Original:

Indeed, we discovered that the new weaving technique affected production time.

(11 words)

Revised:

We discovered that the new weaving technique affected production time.

(10 words)



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Eliminate conjunctions

Original:

Patients treated with drug X had no symptoms after 3 days, **and** patients treated with drug Y had no symptoms after 7 days.

(23 words, 121 characters)

Revised:

Patients treated with drug X had no symptoms after 3 days.
Patients treated with drug Y had no symptoms after 7 days.

(22 words, 117 characters)



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Use *abbreviations* and *acronyms*

- In your text after defining it at its first use
- Perhaps journal names in your references



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Use *shorter* words

Original:

We **investigated** whether **utilising** the dye would **facilitate** sustainability.
(66 characters)

Revised:

We **studied** whether **using** the dye would **aid** sustainability.
(50 characters)

Use *hyphenated* words



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Original:

After rehabilitation, the patients came to **rely on themselves.**

(9 words)

Revised:

After rehabilitation, the patients became **self-reliant.**

(6 words)



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Eliminate **unnecessary** **hedging words**

Introductory verbs	e.g. seem, tend, look like, appear to be, think, believe, doubt, be sure, indicate, suggest
Certain lexical verbs	e.g. believe, assume, suggest
Certain modal verbs	e.g. will, must, would, may, might, could
Adverbs of frequency	e.g. often, sometimes, usually
Modal adverbs	e.g. certainly, definitely, clearly, probably, possibly, perhaps, conceivably,
Modal adjectives	e.g. certain, definite, clear, probable, possible
Modal nouns	e.g. assumption, possibility, probability
That clauses	e.g. It could be the case that... e.g. It might be suggested that... e.g. There is every hope that...
To-clause + adjective	e.g. It may be possible to obtain... e.g. It is important to develop... e.g. It is useful to study...



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Remove adverbs and adjectives

Original:

The **entire** treatment lasted for four days, and it **greatly** improved the mental health of patients.
(16 words)

Revised:

The treatment lasted for four days, and it improved the mental health of patients.
(14 words)



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Avoid meaningless *modifiers*

- ~~past history~~
- ~~advanced planning~~
- ~~close proximity~~
- ~~carefully scrutinise~~
- ~~combine together~~
- ~~advanced warning~~



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Avoid ”helping” verbs

Examples:

~~First, you have to create an account.~~

First, create an account.

~~The customer is always trying to get a discount.~~

The customer always tries to get a discount.

~~The report was prepared by top scientists.~~

Top scientists prepared the report.



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Choose *efficient verbs*

<i>Verb</i>	<i>Longer sentence</i>	<i>Concise sentence</i>
Agree	These results are in agreement with prior findings.	These results agree with prior findings.
Analyse	We performed an analysis of several factors.	We analysed several factors.
Contradict	Our results are in opposition to Johnson's study.	Our results contradict Johnson's study.
Improve	Our method is an improvement over prior systems.	Our method improves on prior systems.
Localise	AjeA was found to be present in the nucleus.	AjeA localised to the nucleus.
Summarise	Table 1 presents a summary of the patient data.	Table 1 summarises the patient data.



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Choose *single words* over *phrases*

Wordy Phrase	Single word substitute
a majority of	most
based on the fact that	because
in close proximity to	near
during the course of	during
in the absence of	without



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**The right words
don't need
modifying.**





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Reflections/questions
so far?

What has surprised you?



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Phrases



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Trim *wordy* phrases

Original:

During **the course of the study**, **the majority of** participants improved **in response to** treatment with the therapeutic programme.

(19 words)

Revised:

During **the study**, **most** participants improved after treatment **with** the therapeutic programme.

(12 words)



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Wordy phrase *substitutes*

all of the	all the
as to whether	whether
because of/due to the fact that	because
brought up	raised
due to the face that	because
find out	determine, investigate
give consideration to	consider
grow in size	grow
has the ability to	use "can"
for the purpose of	use "to" + verb
in order to	to
in reference to	about, regarding
in spite of the fact that	despite/though
in terms of	delete and restructure or use "about" or "regarding," depending on the context.
in the event of/that	if
in the process of	use "while" or "when," depending on the context.
made a decision	decided
make a contribution	contribute
make contact with	contact
on a daily basis	daily
on a regular basis	regularly
one of the	a
our results indicate	therefore
take into account	consider
the majority of	most



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Dispensable words and phrases

as well as

indeed

the fact that

due to the fact that

for a short (or long)

basically

period of time

on the other hand

by using

fundamentally

needless to say

certainly

however, moreover,

just

furthermore

completely

really

definitely

in order to

very

absolutely

in relation to

for all intents and

in the event that

purposes



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Grammar

Avoid
possessive
constructions
using “of.”



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Original: **Members of Group 1** were followed up for 6 months, and **those of** Group 2, for 12 months.

(18 words)

Revised: **Group 1 members** were followed up for 6 months and Group 2 for 12 months.

(15 words)

Original: *Administrators have complex roles that mean...*

Revised: *Administrators' complex roles mean...*



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Use elliptical constructions

Original:

Group A **was given** cyclosporine, Group B **was given** FK506, and Group C **was given** chlorambucil.

(16 words)

Revised:

Group A **was given** cyclosporine; Group B, FK506; and Group C, chlorambucil.

(12 words)



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Rewrite running starts

Original:

It has been reported that the fungal samples grow faster when treated with the wash.

(15 words)

Revised:

The fungal samples grow faster when treated with the wash.

(10 words)



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Avoid “**there
is/are**”

Original:

There is a consensus in the literature that...

(8 words)

Revised:

The literature agrees that...

(4 words)



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Active vs. passive voice

Active:

The nurse **treated** the patient.

(5 words)

Passive:

The patient **was treated by** the nurse.

(7 words)



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Choose *active* voice

Passive:

The samples **were collected** by the researcher.

(7 words, 45 characters)

Active:

The researcher **collected** the samples.

(5 words, 37 characters)



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Sometimes the
passive is
appropriate

- Doer of the action is unknown
- Doer of the action is less important than the object and what happened to it

~~*We washed the specimens*~~

The specimens were washed.



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Be wary of nominalisations

- a nominalized verb is a verb that has been **changed** to noun/adjective

to regulate = verb

a regulation = noun

regulated (e.g. “regulated process”)=
adjective

~~*An analysis of learning outcomes was
made on the basis of the findings.*~~

*Learning outcomes were analysed on
the basis of the findings.*



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Find nominalisations, Part 1

1. Often follow the phrases “it is or was” and “there is, was, or are.”
2. Look for weak, generic verbs.
3. Look for several prepositional phrases.
Original: The reduction [in the census] was caused [by the lack] [of a favourable response] [by officials].

Revised: The lack of a favourable official response reduced the census.



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Find nominalisations, Part 2

4. Look for common word endings (suffixes).

Table 1. Common Nominalisations and Their Suffixes

Ending	Nominalisation	Original verb
-act	reaction, contraction	react, contract
-age	Package, passage	pack, pass
-al	removal, refusal	remove, refuse
-ance	assistance, variance	assist, vary
-ee	Employee, trustee	Employ, trust
-ence	conference, dependence	confer, depend
-ing	writing, feeding	write, feed
-ion	organisation, investigation	organise, investigate
-ment	assignment, resentment	assign, resent
-ure	failure, enclosure	fall, enclose



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Keep sentences short.



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BREAK?



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Numbers



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Write out numbers *judiciously*

1. Write out all numbers less than 10 (i. e. “nine” not “9”).
2. Write out any number at the start of a sentence.
3. For sentences starting with long numbers, it is usually best to rewrite them.
“Four hundred and sixty one subjects were analysed” can be changed to “We analysed 461 subjects.”



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Remove
spaces around
mathematical
operators

Original: $n = 3$
(3 words)

Revised: $n=3$
(1 word)



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**Don't *rewrite* data
that is already
presented in your
tables and/or figures**





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Punctuation and formatting



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Use *parentheses*

Original:

The protein level was **5 mg in Group A, while it was 3 mg in Group B**, the difference being statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

(25 words)

Revised:

The difference in the protein level between **Groups A and B**, was significant (**5 mg vs. 3 mg, $p < 0.05$**).

(21 words)



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Put *product* *names* in parentheses

Original:

The samples were analysed **on the ABC spectrophotometer** (Zhejiang Scientific, Zhejiang, China) to determine the xyz values.

(17 words)

Revised: The samples were analysed to determine the xyz values (**ABC spectrophotometer**; Zhejiang Scientific, Zhejiang, China).

(15 words)



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*Cite the
reference*

~~According to Potter, these results are typical.~~
These results are typical (Potter, 2002).



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Target *paragraphs* with widows and orphans

Original:

The mutated protein greatly decreased cell function.

Revised:

The mutated protein decreased cell function.



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Exercise:
Shorten these sentences



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Exercise: Shorten these sentences

1. The release and activation of the dye were controlled digitally.
2. These analysis methods make it possible to profile all of the students graduated during a given period.
3. There is no general method for controlling the timing and location of activity of proteins within cells.
4. Similar technologies have been successfully used in other IT applications.
5. Nurses were taught the techniques and they were also taught the theories behind them.



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**1. The release
and activation
of the dye were
controlled
digitally.**

Eliminate unnecessary prepositional phrases:
“of the dye.”

*Dye release and activation were controlled
digitally.*



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2. These analysis methods make it possible to profile all of the students graduated during a given period.

Here, you can replace a phrase with a single word: use “permit” instead of “make it possible.” And the “of” in the phrase “all of the” is unnecessary.

These analyses enable profiling of all graduates during a period.

3. There is no general method for controlling the timing and location of activity of proteins within cells.



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Here you can eliminate an expletive phrase (“there is”).

A general method for controlling the timing and location of protein activity within cells is lacking.

And if you are familiar with more concise terminology, use “spatiotemporal control” versus “controlling the timing and location.”

A general method for spatiotemporal control of protein activity within cells is lacking.

4. Similar technologies have been successfully used in other IT applications.



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Eliminate redundant words, “successfully” in this case. “Used” implies success; one would never say “technologies have been unsuccessfully used.”

Similar technologies have been used in other IT applications.



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5. Nurses were taught the techniques and they were also taught the theories behind them.

Turn a compound sentence (two subjects, two verbs) into a simple sentence with a single subject (“nurses”).

Nurses learned techniques and underlying theories.



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Structure



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Is every paragraph in your manuscript tied to your ***one main message?***

Does each sentence give the reader ***new information,*** or have you just used different words to say the same thing?



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Avoid redundancy

Eliminate information or data that is described in previous sections.

~~Omit text containing information already present.~~



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What is included in the *word count*?

Do references count?

Do footnotes count?

Does the abstract count?



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**You've tried all
these tips and
your text is
*still too long***

- Write a different paper.
- Drop significant chunks of the paper.
- Shove things into supplementary material.



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Lanham's Paramedic Method

- Ask: “Who’s kicking whom?”
- Put this action into a single, active verb and place the doer as the subject.
- Keep the action near the beginning of the sentence if possible.



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Wordy sentence

The point I wish to make is that perception is the process of extracting information from stimulation emanating from the objects, places, and events in the world around us.



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1. Eliminate *slow wind-ups*

~~The point I wish to make is that~~ Perception is the process of extracting information from stimulation emanating from the objects, places, and events in the world around us.



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2. Eliminate *clichés*

Perception is the process of extracting information from stimulation emanating from the objects, places, and events ~~in the world around us.~~



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3. Highlight the “*is*” forms and *prepositions*

Perception **is** the process **of** extracting information **from** stimulation emanating **from** the objects, places, and events.



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4. Break the sentence into a list that starts with all the *highlighted* words

Perception

is the process

of extracting information

from stimulation emanating

from the objects, places, and events.



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5. Identify the possible “actions” and transform them into single verbs.

Perception is the process of extracting information from stimulation emanating from the objects, places, and events.

Process

Extract

Inform

Stimulate

Emanate



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6. Identify the *subject* of the sentence and choose the *clearest action verb* for that subject to take on.

Perception is the process of extracting information from stimulation emanating from the objects, places, and events.

Subject: perception

Verb: extract



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7. Eliminate “is” forms and excess/repeating prepositional phrases and words, bringing the subject and action verb together.

Perception

~~is the process~~

~~of extracting information~~

~~from stimulation emanating~~

from the objects, places, and events



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Concise
revision

Perception extracts information
from objects, places, and events.



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Use the principles of the Paramedic Method to *improve* a wordy sentence

1. The encouragement of total reliance on the federally sponsored student loan programme for medical students from low-income families to pay their way through school is causing many young doctors to leave medical school deeply in debt.
2. The new interpretations on canine aggressive behaviour researched by Cesar Milano are actually conceived by using a method that originally was used by Skinner and the early scholars in behaviourism.
3. After reviewing the results of your previous research, and in light of the relevant information found within the context of the study, there is ample evidence for making important, significant changes to our operating procedures.



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Revision process for #1:

The encouragement

of total reliance

**on the federally sponsored
student loan programme**

for medical students

from low-income families

to pay their way through school

is causing many young doctors
to leave medical school deeply

in debt.

Encourage

Rely

loan

Pay

Cause

Leave

Owe

Subject: medical students

Verb: rely



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Revision suggestion for #1:

Medical students relying on federal student loans graduate indebted.

(Reduced from 35 words to 9)



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Revision suggestion for #2:

Cesar Millan reinterprets Behaviourism in researching canine aggression (Skinner, X).

(Reduced from 30 words to 9)



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Revision suggestion for #3:

Evidence supports changing operating procedures, given our review and context.

(Reduced from 36 words to 10)



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Abstract



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Abstract Template

Provide one or two sentences that give **context** to your study topic.
Every reader should understand this first part of the abstract (*present tense*).

Describe the specific **background information** that your reader needs
to understand the context of your study in one or two sentences (*present tense*).

State the **specific problem** in the state-of-the-art that your study addresses
in one sentence using phrases such as “however,” “yet,” “but” etc. (*present tense*).

Describe the **central message** of your paper in one sentence
using the phrase “Here, we show/demonstrate” (*present tense*).

Take two or three sentences to describe your **main findings**. Here, it is important to focus on the most important findings and
only to provide details on the methods used if they are crucial for your main message (*past tense*).

In the last one or two sentences, put your **results in a broader perspective**.

Explain why your findings are significant and what specific impact your findings are likely or possibly going to make in your field
of research or for an application (*present and/or future tense*).



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Resources: additional writing resources

<https://www.hb.se/en/staff/my-employment/competence-development/academic-communication/>

<https://www.hb.se/anstalld/min-anstallning/kompetensutveckling/academic-communication/att-skriva-koncist/>



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Resources: use a concordance

To see how specific words/phrases are really used in academic writing, use the
Compleat Lexical Tutor

Web Concordance – English

<https://www.lextutor.ca/conc/eng/>

Select a relevant corpus, e.g. BAWE - British Academic Written English, Academic Abstracts, or Electrical Engineering



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Resources: try Grammarly

If you'd told me a year ago that today I would finish a marathon, I would have laughed. Your support had a huge **affect** on me!

Replace the word

effect



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Resources: search phrases in Google Scholar

”



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Questions or comments?

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