Reducing your word count

It is always possible to reduce your word count, even when you think there is nothing more that could be eliminated. In addition, excess language is often confusing for the reader and writing can be improved by paring down text to improve clarity. This guide focuses on small but effective methods for getting your word count down. It does not focus on structuring your arguments logically or other specific aspects of content; these are best addressed to your supervisor.

Rearranging Content and Combining Sentences

Once you have a rough draft, try to ‘reverse outline’ your document to make sure your ideas and arguments develop logically and with supporting evidence and examples. Write down what each section and paragraph is about. If you see anything extra that doesn’t belong or enhance your argument, it is a candidate for deletion. The more focused you can remain on your topic and arguments, the more concise your writing will be.

If you still find you’re well above your word count maximum, the first step is to rank the points you use to substantiate your argument. By ranking the importance of the arguments you make, you can eliminate ones which aren’t as important as others, keeping the essay strong while removing large portions of writing.

If you don’t want to eliminate any of the points, you can still reduce word count by taking the topic sentence, or main idea, of several, less important paragraphs, to create new combined paragraphs with less detail than the more important arguments.

Removing Extraneous Words

Look through your work and see if you find any adverbs, especially adverbs which have “ly” endings. In many instances, these adverbs end up being filler words which don’t add anything beneficial. Ask if each one is needed and remove those that aren’t. Adverbs include: actually, commonly, continually, correctly, finally, fully, greatly, perfectly, rigidly, sadly, totally, urgently.

Much in the same way as adverbs make their way into writing, multiple adjectives are used when one (or none at all) would suffice. See if all of the adjectives used are needed and remove those which don’t add to the meaning of the sentence being written.

Writers sometimes clog up their prose with one or more extra words or phrases that seem to determine narrowly or to modify the meaning of a noun but don’t actually add to the meaning of the sentence e.g. kind of, sort of, type of, basically, for all intents and purposes, definitely, specific, particular.

Bear in mind that that these are not strict rules but guidelines. You will still need to make judgements about meaning and phrasing. This is your writing, your voice and, ultimately, your decision about how to express your ideas. There are also differences between disciplines, so when in doubt, consult your supervisor for clarification.
Removing excessive detail

Watch for phrases or longer passages that repeat words with similar meanings. Words that don’t build on the content of sentences or paragraphs are rarely necessary.

Likewise, many pairs of words imply each other. Finish implies complete, so the phrase “completely finish” is redundant in most cases. So are many other pairs of words: past memories, various differences, each individual, true facts, future plans, terrible tragedy, end result, final outcome, free gift, past history, unexpected surprise, sudden crisis. There are also illogical expressions such as “very unique.” Since unique means “one of a kind,” adding modifiers of degree such as "very," "so," "especially," "somewhat," "extremely," and so on is unnecessary. One-of-a-kind-ness has no gradations; something is either unique or it is not.

Replacing Vague Phrases with Specific Words

Many commonly-used phrases can be replaced with single words. These phrases often crop up in writing that requires a formal tone, but they detract from, rather than add to, meaning. For example:

“The reason for”, “due to the fact that”, “in light of the fact that”, “given the fact that”, and “considering the fact that” can be replaced with because, since, or why. “Despite the fact that” or “regardless of the fact that”, can be replaced with although.

“In the event that” and “under circumstances in which” can be replaced with if. “It is necessary that” and “cannot be avoided” can be replaced with must or should.

“On the occasion of” or “in a situation in which” can be replaced with when.

“In reference to”, “as regards”, “concerning the matter of” could be replaced with about. “In anticipation of”, “at the same time as”, “following on from”, could be replaced with before, when, as or after.

“Is able to”, “has the opportunity to” and “has the capacity for”, could be replaced with can.

Identify negatives and change them to affirmatives

Expressing ideas in negative form means you must use an extra word; it also makes readers work harder to figure out your meaning.

E.g. If you do not have more than five years of experience, do not call for an interview if you have not already spoken to human resources.

Can be revised as: Applicants with more than five years of experience can bypass human resources and call for an interview.

Read aloud

One final technique that is helpful for showing where your sentences might need editing, is to read your document out loud. This can identify awkward wording which may need rewriting, or ideas that don’t connect. You should go through this process a few times with your writing, each time eliminating words or phrases that are problematic and do not flow smoothly. It might feel strange to read your words aloud, but it very effective for highlighting areas which you may gloss over when reading silently.

In addition, it is always helpful to get a fresh pair of eyes to read through your work, if you are fortunate enough to have a friend or colleague who will proof read for you. Why not offer to read their work in return?

Recommended Websites

The following two websites are recommended for further clarification. Many of the examples in this guide are taken from these resources:

- [https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/conciseness-handout/](https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/conciseness-handout/)
- [https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/academic_writing/index.html](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/academic_writing/index.html)

www.wolfson.cam.ac.uk/library
http://libguides.cam.ac.uk/wolfsoncollege

Book a bespoke one-to-one session by emailing librarian@wolfson.cam.ac.uk
academic-skills@wolfson.cam.ac.uk