

CLEAN. CONCISE. WRITING.

Streamline Your Wordy Sentences



ASHAN R. HAMPTON

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Introduction

As a college English instructor for over 20 years and a freelance copyeditor for the last ten, I have spent a lot of precious time untangling wicked writing. As I scanned thousands of pages, I found myself inserting the same comments in the margins of essays over and over again:

- *What are you trying to say?*
- *Get clear.*
- *Too many words.*
- *Not enough information.*

I am sure that other teachers or those who work with novice writers can relate to the tedium of correcting basic elements of grammar and style. Recently, a nontraditional student emailed me a graded draft of an essay with comments from her English instructor. The student indicated that this was her third time trying to pass this level two writing class. I literally gasped aloud. I had so many questions that went unasked, because I did not want to embarrass this student who was trusting me to explain the notes on her paper.

As I read the comments, I felt sorry for the English instructor. It is very hard to teach adults how to properly put words together when they think they already know how, especially since they had written stuff with no problems before entering the class. The digital sticky notes were filled with comments like, “*wordy and a little confusing*,” and other typical English teacher comments such as, “*Provide specific examples. Reduce wordiness in your writing.*”

Although I am not teaching in a traditional classroom, I have distilled a lot of instruction into books, video tutorials and online classes for students and teachers who need to know how to write well. In particular, “*Clean, Concise Writing: Streamline Your Wordy Sentences*” is an answer to everyone who has ever written or received the comments above and wondered how to fix them enough to pass a composition.

Chapter 1

What is Clean Writing?



The Building Blocks of Clean Writing

Whatever you write should be understandable to most readers. Clean copy consists of text that is well-organized, logical and free of extraneous words that might muddy its meaning. Whether for business, academics, social media or marketing purposes, these characteristics of clean writing will not change. Since paragraphs and longer pieces of writing are basically collections of sentences, it is important to shape them in a way that demonstrate the 7 Cs of writing and communication. Although other sources include variants to the ones listed below, the following 7 Cs best relate to our mission for creating direct, descriptive, error-free writing. In fact, all of the techniques in the forthcoming chapters demonstrate how to incorporate the 7 Cs in your writing to achieve a desirable level of concision without forsaking style and personality.

clear
concise
consistent

complete
correct

compelling
coherent

#1: Clear

Readers should not struggle over complicated vocabulary or extra-long sentences to understand your message. Clear writing is specific, direct and indicates a clear sense of purpose. In other words, readers know what you are saying and your reasons for saying it.

#2: Concise

Nobody wants to read aimless writing that rambles in a stream of consciousness that ends in a confusing blob. Concise writing is focused and gets to the point without including unnecessary words or empty phrases. Also, it is free of repetition and redundancy. Although brief and straight-forward, concise writing should still be interesting and engaging.

#3: Consistent

Do you spell *copyeditor* as one word or two (*copy editor*)? Do you hyphenate *jump-start* or drop the hyphen (*jumpstart*)? In addition to style choices, your writing should not contain errors in logic or the chronology of your narrative, because inconsistency makes you appear careless and dishonest.

#4: Complete

If readers ask several questions after reading your writing, that usually means you have omitted some important information, and it is therefore incomplete. Complete writing gives the reader all of the information they need to make a decision, to accomplish a task or to understand your intentions. Readers should be left with a satisfactory sense of conclusion, not annoyance.

#5: Correct

To engender and maintain trust with the reader, your writing must be correct and error-free. Have you ever read a news story that cited an incorrect date or misspelled a prominent person's name? Errors like these cause readers to question the integrity of the organization and everything they have ever published. To avoid this fate, you must fact-check your material and thoroughly proofread it before releasing it to the masses.

#6: Compelling

Have you ever read a book that you just couldn't put down? The way the writer captured description or dialogue and moved the storyline compelled you to keep reading until the end. This is the hallmark of compelling writing. Likewise, compelling writing is fascinating and holds the reader's interest.

#7: Coherent

Imagine listening to someone who loves to talk, but cannot tell a story straight. Instead of smoothly telling it from beginning to end, they jump around, because they forgot to tell you that part before this part. Their storytelling attempt is incoherent and frustrating. Therefore, coherent writing is organized so that related ideas are broken into paragraphs that logically flow in an order that readers easily understand from the introduction to the conclusion.

*****NOTE:** Even without explicitly saying it, all of the tips in this book for streamlining your sentences refer back to some aspect of these 7 Cs.***