

10 Tips for Cutting Your Word Count

Essays are given specified word counts for a reason. They prevent us from going too far in our research, thereby losing a sustained argument, and they prevent us from keeping our scope too narrow. However, cutting word counts is not always easy, especially in a piece of writing you have written yourself. You feel like you wrote all these words for a reason and there is a sense of accomplishment in watching the word count rise as you work.

The phrase "kill your darlings" advises writers to cut any elements from their writing that do not serve to further the work as a whole, even if those elements are ones that they love. By forcing yourself to "kill your darlings", you are actually practicing objectivity, which improves your self-editing skills. Here are 10 tips to help you do it.

1. Start sentences with the subject.

This is both a grammatical point and a content point. Grammatically, the 'subject' is the noun in the sentence that does the verb. For example, in the sentence 'I walked to the shops', 'I' is the subject; I do the walking and the shops are just there for me to walk to. Think about what is the most important part of the sentence and structure your sentence by starting with that. Starting sentences with the subject makes your writing clearer because it is obvious who or what the sentence is about.

Compare the following for an essay about the 2011 tsunami in Japan:

- (a) It was found that after the main shock, several smaller movements continued to occur.
- (b) Several smaller movements continued to occur after the main shock.

The second one is better for several reasons. First of all, it says the same thing with fewer words, so that makes it clearer and more concise. Secondly, the most important part of the sentence—that small movements continued to occur after the shock—is in the beginning, right where the most important part of the sentence should be. 'After the main shock' is less important because that part of the sentence doesn't contain the main subject or verb. It's only a prepositional phrase. And while 'after the main shock' is an important detail, it's not as important as the main actor and action of the sentence.

2. Use the active verb.

Verbs are adaptable. You can take verbs that should suggest action and turn them into passive forms. The passive voice is where you invert the sentence, and make the object the start of the sentence (for example: 'I walked to the shops' becomes 'The shops were walked to by me'). This is a less concise (and less clear) way of writing, even in this simple example. This can lead to confused sentences where the reader is not sure what is being caused by whom.

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(a) It was not until after the last batch of votes was counted, that victory could be declared by the Senator.

(b) The Senator declared victory after the last batch of votes was counted.

Once again, the second one is better here because it is more concise, and because it is active. In this second sentence, we know who is doing the acting right away. So, put the actor of the sentence first (The Senator) and then follow that right away by your verb (declared), and then add the rest of the details (after the last batch of votes was counted). Anything after the verb is called the predicate, and this is where you want to add the details that explain that effects of the action you've already mentioned.

However, the passive voice can be used effectively in situations where there is no causality or agency. For example 'In 2011, the people in Northern Japan were struck by a tsunami'. It can also be used to distance oneself from associating responsibility or blame. One well-used example of this is the statement 'mistakes were made'. For example, in a 2011 interview with the late Sir David Frost, the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, [observed the following about UK Middle Eastern policy](#):

"Yes of course *mistakes were made* and of course you know what happened at Guantanamo Bay. *There were mistakes made*".

Similarly, in 1987, US President Ronald Reagan [stated the following in a speech about the Iran-Contra affair](#):

"And certainly it was not wrong to try to secure freedom for our citizens held in barbaric captivity. But we did not achieve what we wished, and serious *mistakes were made* in trying to do so".

This, of course, is best left to the politicians. In an essay, you want to be as direct as you can.

3. Get rid of adjectives and adverbs.

The purpose of an essay is to argue a particular point, using objectivity and evidence. The addition of too many adjectives and adverbs can give the impression that the writer is being subjective in their attitude towards the topic. Keeping an objective eye while editing is difficult, but important in academia.

Adjectives (words that describe nouns) in academic writing are often used in the place of evidence. Replace them with quantities, data, dates, quotes:

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(a) The *terrible* tsunami of 2011 was caused by a 9.1 magnitude earthquake off the coast of Tōhoku, Japan.

(b) The tsunami of 2011, which was caused by a 9.1 magnitude earthquake off the coast of Tōhoku, Japan, led to 15,782 deaths and 4,086 missing.

Adjectives should generally only be used in describing colour, size and number. Instead, if you want to create an atmosphere in your writing, you can amplify the intensity of a statement by making your verbs work harder for you:

(a) The *terrible* tsunami of 2011 was caused by a 9.1 magnitude earthquake off the coast of Tōhoku, Japan.

(b) A 9.1 magnitude earthquake off the coast of Tōhoku created the tsunami that *devastated* the northeast of Japan in 2011.

In the first sentence, the adjective ‘terrible’ is unnecessary. Although the examples without adjectives are longer, they contain more information overall, which means you will need fewer sentences overall. Of course, make sure you back up this evidence with credible sources.

Adverbs (words that describe or modify verbs, adjectives, or other adverbs) in academic writing are often used when a writer wants to intensify their writing.

In his book, *On Writing*, Stephen King includes a criticism of adverbs: “Adverbs, like the passive voice, seem to have been created with the timid writer in mind. ... With adverbs, the writer usually tells us he or she is afraid he/she isn’t expressing himself/herself clearly, that he or she is not getting the point or the picture across” (1999).

Instead of using adverbs to try to persuade your reader, demonstrate your argument using evidence, as you would in place of an adjective:

(a) The tsunami was a *relatively* large one.

(b) The tsunami was the fifth largest in world history.

Again, you will probably find that although the examples without adverbs are longer, they contain more information overall, which means you will need fewer sentences. For example, the sentence with the adverb may need further information for clarification, such as ‘The tsunami was a relatively large one, ranked fifth largest in world history’. By packing more information into a concise structure, you can minimise your overall word count.

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4. Use the shortest form of the word.

Why say 'utilise' if you mean 'use'? Why say 'conceptualisation' if you mean 'concept'? This may not reduce your word count, but it will make your essay easier for the reader to process. Using a longer form of the word can also be a trap for the unwary, as some words that appear to be longer versions of another word, may actually have a different meaning, for example 'concept' ≠ 'conception'. Use the words you know and keep it simple.

(a) The warning system promulgated its message just minutes before the tsunami struck.

(b) The warning system was activated just minutes before the tsunami struck.

5. Use the shortest form of a phrase.

There are lots of stock phrases that we use to connect sentences, to signpost and to 'pad out' our writing. These can often be shortened, for example, you can use 'However' in preference to 'On the other hand', or 'how' in preference to 'the ways in which':

(a) *This essay discusses the successes of Japan's Disaster Risk Management (DRM) system, as well as the ways in which that system could be improved.*

(b) *This essay discusses the successes of Japan's Disaster Risk Management (DRM) system, and how that system could be improved.*

6. Keep your sentences to 25-30 words.

It is almost impossible to keep control of a sentence that's over about 40 words, and it's very hard to follow. You really can't get lost in a 25 word sentence, as a thinker, a writer or a reader. If you have a tendency to write 50 word sentences, you will find that breaking them into 2 sentences makes your thinking clearer, your writing more effective, and helps your reader to understand your topic.

7. Keep your paragraphs to 250-300 words.

A paragraph is not a whole idea; it is a small step in the overall argument. You should be able to hold the entirety of a paragraph in your mind at once and glance your eye over it in one sweep.

8. Don't refer back.

In an essay, start each paragraph cleanly. Never link back to previous text. It is a waste of energy and words to start any section with 'As I discussed in the previous paragraph...'. This kind of writing sends the reader backwards, in thought and possibly literally flicking back

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through your work if the reference is too vague. You want your writing to move forward, and your reader along with it:

(a) As mentioned earlier, Japan's DRM system could be improved by...

(b) Japan's DRM system could be improved by...

This is particularly important in your conclusion. Your conclusion is your chance to give a summarised discussion that ties the paragraphs together, shaping your overall argument. You do not want to interrupt the flow by telling your reader to refer back to what you have already said.

9. Only explain one idea at a time.

Multitasking in writing is very messy. Ultimately, it is less effective than doing one thing at a time. Unlike a visual image or listening to music (where you can take in the 'whole' of multiple parts and colours/notes), you can only read one word at a time. Academic writing in particular values logical progression, explanation of cause and effect, isolation of individual factors. If you try to discuss too many factors together, they are likely to get confused, or at least become confusing; you will need unnecessary words to explain them, or you will feel the need to tie up too many loose strands, which will negatively affect your structure.

10. Avoid extraneous ideas.

Keep to the single purpose of the writing. Anything else does not belong in this piece. If it has been relegated to a footnote, this is your first sign it is extraneous. When in doubt, check your thesis statement and ask yourself if this piece of information contributes to the argument you set out to achieve.