

Writing Concisely — the Paramedic Method

People overwrite for various reasons. For example, repetition in writing can be a result of figuring out exactly what we want to say or of qualifying what we want to say instead of just saying it. Writing verbosely might seem “smarter” or help fulfill an assignment’s word count. Overwriting might also hide the fact that we don’t have much to say, as Michael Harvey, author of *The Nuts and Bolts of College Writing*, describes: “Concision leaves us fewer words to hide behind. Our insights and ideas might appear puny stripped of those inessential words, phrases, and sentences in which we rough them out. We might even wonder, were we to cut out the fat, would anything be left?”

Wordy writing may be a necessary step in discovering your ideas, but skillful writers ultimately revise their writing to eliminate excess. Working one’s way through a text burdens the reader. Repetition bores, elaborate words don’t necessarily equate to insight, passive voice confuses, and over-qualification congests. Concise writing is vigorous and engaging. To achieve it, ask yourself what is essential and allow every word to speak for itself. Here’s Strunk and White’s advice, from *The Elements of Style*: “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.”

The Paramedic Method

The Paramedic Method, developed by Richard Lanham (*Revising Prose*), is an easy, effective, do-it-yourself method for eliminating unnecessary words. It requires methodical attention at first, but once you start to recognize wordiness patterns, writing concisely will come naturally. Here’s how to do it:

Wordy sentence:

The point I wish to make is that perception is the process of extracting information from stimulation emanating from the objects, places, and events in the world around us.

1. Eliminate slow wind-ups (e.g., replace “at this point in time” with “now”).

~~The point I wish to make is that~~ Perception is the process of extracting information from stimulation emanating from the objects, places, and events in the world around us.

2. Eliminate clichés (e.g., put it in a nutshell; better late than never; a good time was had by all).

Perception is the process of extracting information from stimulation emanating from the objects, places, and events ~~in the world around us~~.

3. Highlight the “is” forms (is, was, are, become, etc.) and prepositions (of, in, about, for, onto, to, etc.).

Perception **is** the process **of** extracting information **from** stimulation emanating **from** the objects, places, and events.

4. Break the sentence into a list that starts with all the highlighted words.

Perception
is the process
of extracting information
from stimulation emanating
from the objects, places, and events.

5. Identify the possible “actions” and transform them into single verbs.

Process Extract Inform Stimulate Emanate

6. Identify the subject of the sentence and choose the clearest action verb for that subject to take on.

Subject: perception

Verb: extract

7. With the action identified, eliminate “is” forms, and excess/repeating prepositional phrases and words, bringing the subject and action verb together.

Perception

is the process

of extracting information

from stimulation emanating

from the objects, places, and events.

Concise revision: Perception extracts information from objects, places, and events.

Read the following wordy paragraph and the concise revision, noting how concision begets clarity.

ORIGINAL (word count: 151)

In the sculpture *Un Ballo in Maschera (Courtiers V)*, which was a piece created by the artist Yinka Shonibare, who is from Nigeria, the artist is creating multiple layers of symbolism that point to cultural and historical ideas. Looking at the three pieces all together, they are creating a juxtaposition between different elements, including style and form from the Victorian era as well as content that is recognizable as Modern, such as the Chanel logo, the number “5”, and colors that are loud and not really harmonious. The three pieces in the sculpture also incorporate prints in an African style, which are actually made by using a dye method that originally came from Indonesia as a matter of fact, while displaying the clothing on manikins that are white. By using these features, the piece is creating a dialogue about how we think about global identity in the world around us today.

REVISION (word count: 73)

Un Ballo in Maschera (Courtiers V), a sculpture by Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare, layers cultural and historical symbolism. The three pieces juxtapose Victorian era style and form with recognizable modern content, such as the Chanel logo, the number “5,” and loud, inharmonious colors. They also incorporate African prints, using a dye method that originated in Indonesia, while displaying the clothing on white manikins. Thus the piece creates a dialogue about contemporary global identity.

