

Strive for Direct Expression

Using more words than necessary to express a thought slows reading, wastes printing space, and interferes with clear and concise writing. Two common writing errors that interfere with direct and word-efficient expression are: (a) including information that is not needed and (b) constructing sentences in styles that use excess words. Some examples will demonstrate these problems.



As written: The application of the herbicide resulted in the death of the weeds (12 words).

This sentence is grammatically correct and the information presented is easy to understand. However, the number of words could be reduced by more than half without losing information.

Improved: The herbicide killed the weeds (5 words).

“To kill” means the same as “to cause the death of.” Therefore, the one word “killed” can replace “caused the death of.” Whenever a performer (in this case, the herbicide) causes a result or an action of a verb (“death” resulting from the action of the verb “to kill”) the sentence can be streamlined and improved by using the verb rather than the noun.

Obviously, the herbicide could not kill the weeds unless it were applied. Nevertheless, the application of the herbicide is not of interest here, but rather the herbicide itself and its action. Thus, “application” represents extraneous and distracting information in this sentence. Furthermore, the use of “application of the herbicide” forces the round-about, indirect term “to result in,” because it would be technically incorrect to say “the application of the herbicide killed the weed.”

Here is another example of a sentence with excess information and inefficient construction.

As written: The selection and use of the cultivar “Greenleaf” by the farmer allowed him to realize a yield of forage 25% in excess of that produced by the standard cultivar (30 words).

The intended message from this sentence was very simple. Therefore, by eliminating unnecessary information, by changing “yield” from a noun to a verb, and by eliminating other wordy constructions, the number of words used can be reduced from 30 to 9 without losing anything vital.

Improved: Greenleaf yielded 25% more than the standard cultivar (9 words).

I remember college composition courses in which an assignment might be to write a 1000-word theme. I remember consciously trying to be as wordy as possible, because the theme needed 1000 words. I believe a very useful training exercise for aspiring technical writers would be to write a 1000-word theme, then rewrite it in 800 words or less without loss of essential information. This would help the students understand the need for concise, direct expression. They would learn that excess verbiage wastes printing space and readers’ time, and sacrifices readability.

Remember:

The words and style
that we select
Should help our writing
be direct.

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