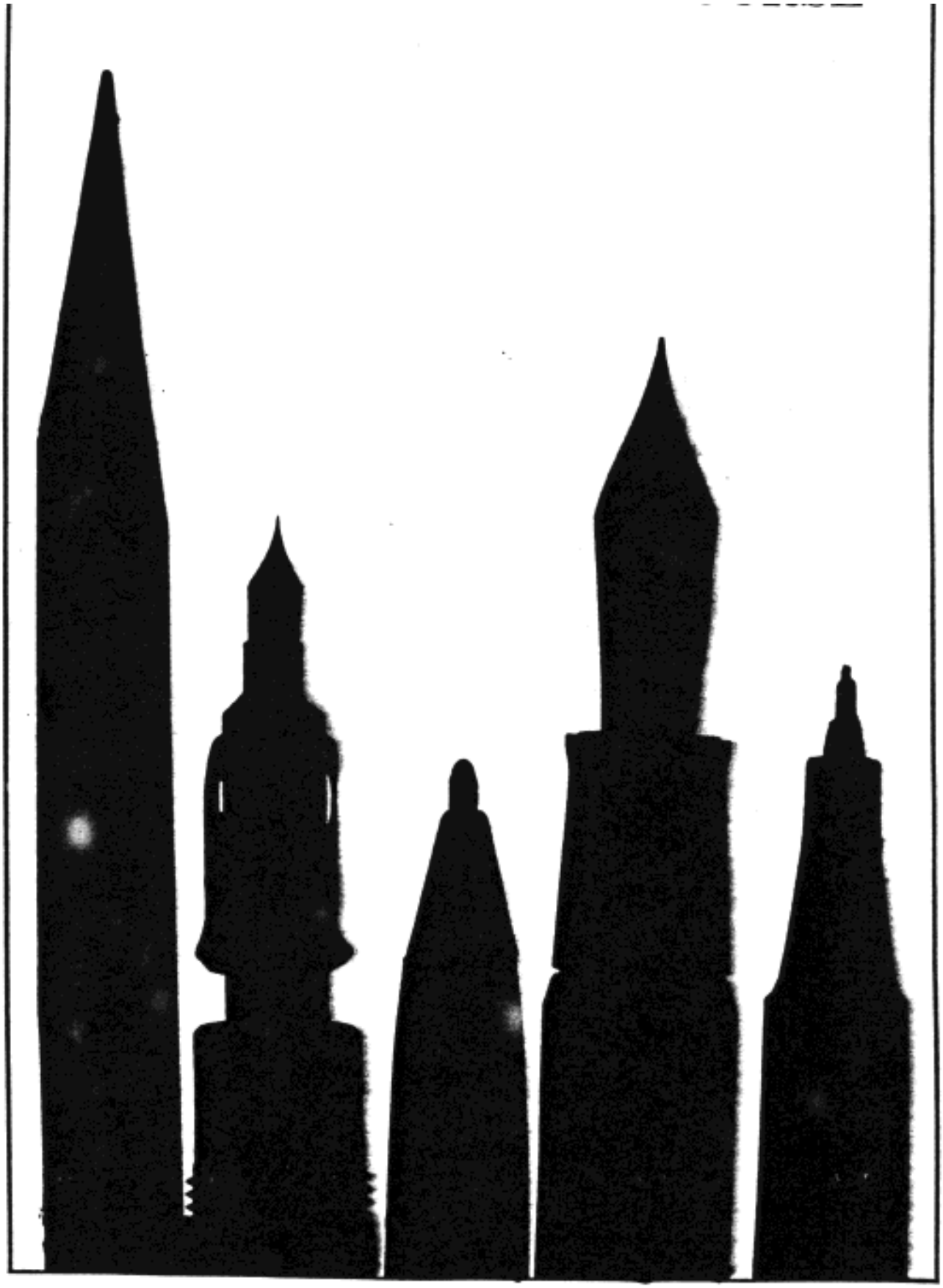
UNITED STATES AIR FORCE ACADEMY

EXECUTIVE WRITING COURSE



CONTENTS

ORGANIZED WRITING

Page 2 Establish Your Purpose and Audience
2 Start Fast, Explain as Necessary, Then Stop
3 Use More Headings
4 Write Effective Paragraphs
5 Write Disciplined Sentences

SPOKEN WRITING

7 Use Personal Pronouns
8 Talk to One Reader When Writing to Many
9 Rely on Everyday Words
10 Use Some Contractions
10 Keep Sentences Short
11 Ask More Questions
11 Listen to Your Tone
13 Be Concrete

CONCISE WRITING

14 Avoid "it is" and "there is"
15 Prune Wordy Expressions
16 Free Smothered Verbs
16 Shun "the ion of" and "the -meet of "
17 Cut Doublings
17 Prevent Hut-2-3-4 Phrase
17 Avoid Excessive Abbreviating

ACTIVE WRITING

18 Learn the Symptoms of Passive Voice
19 Know the Three Cures
20 Write Passively only for Good Reason
21 Practice on These Examples

APPENDIXES

24 A—Simpler Words and Phrases
26 B—Editing for Conciseness
27 C—Completed Staff Work
38 Books About Official Writing

ORGANIZED WRITING

Too many writers start throwing ink before they know what to aim at. When you write, start with a clear sense of your purpose and audience, and arrange your ideas so you get to the point fast. Then write effective paragraphs and sentences.

Establish Your Purpose and Audience

You'll save time and rewrite less if you plan before you pick up a pen or start to dictate. In the planning stage, analyze your audience in light of your purpose by answering these questions:

What is my purpose?

Who are my readers?

What are their interests?

How much do they know already?

What will make it easy for them to understand or act?

You'll discover ideas as you write, but you'll wander less by keeping the answers to these questions in mind.

Start Fast, Explain as Necessary, Then Stop

Timid writing creeps up on the most important information. This kind of writing starts with background, then discussion, and finally the so-what. With luck, the main point follows a sign such as *therefore*, *consequently* or *due to the above*. This slow buildup isn't chaotic; it enacts the way writers inform themselves. But the pattern isn't efficient, either. From the perspective of readers, it's the clue-by-clue pattern of mystery stories.

Your writing should follow the newspaper pattern. Open with the most important information and taper off to the least important. Avoid mere chronology. (Make your bottom line your top line.)

To find what to put first, think about the one sentence you'd keep if you could keep only one. Many letters and memos are simple enough to have such a key sentence, which should appear by the end of the first paragraph. The strongest letter highlights the main point in a one-sentence paragraph at the very beginning. Put requests before justifications, answers before explanations, conclusions before discussions, and summaries before details.

Sometimes, as in a complex proposal or a reply to various questions, you may have many key points. They would overload the first paragraph if you tried to put them all there. In these cases, start with a general statement of purpose.

Here are some good beginnings:

> We inspected the Directorate of Administration on 24 January 1994. Its overall performance was satisfactory. Special-interest areas were also satisfactory
>
> We request authorization to hire a full-time clerk typist or reassign one from the word-processing center.
>
> This memorandum summarizes how we are planning the first step toward your goal of reorganizing the Air Force Reserve.
>
> Sgt Frank Martin did a superb job during our recent engine change.

Delay your main point to soften bad news or to introduce a controversial proposal. But don't delay routinely. Readers, like listeners, are put off by people who take forever to get to the point. In most cases, plunge right in.

To end most letters, just stop. When writing to persuade rather than just to inform, end strongly with a forecast, appeal, or implication that activates the reader to do something. When feelings are involved, exit gracefully—with an expression of good will. When in doubt, offer your help or the name of a contact.

Use More Headings

Any document longer than three pages probably needs headings, so that readers can follow at a glance. Even a one-page letter can benefit from headings when topics vary widely. Be informative; avoid relying on headings that use one or two vague words.

> For: Procedures
>
> Try: How to Complete DOD Form 76
>
> For: Use of Contractors
>
> Try: How Much Contractors May Charge

If you want the scoop, then group, otherwise it's poop (Poorly Organized Offers Perplexity)

Write Effective Paragraphs

Keep paragraphs short. Cover one topic completely before starting another, and let a topic run for several paragraphs if necessary. But keep each paragraph down to roughly four or five sentences. Divide long paragraphs where your thinking takes a turn.

Now and then use a one-sentence paragraph to highlight an important idea, such as the main point of a letter.

Use more lists. Look for opportunities to divide paragraphs into lists. This technique is especially important for staff papers and directives. As you can see, lists

> Add white space for easy reading,
>
> Show levels of importance,
>
> Simplify--
>
> > Initial review,
> >
> > Later revision,

Just remember to avoid dividing a paragraph into more than the three levels shown here. If you use too many lists within lists, readers will lose sight of the overall structure.

Take advantage of topic sentences. A paragraph may need a topic sentence—a generalization explained by the rest of the paragraph. Then again, it may not. The decision to use a topic sentence is among a writer's many judgment calls. A short paragraph announcing the time, place, and agenda of a meeting might begin with. "Here are details about the meeting." Yet such a topic sentence is probably unnecessary, for readers can follow the writer's thinking without it.

But suppose you're writing a report on ways to protect a particular military facility from attack. Your ideas are complex and the evidence needed to make them clear and convincing is considerable. So your paragraphs are likely to run longer and use more topic sentences than is the case in letters. Here's a model:

> Because so much of the complex borders the river, its waterfront is especially vulnerable to attack. The naval station and the shipyard next to it have 1.5 miles of waterfront on the river's north bank. Together they have 13 dry docks and piers. Two piers are used to load fuel. Most of the piers extend to within 100 yards of the center of the river's main ship channel, and the river itself is only 900 yards at its widest.

The first sentence of the sample gives the paragraph a bull's eye. Because we know early where the facts are headed, the paragraph inspires confidence. A lesser writer might have left out the topic sentence or put it elsewhere in the paragraph or claimed more than the facts support Be

alert to the advantages of topic sentences, for they help shape masses of information. Without them, some paragraphs make readers shrug and say, "So?"

Write Disciplined Sentences

So far we've talked about organizing letters and paragraphs so they call attention to important ideas. Now here are some important ways to avoid sentences that mumble: subordinate minor ideas, use more parallelism, place ideas deliberately, and try some mini-sentences.

Subordinate minor ideas. Besides clarifying the relationship between ideas, subordination prevents overusing and, the weakest of all, conjunctions.

Use more parallelism. Look for opportunities to arrange two or more equally important ideas so they look equal. Parallelism saves words, clarifies ideas, and provides balance. The first words of the series should use the same part of speech (verbs in the previous sentence).

For: The symposium is a forum for the dissemination of information and is not intended to establish standards.

Try: The symposium is a forum for sharing information, not for setting standards.

For: Effective 1 October, addressees will be required to utilize the cost accounts contained in the attachment. Addressees will cease reporting against cost accounts 1060, 2137, and 2340.

Try: On 1 October, start using the cost accounts in the attachment and stop using cost accounts 1060, 2137, and 2340.

Place ideas deliberately. Start and finish a sentence any way you like, but keep in mind that ideas gain emphasis when they appear at either end. To mute an idea, put it in the middle.

Maintenance time may have to increase if more structural problems develop. (mutes increased time)

If more structural problems develop, maintenance time may have to increase. (stresses increased time)

For: I would like to congratulate you on your selection as our Employee of the Month for June.

Try: Congratulations on your selection as our June Employee of the Month.

Try some mini-sentences. An occasional sentence of six words or less slows down readers and emphasizes ideas. The principle is illustrated in this next example from a general's memo to his staff.

> I can get more information from the staff if each of you gives me less. Here's why. In a week, about 110 staff actions show up in my in-box. I could handle these in a week if all I did was work the in-box. Yet about 70% of my time in the headquarters goes not to the in-box but to briefings. I could handle that dilemma, too—by listening to briefings and thinking about staff papers at the same time. I don't.

Look for opportunities in your own writing to use mini-sentences. They'll give it variety.

For: I apologize for not answering your letter sooner, but an extended TDY kept me away from my desk for three weeks.

Try: I should have answered your letter sooner. I apologize. An extended TDY kept me away from my desk for three weeks.

SPOKEN WRITING

Make your writing as formal or informal as the situation requires, but do so with language you might use in speaking. This isn't a call to copy every quirk of speech down to grunts and ramblings. And, granted, some people speak no better than they write. Still, because readers "hear" writing, the most readable writing sounds like people talking to people.

To make your writing more like speaking, begin by imagining your reader is sitting across from you. Then write with personal pronouns, everyday words, contractions, and short sentences. Together with questions, good tone, and concrete language, these techniques are the best of speaking.

Use Personal Pronouns

Though you needn't go out of your way to use personal pronouns, you mustn't go out of your way to avoid them. Avoiding natural references to people is false modesty. Whether you're a senior official or a subordinate, follow these principles:

1. Use we, us, our when speaking for your organization.

2. Use I, me, my when speaking for yourself.

3. Use you, stated or implied, to refer to the reader.

Multiplied across an entire letter, roundabout sentences like the next examples do severe damage. We would be laughed out of the room if we talked that way. Ordinary English is shorter, clearer, and just as official:

Not: Conceivably, funding constraints for this year will exceed in severity the financial scarcities that have been anticipated.

But We may have less money this year than we anticipated.

Not: The Naval Facilities Engineering Command, by reference (a), forwarded its draft master plan for the Washington Navy Yard to the Naval Supply Systems Command for review and comment. The following comments apply.

But: In response to reference (a), here are our comments on your draft master plan for the Washington Navy Yard.

Not: It is necessary that the material be received in this office by June 10.

But: We need the material by June 10.

Or: The material must reach us by June 10.

It is and *this command* complicate the next example. They force readers to put back the pronouns the writer took out. To make matters worse, the first *it is* refers to the reader, while the second refers to the sender.

Not: If *it is* desired that Marines be allowed to compete for positions on the pistol team, *this command* would be happy to establish and manage team tryouts. *It is* recommended that tryouts be conducted soon to ensure…

But: If you allow Marines to compete for positions on the pistol team, we would be happy to establish and manage the tryouts. We recommend that tryouts start soon to ensure…

Military writers can profit from an axiom of business writing known as the "you" attitude. It's a matter of showing greater concern for the reader than the writer by using you more than I or we. Better to say "the service you receive" than "the service we provide." Keep this distinction in mind, and when you have a choice, show that you see things from your reader's perspective by putting the emphasis on "you."

Can you overuse personal pronouns? In a few instances, yes. For example, you can use so many pronouns that readers lose sight of what the pronouns refer to. Besides, some subjects don't lend themselves to pronouns; the description of a plane's structure isn't likely to include people. Also, criticism hurts fewer feelings if delivered impersonally. "Nothing has been done" avoids the direct attack of "You have done nothing." Finally, if we or I opens more than two sentences in a row, the writing becomes monotonous and may suggest self-centeredness. Still, military writers have a long way to go before overuse of pronouns is a problem. Most of us will benefit from using more natural references to people.

Talk to One Reader When Writing to Many

When you're writing to many people but none of them in particular, create in your mind a typical reader. Talk to that reader by using you and your, stated or implied. Only one person reads your writing at any one time, so the most readable writing speaks directly to one reader.

Not: All addressees are requested to provide inputs of desired course content.

But: Please send us your recommendations for course content.

Not: It is requested that all employees planning to take leave in December fill in the enclosed schedule.

But: If you plan to take leave in December, fill in the enclosed schedule.

When you write directives, look for opportunities to talk directly to a user. Procedures, checklists, or other how-to instructions lend themselves to this cookbook approach. Imagine

someone has walked up to you and asked what to do. The following example is from an instruction that repeated the duty officer dozens of times:

Not: The duty officer will verify that security responsibilities have been completed by putting his/her initials on the checklist.

But: When you complete the inspection, initial the checklist.

Rely on Everyday Words

The complexity of military work and the need for precision require some big words. But don't use big words when little ones will do. People who speak with small words often let needlessly fancy ones burden their writing. On paper help swells to assistance, pay to remuneration, and visit to visitation. The list goes on, and so does the damage from word inflation.

Do you remember the dude in those old Western movies who overdressed to impress the folks at the ranch? Overdressed writing fails just as foolishly. Here are some commonly overdressed words.

Not	**But**
commence	start
facilitate	help
optimum	best
promulgate	issue
utilize	use

Prefer short, spoken transitions over long, bookish ones. Save long transitions for variety. By preferring short ones, you help set an ordinary tone for the rest of what you say. (And, yes, you can start sentences with conjunctions.)

Not	**But**
consequently	so
however	but
in addition	also
nevertheless	still

Avoid legalistic lingo. Let a regulation's number or a letter's signature carry the authority instead of trying to put that authority in your language. Write to express, not to impress.

Not	**But**
aforesaid	the, that
heretofore	until now
herewith is	here is

the undersigned I

All writers try to impress readers, but the best do it through language that doesn't call attention to itself. Size of vocabulary is less important than skill in manipulating the words you already know. See Appendix A for a list of simpler words and phrases.

Use Some Contractions

Contractions link pronouns with verbs (we'd, I'll, you're) and make verbs negative (don't, can't won't). They're appropriate for all but the most formal writing situations. Yet even when your final product will be a formal reprimand, for example, you can use contractions in drafts to help you write naturally.

The point is that if you're comfortable with contractions, your writing is likely to read easily, for you'll be speaking on paper. And because the language is clear, you're more likely to spot holes in your thinking that need to be filled.

If contractions seem out of place, you may need to deflate the rest of what you say. In the next sentence, something has to go, either the opening contraction or the inflated language that follows: "It's incumbent upon all personnel to effect energy savings." Written naturally, the sentence might read, "It's your job to save energy."

Keep Sentences Short

For variety mix long sentences and short ones, but average under twenty words. Though short sentences won't guarantee clarity, they're usually less confusing than long ones. You needn't count every word. Try the eye test: average under two typed lines. Or try the ear test: read your writing aloud and break up most of the sentences that don't end in one breath. In the next example, we first break the marathon sentence into manageable units and then make the writing sound like speaking.

Not: It is requested that attendees be divided between the two briefing dates with the understanding that any necessary final adjustments will be made by DAA to facilitate equitable distribution. (29 words)

Uh: It is requested that attendees be divided between the two briefing dates. Any necessary final adjustments will be made by DAA to facilitate equitable distribution. (12,13 words)

But: Send half your people on one day and half on the other. DAA will make final adjustments. (12, 5 words)

Ask More Questions

A request gains emphasis when it ends with a question mark. Do you hear how spoken a question is? Look for opportunities to reach out to your reader:

Not: Request this headquarters be notified as to whether the conference has been rescheduled.

But: Has the conference been rescheduled?

Not: In an effort to improve the cost of office copier operation, it is requested your firm complete the attached form relating to office copiers which you would propose to rent/lease.

But: Would you let us know on the accompanying form what you charge to rent or lease your copiers?

Listen to Your Tone

Speakers have gesture, voice, and movement to help them communicate. Writers only have words on paper. Recognize your disadvantage as a writer and remember to pay special attention to tone.

Tone—a writer's attitude toward the subject or reader--causes relatively few problems in routine writing. The more sensitive the reader or issue, however, the more careful we must be to promote good will. Tactlessness in writing suggests clumsiness in general. When feelings are involved, one misused word can make an enemy.

Imagine you are a reservist who has asked to stay on active duty even though you have a serious illness. How does the following answer strike you?

> Because you have failed to pass the prescribed physical examination, you will be removed from active duty.

Failed? Removed? These words hint at crime and punishment. To avoid such tactlessness, the tone should be positive.

Negative	**Positive**
Opportunity is limited.	Competition is keen.
Stop writing badly.	Start writing well.
Don't use the small hoist.	Use the big hoist.
The cup is half-empty.	The cup is half full.

The positive approach removes some of the sting from the reservist's answer. Here's a possibility:

> Given the results of your physical examination, we must transfer you to the Retired Reserve.

The structure of the letter was better than the wording of the "failed" sentence. The letter opened by acknowledging the favorable endorsements that accompanied the request to stay on active duty, and it closed by thanking the reservist for his years of service. This tactful arrangement helped to soften the bad news.

Now imagine you've asked for more time to complete a correspondence course. Here's the last sentence of the letter that turns you down:

> If we can be of further assistance, please do not hesitate to write.

Beware of rubber-stamp endings such as the one you just read. They don't improve good letters or save bad ones. To the reader whose request has been denied, <u>further assistance</u> promises further disappointment. The closing sentence should be dropped entirely or tied to the rest of the letter with positive language:

> This setback aside, we hope you will take advantage of other correspondence courses available to you.

In all fairness to the writer, the letter did explain the denial in enough detail to avoid any hint of a brush-off. Most <u>no</u> answers need some explanation. <u>Yes</u> answers need little explanation because readers get what they want.

Be Concrete

Without generalizations and abstractions, lots of them, we would drown in detail. We sum up vast amounts of experience when we speak of dedication, programs, hardware, and lines of authority. But such abstract language isn't likely to evoke in a reader's mind the same experiences it evokes in a writer's. Lazy writing overuses such vague terms. Often it weakens them further by substituting adjectives for examples: immense dedication, enhanced programs, viable hardware, and responsive lines of authority.

If you write, "The solution to low morale and poor discipline is good leadership," your readers may feel warm all over. But until you point out some specific behavior meant by low morale, poor discipline, and good leadership, neither you nor your readers can tackle the problem. Similarly, don't use a general word if the context allows for a specific one. Be as definite as the situation permits.

For	Try
aircraft	plane
plane	F-16
improved costs	lower costs
enhanced method	faster method? cheaper method?

Vague, high-sounding language also weakens job descriptions. Someone is said to "assist and advise in the organization management aspects of manpower management." Another "serves as a system proponent to transition from current capabilities to architectural projections." But what do these people really do? After all, a person who "serves as a direct interface with interstate commerce" may be only a highway flag holder.

Performance evaluations suffer when writers make extravagant, unsupported claims. Someone actually wrote this next example, and someone else has it ticking in his files.

> Engaged in an assignment of a highly complex and technical nature, Sgt Anderson has molded on-the-job experience, diligence, and perseverance to a point where his seniors and supervisors can inevitably afford credence to his work and the conclusions he derives therefrom.

An effective evaluation shows what a person did and how well he or she did it. it's concrete enough to inspire confidence in the writer's judgment about the ratee's performance and potential.

CONCISE WRITING

Concise writing includes only those ideas that readers need, and it gives those ideas no more words than they deserve. Careful audience analysis and a willingness to be hard on yourself are essential for conciseness. Have you included too much background? Do excessive details bury your point? Are you keeping an irrelevant idea just because it sounds ever so fine?

You can say too little, of course, and not persuade your readers that a certain problem is serious or that your solution is worthwhile. Sometimes simple courtesy requires bulk; a one-sentence letter of praise is just too abrupt. But the point remains the best writing, like the best machinery, has no unnecessary parts.

Don't be overly concerned about conciseness when you are getting your ideas on paper. If you try to create and edit at the same time, you may bog down in detail and lose sight of your point. When you polish your writing, though, look for wordiness everywhere. Question the need for every paragraph, every sentence, every word. The longer you take to say things the weaker you come across and the more you risk blurting important ideas. In the war against wordiness, the best weapon is a writer's ruthlessness. Let's review some common forms of wordiness that are easy to spot and avoid:

Avoid "it is and "there is"

No two words hurt military writing more than it is. They stretch sentences, delay meaning, hide responsibility, and encourage passive verbs. Unless it refers to something mentioned earlier, avoid it is. Spare only spoken expressions such as "It is time to..." or "It is hard to…" and an occasional pointing expression such as "it is your job to…" (not someone else's).

Not	**But**
It is requested	We request, please
It is my intention	I intend
It is necessary that you	You need to, you must
It is apparent that	Clearly
It is the recommendation of this office that	We recommend

Not: It is mandatory that all personnel receive flu vaccinations.

But: All personnel must receive flu vaccinations.

Not: It is requested that all badges be surrendered upon departure of your group from the restricted area

But: Return all badges when your group leaves the restricted area.

Like it is constructions, forms of there is make sentences start slowly. Don't write these delayers without first trying to avoid them.

Not: There will be a meeting of the Human Relations Council at 1000 on 26 July in the main conference room.

But: The Human Relations Council will meet at 1000 on 26 July in the main conference room.

Not: There are two alternatives offered in the report.

But: The report offers two alternatives.

Prune Wordy Expressions

Wordy expressions don't give writing impressive bulk; they clutter it by getting in the way of the words that carry the meaning. In order to and in accordance with, for example, are minor ideas that don't deserve three words. Here are some repeat offenders.

Not	**But**
for the purpose of	for, to
in accordance with	by, following, under
in order to	To
in the event that	If
in the near future	shortly, soon
be advised	---
in the process of	---
is responsible for	---
the provisions of	---
the use of	---

Wordy expressions dilute the next examples. Extended across a letter or report, the savings from cutting such bloated language are considerable.

Not: In accordance with the new regulation, you may pay the claim with a check in the amount of $300.

But: Under the new regulation, you may pay the claim with a check for $300.

Not: In the event that this offer is satisfactory, be advised your written acceptance must reach us before May 11.

But: If this offer is satisfactory, your written acceptance must reach us before May 11.

Not: We are in the process of revising our form letters in order to make them more readable.

But: We are revising our form letters to make them more readable.

Free Smothered Verbs

Make your verbs do more work. The most important word in a sentence is the verb, the action word, the only word that can do something. Weak writing relies on general verbs, which take extra words to complete their meaning. When you write a general verb such as make or give, check to see whether you can turn a nearby word into a specific verb.

Not: This directive is applicable to everyone who makes use of the system.

But: This directive applies to everyone who uses the system

Not: The committee held a meeting to give consideration to the proposal.

But: The committee met to consider the proposal.

Not: We will conduct an investigation into the incident before making a

But: We will investigate the incident before deciding.

To be deserves special attention. it's the most common verb in English and the weakest. Though we need it often, often we don't. Cut down on your use of to be in any of its forms am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been.

Shun "the -ion of" and "the -ment of"

Words ending in -ion and -ment are verbs turned into nouns. Whenever the context permits, change these nouns to verb forms. By favoring verb forms, your sentences will be shorter and livelier.

Not: Use that format for the preparation of your command history.

But: Use that format to prepare your command history.

Not: The settlement of travel claims involves the examination of orders.

But: Settling travel claims involves examining orders.

Or: To settle travel claims, we examine orders.

Cut Doublings

As the writer, you may see some differences between advise and assist, interest and concern, or thanks and gratitude. But your readers won't. Repeating a general idea can't make it any more precise. Simple subtraction will overcome doublings such as these:

Not: We must comply with the standards and criteria for controlling and reducing environmental pollution.

But: We must comply with the standards for reducingUenvironmental pollution.

Not: The Department of Defense has developed plans for an orderly and integrated system of executive and management advancement.

But: The Department of Defense has developed plans for a system of executive advancement.

Prevent Hut -2-3-4 Phrases

Though you should cut needless words, sometimes you can go too far. Avoid hut-2-3-4 phrases—long clots of nouns and modifiers. Readers can't tell how the pieces fit together or where they all will end. We must live with some established hut-2-3-4 phrases such as Air Traffic Control Radar Beacon System, but you can keep them out of whatever you originate by adding some words or rewriting entirely.

Not: the Board of Inspection and Survey service acceptance trials requirements

But: requirements by the Board of Inspection and Survey for service acceptance trials

Not: training needs planning summary survey

But: survey of training needs for the planning summary

Avoid Excessive Abbreviating

Excessive abbreviating is another common form of false economy. Use abbreviations no more than you must with insiders, and avoid them entirely with outsiders. Spell out an unfamiliar abbreviation the first time it appears, like this:

Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC)

If an abbreviation would appear only twice or infrequently, spell out the term every time and avoid the abbreviation entirely. Put clarity before economy.

ACTIVE WRITING

Passive writing is wordy, roundabout, and sometimes downright confusing. To avoid this infectious disease, learn how to spot passive verbs and make them active. Most of your sentences should use a who-does-what order. By leading with the doer, you automatically will avoid a passive verb.

Doctor: When did you first notice your use of verbs in the passive voice?

Patient: The utilization was first noticed by me shortly after the military was entered. A civilian agency has been joined by my brother. The same condition has been remarked on by him

Doctor: Did you know that most of the verbs we speak with are active? So are most of the verbs in newspapers and magazines, the kinds of writing we like to read.

Patient: Well, it is believed by me that many verbs are made passive by military writers. In the letters and directives that have been prepared by this speaker, passive verbs have been utilized extensively. Are problems caused?

If you heard the unnatural sound of the patient's passives and know how to lead with doers, you needn't read on. But the following technical discussion may be helpful.

Learn the Symptoms of Passive Voice

A verb in the passive voice uses any form of to be plus the past participle of a main verb:

am is was were be being been

PLUS

a main verb usually ending in en or ed

Unlike sentences with active verbs, sentences with passives don't need to show who or what has done the verb's action. If a doer appears at all, it follows the verb. But most passives in military writing just imply the doer, a severe problem when the doer isn't clear from the context. Passive verbs look like the following underlined words:

Ex: As a result of what has been learned, it is desired that additional equipment testing be made.

(Be made is passive. The past participle of to make is irregular.)

Ex: Two units of blood were ordered for an emergency patient whose hematocrit had fallen below 20 percent.

(Had fallen is active. Had isn't a form of to be. Besides, what did the falling? Hematocrit, which appears before the verb.)

Know the Three Cures

Put a doer before the verb:

Not: The part must have been broken by the handlers.

But: The handlers must have broken the part.

Not: The requests must be approved. (By whom?)

But: The supervisor must approve the requests.

Not: Complete uniforms must be worn by all personnel.

But: All personnel must wear complete uniforms.

Or: Wear complete uniforms.

Drop part of the verb:

Not: The results are listed in the attachment.

But: The results are in the attachment.

Not: Then she was transferred to Maxwell AFB.

But: Then she transferred to Maxwell AFB.

Change the verb:

Not: Letter formats are shown in the correspondence manual.

But: Letter formats appear in the correspondence manual.

Not: The replacement has not been received yet.

But: The replacement has not arrived yet.

Write Passively only for Good Reason

Now and then, write passively if you have good reason to avoid saying who or what has done the verb's action. This situation may occur if the doer is unknown, unimportant, obvious, or better left unsaid:

> Presidents are elected every four years. (doer obvious)
>
> The part was shipped on I June. (doer unimportant, perhaps)
>
> Christmas has been scheduled as a work day. (doer better left unsaid)

Now and then, you may want to write a passive sentence that names the doer. The situation may occur when you need a transition from one topic to another. The following sentence would shift a discussion from individual habit to group inertia:

> Writing improvement is doubly difficult when individual habit is reinforced by group inertia.

Now and then, a passive sentence that names the doer is appropriate if the rest of the paragraph is about the receiver of the verb's action. The following sentence might work in a paragraph about a general.

> Then the general was hit by a falling limb.

Finally, for variety or stateliness, you may want the slow procession of a passive sentence such as this one on a monument at the Air Force Academy:

> Man's flight through life is sustained by the power of his knowledge.

When in doubt, write actively, even though the doer may seem obvious. You will write livelier sentences (not, livelier sentences will be written by you).

Practice on These Examples

The following paragraph comes from a letter that proposes to expand a Scheduled Airline Ticket Office (SATO). Find the passives and try to make them active. Then check yourself against the revision.

> During that time period, a total of $644,000 was expended in the issuance of government transportation requests (GTRs) for air travel. It is estimated by SATO that an additional $10,000 per month would be generated through casual travel. A summary of the GTR revenue by month is provided in attachment 1.

Here is a sentence-by-sentence revision of the passive paragraph:

> During that time period, a total of $644,000 was expended in the issuance of government transportation requests (GTRs) for air travel.

We can cut 19 percent from the passive sentence above just by shortening during that time period to during that time and by omitting a total of. No writer has any excuse for not performing such simple subtraction. To avoid the passive was expended, we don't have to know who or what did the spending. The core idea is this: "During that time, government transportation requests (GTRs) for air travel totaled $644,000." Now the verb carries more of the meaning, $644.000 appears in a stronger place and the sentence is slimmer by 43 percent.

> It is estimated by SATO that an additional $10,000 per month would be generated through casual travel.

This sentence is easy to improve because doers follow both passive verbs. "SATO estimates that casual travel would generate an additional $10,000 per month." Though active now, the sentence still needs work. We can shorten generate to add, and additional to another, and per to a. For clarity, casual travel can become off-duty travel. These small improvements add up: "SATO estimates that off-duty travel would add $10,000 a month."

> A summary of the GTR revenue by month is provided in attachment 1.

Though the sentence would be shorter if we simply dropped provided, the weak is would remain. Better to reshape the sentence: "Attachment 1 provides a summary of the GTR revenue by month." But provides a summary is a smothered verb for summarizes. So the best improvement is this: "Attachment 1 summarizes the GTR revenue by month." Here is the passive original again, followed by the active version:

Passive: During that time period, a total of $644,000 was expended in the issuance of government transportation requests (GTRs) for air travel. It is estimated by SATO that an additional $10,000 per month would be generated through casual travel. A summary of the GTR revenue by month is provided in attachment 1. (50 words)

Active: During that time, government transportation requests (GTRs) for air travel totaled $644,000. SATO estimates that off-duty travel would add $10,000 a month. Attachment 1 summarizes the GTR revenue by month. (31 words)

The following letter, from an inspector general, suffers from epidemic passives and other problems. On a separate sheet of paper, rewrite the letter to make it organized, spoken, concise, and active.

> Attachment 1 is forwarded for review and comment as to concurrence or non-concurrence with the recommendations of the subject to inspection. Only those recommendations requiring action are forwarded. Comments are requested by 7 June in order that approval and implementing can be taken. Recommendations will stand as written if concurrence is not provided by the above date.

> Status reports or comments concerning actions completed or in progress are not to be submitted at this time. Guidance on status reporting will be provided at a later date. (85 words)

Here's our version (you may have come up with a better one).

> Please concur or non-concur with the inspection recommendations in attachment 1. To consider changes to these recommendations, we must have your comments by 7 June.
>
> Don't send status reports about actions completed or in progress. Guidance on these will reach you later. (40 words)

The second sentence of the original is unnecessary. Elsewhere in the original the writing is swollen: provided and submitted for sent, in order that for so, and at a later date for later. But the worst damage comes from the seven untouched-by-human-hands passives. They force readers to pause and figure out just who is supposed to do what. The revision avoids the passives by talking directly to a typical reader. Note the personal pronouns, contractions, and please.

Please, the first word of the active version, is a convention of modern writing (and speaking) that helps avoid many roundabout constructions. "Please send us two blivets" is far more efficient than "it is requested that two blivets be sent to this command." Real men and women do say "please."

Appendix A
SIMPLER WORDS AND PHRASES

Instead of	*Try*	*Instead of*	*Try*
accompany	go with	Disclose	show
accomplish	carry out, do	discontinue	drop, stop
accomplish (a form)	fill out	disseminate	issue, send out
accordingly	so	do not	don't
accrue	add, gain	due to the fact that	due to, since
accurate	correct, exact, right	echelons	levels
achieve	do, make	effect	make
actual	real	elect	choose
additional	added, more, other	eliminate	cut, drop, end
adjacent to	next to	employ	use
advantageous	helpful	encounter	meet
advise	recommend, tell	encourage	urge
affix	put, stick	endeavor	try
afford an opportunity	allow, let	ensure	make sure
aircraft	plane	enumerate	counter
anticipate	expect	equitable	fair
a number of	some	equivalent	equal
apparent	clear, plain	establish	set up, prove, show
appear	seem	evaluate	check, rate, test
appreciable	many	evidenced	showed
approximately	about	evident	clear
as a means of	to	exhibit	show
ascertain	find out, learn	expedite	hurry, rush, speed up
as prescribed by	under	expeditious	fast, quick
assist, assistance	aid, help	expend	pay out, spend
attached herewith is	here's	expense	cost, fee, price
attempt	try	explain	show, tell
benefit	help	facilitate	ease, help
by means of	by, with	factor	reason, cause
cannot	can't	failed to	didn't
capability	ability	fatuous numb skull	jerk
category	class, group	feasible	can be done, workable
close proximity	near	females	women
combined	joint	final	last
comply	follow	finalize	complete, finish
component	part	for example	such as
comprise	form, include, make up	forfeit	give up, lose
concerning	about, on	for the purpose of	for, to
conclude	close, end	forward	send
concur	agree	function	act, role, work
confront	face, meet	fundamental	basic
consequently	so	furnish	give send
consolidate	combine, join, merge	has the capability	can
constitutes	is, forms, makes up	herein	here
construct	build	however	but
continue	keep on	identical	same
contribute	give	identify	find, name, show
cooperate	help	immediately	at once
currently	(leave out)	implement	carry out, do, follow

Appendix A (Cont.)
SIMPLER WORDS AND PHRASES

Instead of	*Try*	*Instead of*	*Try*
deem	think	in accordance with	under, by
delete	cut, drop	in addition	also, besides, too
demonstrate	prove, show	in an effort to	to
depart	leave	inasmuch as	since
designate	appoint, choose, name, pick	inception	start
desire	wish	in conjunction with	with
determine	decide, figure, find	incorporate	blend, join, merge
develop	grow, make, take place	incumbent upon	must
indicate	show, write down	programmed	planned
indication	sign	promulgate	announce, issue
initial	first	provide	give, say, supply
initiate	start	provided that	if
in lieu of	instead of	provides guidance for	guides
in order that	for, so	(the) provisions of	(leave out)
in order to	to	purchase	buy
in regard to	about, concerning, on	reason for	why
interpose no objection	don't object	recapitulate	sum up
in the amount of	for	reduce	cut
in the course of	during	reflect	say, show
in the event that	if	regarding	about, of on
in the near future	soon	relating to	about, on
in view of	since	relocation	move
in view of the above	so	remain	stay
it is	(leave out)	remainder	rest
it is essential	must	remuneration	pay, payment
it is recommended	I, we recommend	render	give, make
it is requested	please	request	ask
justify	prove	require	must, need
legislation	law	requirement	need
limited number	few	retain	keep
limitations	limits	return	go back
locate	find	review	check, go over
lcoation	place, scene, site	selection	choice
magnitude	size	similar	like
maintain	keep, support	solicit	ask for
majority	greatest, longest, most	state	say
minimize	decrease, lessen, reduce	subject	submit
modify	change	submit	give, send
monitor	check, watch	subsequent	after, later, next
nebulous	vague	subsequently	after, later, then
necessitate	cause, need	substantial	large, real, strong
notify	let, know, tell	sufficient	enough
numerous	many, most	take appropriate maeasures	please
objective	aim, goal	terminate	end, stop
obligate	bind, compel	that	(leave out)
observe	see	therefore	so
obtain	get	there are	(leave out)
		there is	(leave out)

		thereof	its, their

Appendix A (Cont.)
SIMPLER WORDS AND PHRASES

Instead of	*Try*	*Instead of*	*Try*
operate	run, work	this office	us, we
operational	working	time period	(either one)
optimum	best,greatest, most	transmit	send
option	choice, way	transpire	happen, occur
participate	take part	type	(leave out)
perform	do	until such time as	until
permit	let	(the) use of	(leave out)
personnel	people, staff	utilize, utilization	use
pertaining to	about, of, on	validate	confirm
place	put	value	cost, worth
portion	part	verbatim	word for word, exact
position	place	via	in, on, through
possess	have, own	viable	workable
preclude	prevent	warrant	call for, permit
prepared	ready	whenever	when
previous	earlier, pas	whereas	since
previously	before	with reference to	about
prioritize	rank	with the exception of	except for
prior to	before	witnessed	saw
probability	chance		
procedures	rules, ways	/	and, or
proceed	do, go on, try		
proficiency	skill		

Appendix B

EDITING FOR CONCISENESS

1. TESS is a long-term, dynamic development effort to modernize and upgrade the capabilities of major combatant ships and selected shore stations to rapidly and instantaneously assimilate, correlate, process, and display the large quantities of environmental, temperature, and weather data required to counter atmospheric effects on fleet and shore based sensors and weapons systems.

2. It is requested that all two letter directorates or a designated representative from their staffs attend a preliminary meeting next Thursday at 1600 in order to lay the groundwork in advance for preparation for the upcoming POM input on the B-2 development and acquisition program

Appendix C

COMPLETED STAFF WORK

Here are two testimonials on how to write for a busy boss. The first comes from an anonymous university administrator. The second is part of a memo by Army General Donn A. Starry to his staff. Together the statements argue for thorough legwork and compact paperwork.

> Completed staff work consists of studying a problem and presenting its solution in such a way that the President need only indicate approval or disapproval of the completed action. The words completed action are emphasized because the more difficult a problem is, the more the tendency is to present the problem to the President in piecemeal fashion. A staff member's duty is to work out details, no matter how perplexing they may be.
>
> It's so easy to ask the Presidents what to do, and it appears so easy for them to answer. Resist that impulse. You will succumb to it only if you do not know your job. Tell Presidents what they ought to do, don't ask them what you ought to do. THEY NEED ANSWERS, NOT QUESTIONS. Your job is to study, write, restudy, and rewrite until you have evolved a single proposed action—the best one of all you have considered. The President merely approves or disapproves. Alternate courses of action are desirable in many cases and should be presented. But you should say which alternative you think is best.
>
> The theory of completed staff work does not preclude the rough draft, but the rough draft must not be a half-baked idea. It must be complete in every respect, except that it lacks the required number of copies and may not be neat. Do not use a rough draft as an excuse for shifting to the President your burden of formulating the action.
>
> The completed staff work theory may result in more work for the staff member, but it results in more freedom for the President. This is as it should be. Further, it accomplishes two things:
>
> > The President is protected from half-baked ideas, voluminous memoranda, and immature oral presentations.
> >
> > The staff member who has an idea to sell can find a market more readily.
>
> When you have finished your staff work, the final test is this: if you were the President, would you sign the paper you have prepared and stake your professional reputation on its being right.' If the answer is no, take it back and work it over, because it is not yet completed staff work.

***

I can get more information from the staff if each of you gives me less. Here's why. In a week, about 110 staff actions show up in my in-box. I could handle these in a week if all I did was work the in-box. Yet about 70% of my time in the headquarters goes not to the in-box but to briefings. I could handle that dilemma, too—by listening to briefings and thinking about staff papers at the same time. I don't. Most of the information I need is in the field. Much of my time must go there. In February, for example, I was here six days.

Within six days, add 15-20 office calls a dozen or so visitors, seven social engagements, two or three ceremonies, and 32 telephone calls. These are the realities.

To work the problems of the central battle within the restrictions of the realities, I need less information. But every piece of the less has to be pure. Every piece must go through that old filter of need to know, good to know, nice to know. I need the need part, not the rest. You need to synthesize, condense, stop out, boil down, distill, abstract—like a good newspaper editor.

Here's your challenge: reduce six months of work to a 10-page package, or a package to a page, or a page to a paragraph, or a paragraph to a sentence, or a sentence to a few words, or a few words to a mode or diagram. I need concepts, bottom lines, central themes, summaries, abstracts. Any action officer who can condense accurately is worth ten who run out poop sheets by the pound. My measure of completed staff work is less paper, not more.

.

BOOKS ABOUT OFFICIAL WRITING

A New Guide to Better Writing by Rudolf Flesch. Warner Books, 1982. A "how to" guide with sections on clarity, pruning, choosing the right word, and adding punch to get the point across. Devotes several chapters (with exercises) to curing troubling grammatical mistakes.

Business Communications by Michael Adelstein and W. Keats Sparrow. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990. A thorough college text that offers excellent examples of business memos, letters, and reports.

Effective Writing: A Workshop Course by Internal Revenue Service. Government Printing Office, 1975. (Stock No. 048-004 01288-0/Catalog No. T22.19/2: W 93/3). Excellent advice on how to write official letters that are complete, correct, clear, concise, and appropriate in tone.

Handbook of Technical Writing, 4th edition, by Charles T. Brusaw, Gerald-J. Aired, and Walter E. Oliv. St Martin's Press, 1992. Besides covering the elements of technical reports, this reference text answers hundreds of questions, some of them fussy, on grammar and punctuation.

Harbrace College Handbook, l1th edition, by John C. Hodges and Mary E. Whetted. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990. A popular reference on grammar and punctuation. Thorough and sensible.

Plain English for Lawyers, 2nd edition, by Richard C. Wydick. Carolina Academic Press, 198S. A lively, practical book for all who care to write the law in readable English. Includes exercises and answers.

Revising Business Prose, 3rd edition, by Richard ~ Lanham. Macmillan Publishing 1991. Called "a quick self-teaching method of revision for people who want to translate bureaucratic prose, their own or someone else's, into plain English."

Rudolf Flesch on Business Communication by, you guessed it, Rudolf Flesch. Barnes & Noble, 1974. A short, practical book by the leading advocate of spoken writing.

Else Elements of Style, 3rd edition, by William Strunk, Jr., and E. B. White. Macmillan, 1979. These tips on style are sure to improve anyone's writing.

The Plain English Approach to Business Writing by Edward P. Bailey, Ir. Oxford University Press, 1990. A readable, concise guide by one of the strongest advocates of executive writing. Practical advice ranging from punctuation and style of sentences to visual layouts and using a computer to write.

The Tongue and Quill: Communicating to Manage in Tomorrow's Air Force, Air Force Pamphlet 4-19, 31 August 1992.