

Concision Checklist

1. Find sentences more than three lines long. Examine these first, then move to shorter sentences.

2. Omit needless words.

A. Find words which occur in pairs: “if and when,” “each and every,” “define and establish,” “ready and willing,” etc. Replace as many of these as possible with a single word.

- “Each and every dog hates cats” could be “*all* dogs hate cats.”
- “I’m ready and willing to start a long-term relationship” could be “I *want* to start a long-term relationship.”

B. Look for unnecessary “category words.”

- “tight financial conditions” → “tight finances”
- “swarms of bees” → “bees”
- “nonessential areas” → “nonessentials”

C. Look for meaningless modifiers (*generally, usually, certain, various*) and delete them, unless you have exceptional reason not to. More specific words abound.

- “Basically, I usually go to the store on Tuesdays” could be reduced to “I go to the store on Tuesdays.”

D. Whenever possible, substitute a word for a phrase.

- “A sail-powered craft that has turned on its side or completely over” can be rephrased as “A *capsized* sailboat.”
- “In the situation in which a class is over-enrolled, a new section should be started” could become “*When* a class is over-enrolled, a new section should be started.”

3. Omit any information which readers can easily supply or infer.

A. Delete any details which can be inferred from context.

- “Energy used to power our industries and homes will in years to come be increasingly expensive in terms of dollars and cents” can become “Energy will eventually cost more.”
- “In the area of educational activities, tight finances are forcing school boards to cut nonessentials drastically.” You can delete the opening phrase: “Tight finances are forcing school boards to cut nonessentials drastically.”

B. Delete any information that your readers will already know.

- If you are writing about goldfish for a home aquarium magazine, you don't need to describe how to replace the tank's water.
- “Campbell's Soup sells many kinds of canned soups for people to eat” contains extra information. “Campbell's Soup sells many kinds of soup” is sufficient.

4. Avoid excessive metadiscourse. Metadiscourse occurs when a text explains itself. While we need metadiscourse to write effectively, sometimes writers use too much of it.

A. Metadiscourse that announces your topic:

- “*In this essay, I will discuss* Robert Frost's nature imagery in his early poems.” You could rephrase this as “Robert Frost used nature images in his early poems.”

B. Metadiscourse that hedges.

- The following words simply mean “I stand by my claim, but I understand it can only be tentative”: *usually, often, sometimes, virtually, possibly, in some ways, to a certain extent, might, can, could, etc.* Consider omitting them, but use them when your claims would be too strong otherwise.

C. Metadiscourse that intensifies:

- The following words mean little more than “believe me”: *very, quite, central, crucial, basic, fundamental, major, as we know, as we can see, it is clear that, it is obvious that.* Omit them and choose stronger language.

D. Metadiscourse that attributes:

- “High divorce rates *have been observed* to occur in areas that *have been determined* to have low population density.” Instead, you could write “High divorce rates *occur* in areas with low population density.”
- “Patterns of drought and precipitation *have been found* to coincide with cycles of sunspot activity.” This could become “Patterns of drought *coincide* with sunspot activity,” or “Patterns of drought *apparently coincide* with sunspot activity.”

E. Metadiscourse that highlights:

- Some phrases, like “in regard to” and “so far as,” are used to place special emphasis on the word that follows. This device can be useful in special circumstances, such as when you are introducing an idea that the next few sentences will elaborate upon. If you've used such phrases for any other purpose, try revising.
- “*In regard to fishing*, a good pole is essential” can become “A good pole is essential *to fishing*.”