

Grammar Rx: Wordiness

Ockham's Razor: In cut-and-dry terms, the theory of Ockham's razor says that the best way to get your point across is often by getting unnecessary information out of the way: "What can be done with fewer is done in vain with more." This originally applied to sciences, but is just as effective in philosophy, as well as literature and writing. For more information, check online through google.com, dictionary.com, or whatis.com.

Wordiness: While you are in the process of writing, it is possible that you might try to use a few too many insignificant words; and by doing this, your writing starts to become cluttered and can suffer a loss of meaning and/or importance.

Better said: Using too many unimportant words can make your writing lose its clarity and significance.

Why is the second way better? Notice that the first definition is boring and makes it easy to skim the words without paying attention to what they say or mean. It succumbs to wordiness: it is redundant, awkward, and boring. It uses 42 words to make its point; the second definition gets right to it, and conveys the same message with only 14 words.

Here are some examples of wordy sentences and their revisions.

Wordy Sentence

Jon, the English professor teaching our current class, required each separate group to fulfill the necessary list of requirements of a "Grammar Rx" project.

Revised

Jon, our English professor, assigned each group a "Grammar Rx" project with a list of requirements.

Note the redundancy eliminated by the revision: "teaching our current class," "each separate," "fulfill the necessary list of requirements," etc.

As still and silent as a rabbit that knows it is being watched by someone else, she quietly scanned her field of vision in the room to get an idea to decide where her stalker waited for her first initial movement and to decide as to whether she could dash quickly for the emergency exit.

As still and silent as a rabbit that knows it is being watched, she scanned the room to decide where her stalker waited for her first movement and whether she could dash for the emergency exit.

In this example, notice which phrases are eliminated and which are kept. Some are literally redundant (for example, the word "dash" implies quickly, so the adverb is unnecessary here and the image is maintained); others simply make the sentence awkward ("to get an idea to decide", "to decide as to whether"); and others just don't sound good or are unnecessary ("her field of vision in the room"). But "still and silent as a rabbit that knows it is being watched" is important to the image and the tensivity of the situation, so it is kept.

How do you catch wordiness? Unnecessary words are the key. If the word is *not* essential to the meaning or grammar, the sentence may be wordy. Not all cases of wordiness will be as overwhelming as the examples, but it is still a good idea to watch for unnecessary words.

How do you fix this? Try cutting out a word and re-read the sentence. Is it still effective? Does it still produce the same image? Is the significance the same? If you can keep the same meaning and value of the sentence with one or more words taken out, the sentence may be wordy. *But if the image, description, feeling, fact, idea, meaning, grammar, or emphasis is reduced, hang on to the word.*

Practice. Here are some wordy sentences. Take a few moments to revise them, keeping in mind what words are unnecessary or redundant, and which words are important for the overall structure, image, or meaning.

- She often got bored in class and daydreamed about her dreamy new Swedish boyfriend Sven, the hunky foreign exchange student from Sweden that occupied all her thoughts.
- Annoyed, he grumbled at her irritating habits of repeatedly waltzing in late to work fifteen minutes after she was supposed to be there.
- Upon consideration of the motivation behind the text Romeo and Juliet, it is important to reflect upon Shakespeare's intentions for the purpose of their deaths and the message the author wanted to convey to the audience analyzing his work.
- In an astonishing arrest last Thursday, police apprehended a man accused of seriously violating major grammatical rules in his article, an editorial for the Western Herald. He claimed, "I'm innocent! My teacher never taught me the difference between it's and its. I still don't get it. I didn't do anything wrong," he stated a week ago this Thursday.

How can you talk to kids about this? An interesting introduction to the topic can serve as a good segue into a lesson on wordiness; the Ockham's Razor example given at the beginning of this lesson can draw students in and clarify the concept that "fewer is better."

You could also relate it to their lives, such as when students are giving an explanation or excuse to their parents. They don't want to give too much information that makes it sound like they are trying excessively hard to convince them, repeating their words or giving too much detail:

"Susie and I went to a movie, but it started a few minutes late,"

is much more effective than,

"Susie and I went to a movie, but first they moved the start of the movie back because the projector bulb was out, then they ran the first five minutes out of focus and without sound, so they started it over again, and when it finally ended after starting ten minutes late, Susie had to go to the bathroom and I had to go get a drink of water, and then we finally found each other after looking around for five minutes."

In this way, the students can understand the importance of correcting their wordiness: it sounds better and it can get the message across faster and more effectively.