

How to Become a Better Writer

Keep Sentences Short

The other stores which now come under the general direction of head office have a number of variations in their administrative arrangements, including coding, which it might be appropriate to revise and make more compatible with those of head office, so if it is agreed that there are enhancements which should be made to head office systems, there are advantages to doing it at the same time as the introduction of the new quality assurance system before rolling it out to all the stores.

Long sentences like this one – which has 84 words – are mentally tiring and can often distort the message for the reader. This is because the different components of the message become separated from each other, and the logical flow, or ‘story’, disappears.

Because readers start to lose track of how the sentence started, they have to reread it, sometimes more than once, to make connections between the beginning, middle and end.

This is not to say that all your sentences have to be short.

A series of short, choppy sentences can be just as distracting and difficult as pages and pages of long, convoluted sentences.

A good tip to help make your writing flow smoothly is keep your sentences to an average of 15 to 20 words – maximum 25 – throughout your book or article. Also, try not to pack too many different ideas into one sentence.

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How do sentences become long?

Sentences become long for two main reasons:

1. They include too many ideas, either through adding information (using 'and' 'as well', 'but', etc):

My assignment is due today but the dog ate it, and I should really rewrite it before midday but I don't think I'll have time and anyway I have to take the dog to the vet and clean up the mess the dog made in the house when it chewed all 80 pages of the report.

.... Or through over-qualifying the main idea:

The dog, which I bought from the vet when it was an abandoned puppy, caused a major problem for my deadlines today by eating (probably because it was either hungry or lonely) my assignment which was due today, and which consisted of 80 pages, the remnants of which are now scattered throughout my house.

2. They use more words than are necessary.

How to fix it

If you're having trouble shortening long sentences, try this:

Step 1: Identify all the ideas contained in the sentence

Step 2: Rewrite the sentence so it contains no more than two ideas (put the other ideas into separate sentences or a list). A list format can make the sentence appear less daunting, because it presents the different ideas as clearly distinct.

Step 3: Delete any words that don't add anything to the meaning

The worked example below shows you this in practice.

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Long sentence to be shortened

While our initial brief was to focus on needs and benefits, early in the survey it became evident that in comparison to other issues, benefits were a minor concern to employees and that these other issues would have to be addressed by the project team in order for senior management to obtain a full understanding of the needs of both employees and unions.

(One sentence, 63 words)

Step 1: Isolate the different ideas

- Our initial brief was to focus on needs and benefits
- Early in the survey something became evident
- Benefits were a minor concern to employees in comparison to other issues
- The project team would have to address these other issues
- Senior management needs a full understanding of the needs of both employees and unions

Step 2: Rearrange the ideas (with no more than two in a sentence), and edit to retain the original meaning

Our initial brief was to focus on needs and benefits, but early in the survey two things became evident. (19 words) First, that benefits were a minor concern to employees in comparison to other issues. (14 words) Second, that if senior management were to obtain a full understanding of the needs of both employees and unions, the project team would have to address these other issues. (29 words)

Step 3: Remove superfluous words and phrases

Our ~~initial~~ brief was to focus on needs and benefits, but early in the survey two things became evident. First, that benefits were a ~~minor~~ **of less** concern to employees ~~in comparison to~~ **than** other issues. Second, if senior management were to ~~obtain a full understanding of~~ **fully understand** the needs of both employees and unions, the project team would have to address these other issues. (three sentences, 18, 12, and 25 words)

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The original sentence has been revised and tightened into three shorter but clearer sentences:

Our brief was to focus on needs and benefits, but early in the survey two things became evident. First, that benefits were of less concern to employees than other issues. Second, if senior management were to fully understand the needs of both employees and unions, the project team would have to address these other issues.

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