
Diction and Conciseness

You should read this chapter if you need to review or learn about

Do I Need
to Read
This Chapter?



- Understanding the levels of diction
- Eliminating redundancy
- Making your sentences more concise and effective

Get Started



Here, you'll first explore *diction*, a writer's choice of words. Then you will learn how to eliminate unnecessary words from your writing to create a concise style. Understanding diction and conciseness will help you achieve a more effective writing style.

What is Diction?

- “When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume, among the Powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and Nature’s God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.”
- “Get outta my way, bimbo!”

You likely recognize the first example: It’s the opening of “The Declaration of Independence.” The second example? It was yelled at me when a fellow driver decided that I wasn’t driving fast enough (and I drive plenty fast!).

These two selections are very different because of their words. *Diction* is a writer’s choice of words. Your diction affects the clarity and impact of your message. Therefore, the diction you want in a specific writing situation depends on context: your audience, purpose, and tone.

Levels of Diction

Diction is measured from *formal* to *informal* language usage. *Formal diction* is marked by multisyllable words, long sentences, and a formal tone; *informal diction* includes shorter words and sentences and a less formal tone. Neither level of diction (or any levels in between) is “good” or “bad”; rather, each is appropriate in different writing situations. The following chart shows the levels of diction and when each is used.

Formal Diction	Less Formal Diction	Informal Diction
Multisyllable words	Educated language	Everyday words
Legal documents	Job application letters	Popular magazine articles
Technical reports	Resumes	Notes to friends
Scientific articles	Sales and marketing letters	Everyday e-mail

Let’s explore diction in greater detail.

1. Elevated diction

The most elevated level of diction has abstract language, a serious tone, few personal references, few contractions, and considerable distance implied between reader and writer. It’s used for the most formal documents such as stock offerings, land deeds, formal sermons, and technical articles.

The following selection is from Jonathan Edwards’ famous sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” delivered in the early eighteenth century. As you read it, notice that the words are part of an educated person’s vocabulary. Examples of *elevated diction* include *wrath* (great anger), *inconceivable* (cannot be imagined), and *abhor* (detest).

Notice also the great many *figures of speech*, such as the two imaginative comparisons. The first, a metaphor, compares God's anger to a bow and arrow: "The bow of God's wrath is bent, and the arrow made ready on the string, and justice bends the arrow at your heart and strains the bow. . . ." The second, a simile, compares humans to spiders: "The God that holds you over the pit of hell much as one holds a spider or some loathsome insect . . ."

The wrath of God is like great waters that are dammed for the present; they increase more and more and rise higher and higher, till an outlet is given; and the longer the stream is stopped, the more rapid and mighty is its course when once it is let loose. 'Tis true that judgment against your evil work has not been executed hitherto; the floods of God's vengeance have been withheld; but your guilt in the meantime is constantly increasing, and you are every day treasuring up more wrath; the waters are continually rising and waxing more and more mighty; and there is nothing but the mere pleasure of God that holds the waters back, that are unwilling to be stopped, and press hard to go forward. If God should only withdraw his hand from the floodgate, it would immediately fly open, and the fiery floods of the fierceness and wrath of God would rush forth with inconceivable fury, and would come upon you with omnipotent power; and if your strength were ten thousand times greater than it is, yea, ten thousand times greater than the strength of the stoutest, sturdiest devil in hell, it would be nothing to withstand or endure it.

The bow of God's wrath is bent, and the arrow made ready on the string, and justice bends the arrow at your heart and strains the bow, and it is nothing but the mere pleasure of God, and that of an angry God, without any promise or obligation at all, that keeps the arrow one moment from being made drunk with your blood.

The God that holds you over the pit of hell much as one holds a spider or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked; his wrath toward you burns like fire. . . .

2. Standard American English

The language used in most academic and professional writing is called "Edited American English" or "Standard Written English." It's the writing you find in magazines such as *Newsweek*, *US News and World Report*, and *The Atlantic*. Such language conforms to the widely established rules of grammar, sentence structure, usage, punctuation, and spelling that you've been learning in this book.

Here's an example of Standard American English from an article I wrote for a newspaper:

When I was young, time seemed to stand still. But as I plunge kicking and screaming into my middle years, time compresses and I find myself thinking about eternity. No, not mortality, spirituality, or perfume; rather, I'm talking about the unique meaning "eternity" has for Long Islanders.

To empty-nesters left contemplating the remains of an Easter feast once the guests have rolled out the door, eternity is two people and a ham. To my single female friends, eternity is waiting for Mr. Right to appear on their doorstep and in their arms. To a long-married man, eternity is shopping for shoes with his wife.

To Long Islanders, however, eternity takes on a whole new meaning. My train-going friends claim that eternity is the Long Island Railroad loudspeaker squawking during rush hour, "LIRR delays through Jamaica, delays through Hicksville, delays on the Ronkonkoma branch." Why not just drive? You know the answer to that question if you've ever been westbound on the Southern State in the fall, as the sun sets on the highway and you're blinded for six straight miles. Traffic grinds to a

standstill as everyone fumbles with their sun visors and squints into their windshield. You know what eternity is when you travel from New York City to the Hamptons on a Friday night in August. They don't call it "Long" Island for nothing.

3. Colloquial language

Next comes *colloquial language*, the level of diction characteristic of casual conversation and informal writing. The following joke shows the difference between standard diction and colloquial language. Notice the contractions and the use of the word *buddies*.

Three buddies die in a car crash and go to heaven for orientation. They're all asked, "When you're in your casket and friends and family are mourning you, what would you like to hear them say about you?"

The first guy says, "I'd like to hear them say that I was a great doctor and a great family man."

The second guy says, "I'd like to hear that I was a wonderful husband and teacher who made a huge difference in our children of tomorrow."

The last guy replies, "I'd like to hear them say . . . 'Look, he's moving!'"

4. Slang

Less formal than colloquial language is *slang*, coined words and phrases or new meanings for established terms. Some recent slang includes the words *dweeb*, *nerd*, *doofus*. Slang is fun, informal, and great for casual conversations with friends. Slang is never used in formal writing.

5. Vernacular

Vernacular is the ordinary language of a particular region, such as "pop" or "soda" for a carbonated beverage. *Dialect*, the language specific to a particular regional area, is a type of vernacular. It's different from slang because dialect reflects differences in regions and socioeconomic status. Like colloquial language and slang, vernacular and dialect are not appropriate for formal writing.

Here's how the novelist and humorist Mark Twain used vernacular and dialect to describe the people and events in the American West in the 1880s. This excerpt is from Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*.

"Say, Jim, I'm a-goin' home for a few days."

"What for?"

"Well, I hain't b'en there for a right smart while and I'd like to see who things are comin' on."

"How long are you going to be gone?"

"Bout two weeks."

Choosing the Appropriate Level of Diction

As you read earlier in this chapter, your choice of words depends on the context: your audience, purpose, and tone. Follow these guidelines as you select your level of diction:

1. Use words that are accurate, suitable, and familiar.
 - *Accurate* words say what you mean.
 - *Suitable* words convey your tone and fit with the other words in your writing.
 - *Familiar* words are easy to read and understand.

2. Choose the precise word you want.

English is one of the richest languages in the world, one that offers many different ways to say the same thing. Select your words carefully to convey your thoughts vividly and precisely. Select words with the precise meanings you want. For example, *blissful*, *blithe*, *cheerful*, *contented*, *gay*, *joyful*, and *gladdened* all mean “happy”—yet each one conveys a different shade of meaning.

3. Use specific rather than general words.

Specific words give your readers more vivid mental pictures than general words. Sometimes simple action verbs such as *run* and *go* will be appropriate to your subject, audience, and tone. Other times, however, you’ll need more specific words to make your meaning clear.

4. Use words with the appropriate connotations.

To be successful at choosing exact words for each particular context, you have to understand the *denotation* and *connotation* of words. Every word has a *denotation*, its explicit meaning. You can find the denotation of a word by looking it up in a dictionary. For example, if you look up the word *fat* in the dictionary, it will say, “having too much adipose tissue.”

Some words also have *connotations*, or emotional overtones. These connotations can be positive, negative, or neutral. For example, *fat* has a negative connotation in our fitness-obsessed society. Being sensitive to a word’s denotation and connotation is essential for clear and effective writing. It can also help you use the right word and so avoid getting your nose punched out because you insulted someone. Finally, you can use these connotations to create—or defuse—an emotional response in your reader.

Here are some additional examples of connotation and denotation:

Word	Positive Connotation	Negative Connotation
average	traditional	mediocre, passable
thrifty	economical	parsimonious, cheap, tightfisted
agreeable	amiable, easy-going	servile
caring	concerned	prying, meddlesome
daring	bold	defiant, reckless
deliberate	careful	slow
talkative	loquacious	verbose

Less Is More: Be Concise

The Elements of Style by William Strunk, Jr., and E. B. White is probably the most famous writing book of our time. This slender little volume contains this advice:

Omit needless words.

Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. (MacMillan, NY, 1959, p. 17)

You can't go wrong with this advice because an effective writing style shows an economy of language. When you omit needless words, you omit *redundancy*—the unnecessary repetition of words and ideas. Wordy writing forces your readers to clear away unnecessary words and phrases before they can understand your message.

Here are 10 redundant phrases and their concise revisions:

Redundant	Concise
at this point in time	now
fatally killed	killed
foreign imports	imports
kills bugs dead	kills bugs
live and breathe	live
most unique	unique
proceed ahead	proceed
revert back	revert
successfully escaped	escaped
true facts	facts (or truth)

I can't resist hammering the point home, so here are several more redundant phrases that make your writing flabby and verbose. As a result, be sure to cut them all! Your writing will be stronger and more vigorous, so your message will shine through clearly.

Redundant	Concise
at the present time	now
because of the fact that	because
completely surrounded on all sides	surrounded
due to the fact that	because
experience some discomfort	hurt
for the purpose of	for
free up some space	make room
in the event that	if
in order to utilize	to use
in order to	to
in view of the fact that	because
is an example of	is
it is believed by many that	many believe

Redundant	Concise
making an effort to	trying to
my personal physician	my doctor
reiterated over and over again	repeated
thunderstorm activity	thunderstorm
until such time as	until
weather event	snow (rain, etc.)

Conciseness describes writing that is direct and to the point. This is not to say that you have to pare away all description, figures of speech, and images. No. Rather, it *is* to say that wordy writing annoys your readers because it forces them to slash their way through your sentences before they can understand what you're saying. Writing concise and effective sentences requires far more effort than writing verbose and confusing sentences. Fortunately, your readers will appreciate your efforts.

Three Ways to Write Concise Sentences

Follow these rules to create succinct, effective sentences.

1. Eliminate unneeded words and phrases.
2. Combine sentences that repeat information.
3. Don't say the same thing twice.

Let's look at each of these rules more closely.

1. Eliminate unneeded words and phrases.

Filler words are empty words and phrases that add nothing to your sentences. Filler words are used to fill space and make writing sound "official." Unfortunately, many filler words have become so commonplace that we accept them as part of an effective style. Since they're not good writing, it's important to cut them from your documents. Since filler words are so annoying, think of your efforts to eliminate these space wasters as a public service in the name of good writing!

Filler words come in different parts of speech, as the following chart shows.

Part of Speech	Sample Filler Words		
Adjectives	main	excellent	good
	major	nice	
Adverbs	basically	central	major
	quite	really	very
	in fact	due to the fact that	in the process of

Part of Speech	Sample Filler Words		
Nouns	area	aspect	case
	character	element	factor
	field	kind	nature
	quality	scope	situation
	sort	thing	type

Here's how filler words look in context:

Wordy: Harris took a relaxing *type* of vacation.

Better: Harris took a relaxing vacation.

Wordy: His comment was *of an* offensive *nature*.

Better: His comment was offensive.

Wordy: Work crews arrived *for the purpose of* digging new power lines.

Better: Work crews arrived to dig new power lines.

Wordy: *Regardless of the fact that* a thunderstorm *activity* is not predicted for tomorrow, *in view of the fact that* it is cloudy, you should take your umbrella *anyway*.

Better: Although a thunderstorm is not predicted for tomorrow, because it is cloudy, you should take your umbrella.

Wordy: *In the event that we do have a weather event*, you will be prepared *in a very real sense*.

Better: If it does rain, you will be prepared.

Quick Tip



Eliminate these phrases as well:

the point I am trying to make as a matter of fact in a very real sense

in the case of that is to say to get to the point

what I mean to say in fact

- Combine sentences that repeat information.

You also can combine sentences to achieve clarity. First, look for sentences that contain the same information or relate to the same ideas and so logically belong together. Then combine the related sentences. Finally, cut any words that just take up space and add nothing to the meaning. Here are some examples:

- Wordy: Mr. Drucker gave his students the assignment of a math problem. The problem called for adding a series of numbers. The numbers contained real and imaginary integers.
- Better: Mr. Drucker assigned his students a math problem that called for adding real and imaginary integers.
- Wordy: There is strong evidence to suggest that there is only one difference between highly successful people and the rest of us. It is highly successful people who apply themselves with determination to a task.
- Better: Evidence suggests that the only difference between highly successful people and the rest of us is their ability to apply themselves with determination to a task.

Quick Tip



Be careful not to change the meaning of a sentence when you combine it. If you trim too much, for instance, the meaning is likely to be altered.

3. Don't say the same thing twice.

Phrases such as “cover over,” “circle around,” and “square in shape” are redundant—they say the same thing twice. This is the redundancy problem you corrected in the beginning of this chapter.

- Wordy: We hope *and trust* that you show insight *and vision* because it is fitting *and proper* that you do so.
- Better: We hope that you show insight because it is fitting that you do so.
- Wordy: I am *completely* upset by the extremely dangerous situation, and, *in light* of the fact that I think this is basically a terrible tragedy, I am not sure what the *eventual* outcome will be.
- Better: I am upset by the dangerous situation; since this is a tragedy, I am not sure what the outcome will be.
- Wordy: We watched the *big, massive, dark* black cloud rising *up* from the *level* prairie and covering *over* the sun.
- Better: We watched the massive black cloud rising from the prairie and covering the sun.
- Wordy: The package, rectangular *in shape*, was on the counter.
- Better: The rectangular package was on the counter.



Diction is word choice.



Select words that suit your topic, purpose, and audience.



Redundancy is unnecessary repetition of words and ideas. Eliminate unnecessary words and phrases to make your writing clearer and more vigorous.



Test
Yourself

QUESTIONS

True-False Questions

1. Neither formal nor informal diction (or any levels in between) is “good” or “bad”; rather, each is appropriate in different writing situations.
2. *Colloquial language* is the level of diction characteristic of casual conversation and informal writing.
3. More formal than colloquial language is *slang*, coined words and phrases or new meanings for established terms.
4. Like colloquial language and slang, *vernacular* and *dialect* are very appropriate for formal writing.
5. *Familiar* words are easy to read and understand, which makes them a good choice for most everyday writing that you do.
6. Use *general* rather than *specific* words to convey your meaning accurately.
7. Some words also have *connotations*, or emotional overtones.
8. A word’s connotations can be positive but are rarely negative or neutral.
9. As a general rule, effective writing style shows an economy of language.
10. The phrase “at this point in time” is redundant.

Completion Questions

Select the word that best completes each sentence.

1. (Conciseness, Diction) is a writer’s choice of words.
2. Diction is measured from formal to (informal, academic) language usage.
3. Legal documents are an example of (formal diction, informal diction).
4. (Resumes, Notes to friends) are usually written with informal diction.
5. The language standards used in most academic and professional writing is called “Edited American English” or (“Standard Written English,” “Vernacular”).
6. (Formal diction, Slang) is fun, informal, and great for casual conversations with friends, but it is never used in formal writing.

7. (Vernacular, Connotation) is the ordinary language of a particular region, such as *grinder*, *sub*, or *hero* for an oversized sandwich.
8. (Dialect, Denotation), the language specific to a particular regional area, is a type of vernacular.
9. Use words that are accurate, suitable, and (fancy, familiar).
10. Every word has a (connotation, denotation), its explicit meaning that can be found in a dictionary.
11. (Connotation, Redundancy) is the unnecessary repetition of words and ideas, when a writer says the same thing over and over in different words.
12. (Denotation, Filler words) are empty words and phrases that add nothing to your writing.

Multiple-Choice Questions

Choose the best answer to each question.

1. The diction you want in a specific writing situation depends on all the following *except*
 - (a) Your audience
 - (b) Your mood
 - (c) Your purpose
 - (d) The context of your message
2. In general, *formal diction* is characterized by all the following *except*
 - (a) Short, crisp sentences
 - (b) Multisyllable words
 - (c) Long sentences
 - (d) A formal tone
3. In general, *informal diction* is characterized by all the following *except*
 - (a) Shorter, more familiar words
 - (b) A less formal tone
 - (c) A greater awareness of audience
 - (d) Shorter sentences
4. Which of the following documents is usually written with formal diction?
 - (a) Job application letters
 - (b) Everyday e-mail
 - (c) Scientific articles
 - (d) Popular magazine articles
5. Which word has a negative connotation?
 - (a) Persistent
 - (b) Resolute

- (c) Steadfast
 - (d) Stubborn
6. Which word has a positive connotation?
- (a) Arrogant
 - (b) Proud
 - (c) Egotistical
 - (d) Overbearing
7. Which word has a denotation but no connotation?
- (a) House
 - (b) Apathetic
 - (c) Peculiar
 - (d) Shrewd
8. Which word has the same connotation as *timid*?
- (a) Fainthearted
 - (b) Cowardly
 - (c) Shy
 - (d) Fearful
9. Which is the best revision of the following wordy sentence?
Basically, the English language is so very difficult to learn.
- (a) English is very difficult to learn basically.
 - (b) English is very difficult to learn.
 - (c) English is basically very difficult to learn.
 - (d) The English language is very difficult to learn.
10. Which is the best revision of the following wordy sentence?
It seems that the library board will meet tomorrow, as a matter of fact.
- (a) As a matter of fact, the library board will meet tomorrow.
 - (b) In fact, the library board will meet tomorrow.
 - (c) It is apparent that the library board will meet tomorrow.
 - (d) The library board will meet tomorrow.
11. Which is the best revision of the following wordy sentence?
Intelligent consumers don't let fashion gurus dictate their purchases. These fashion gurus want women to spend money on trendy garments. Trendy garments are poor investments in the long run.
- (a) Intelligent consumers don't let fashion gurus dictate their purchases because these fashion gurus want women to spend money on trendy garments, but trendy garments are poor investments in the long run.
 - (b) Since fashion gurus want women to spend money on trendy garments, intelligent consumers don't let fashion gurus dictate their purchases; trendy garments are poor investments in the long run.

- (c) Intelligent women don't let fashion gurus persuade them to spend money on trendy garments since, in the long run, trendy garments that are poor investments.
 - (d) Intelligent women don't let fashion gurus persuade them to spend money on trendy garments that are poor investments.
12. Which is the best revision of the following wordy sentence?
Today's women have a mind of their own when it comes to clothing. They don't rely on advice from talk shows. They don't rely on advice from books, either. Finally, they don't depend on the dictates of fashion magazines.
- (a) Women today have a mind of their own when it comes to clothing, so they don't rely on advice from talk shows and they don't rely on advice from books and they don't depend on the dictates of fashion magazines.
 - (b) Women today know a lot about clothing.
 - (c) Today's women, who have a mind of their own when it comes to clothing, don't rely on advice from talk shows or books. They don't even take advice from fashion magazines.
 - (d) Today's women, who have a mind of their own when it comes to clothing, don't rely on advice from talk shows, books, or fashion magazines.
13. What's the best simplification of the following redundant phrase: "at this point in time"?
- (a) Now
 - (b) Never never land
 - (c) Never ever
 - (d) Later
14. What is the problem with the phrase "true facts"?
- (a) Only some facts are true.
 - (b) All facts are true; otherwise, they wouldn't be facts.
 - (c) It has a negative connotation.
 - (d) It does not have a denotation.
15. Follow all the rules below to create succinct, effective sentences *except*
- (a) Eliminate unneeded words and phrases.
 - (b) Combine sentences that repeat information.
 - (c) Write as you speak.
 - (d) Don't say the same thing twice.