MASSEY UNIVERSITY
Centre for Teaching and Learning

Concise writing

It is important in academic writing to make your point in as few words as possible. Writing concisely shows you understand the concepts and are avoiding adding extra words that are not necessarily relevant simply to "pad out" your assignments. Lecturers often impose word limits on assignments for this very reason.

Techniques for writing concisely

Make your points straight away:
"The first point relates to….", "Secondly…", "Finally..."

Replace phrases with single words.

☒ "The group of science students sat their exams".

☑ "The science students sat their exams".

☒ "Smith (2006) also believed this to be true, but took into consideration the fact that some managers also preferred to have long meetings that took all day".

☑ "Smith (2006) agreed, but considered the fact that some managers preferred to have longer, all-day meetings".

Avoid qualifying words which mean the same thing:

- past records   >   records
- separate out   >   separate
- looking back in retrospect   >   in retrospect

Omit unnecessary words:

- lowering the rope down   >   lowering the rope
- fewer in number   >   fewer
- due to the fact that   >   because

Avoid saying the same thing twice:

- The farmer sheared the sheep and removed all their wool   >   The farmer sheared the sheep.

Be wary of clumsy sentences where extra words have been added that detract from the point being made:

☒ "There are several of the soldiers, each with their guns and ammunition, who gathered at the gates of the camp before dawn."

☑ "Several of the soldiers, each with their own guns and ammunition, gathered at the camp gates before dawn."

Examples of writing concisely

Long	Better choice (often)
accounted for by the fact that	because
are of the same opinion	agree
as already stated	[omit]
as can be seen from figure 1, substance Z reduces twitching	substance Z reduces twitching (Fig. 1)

Checklist – check that you're not:

Telling the reader the life-story of your assignment

☒ "I thought it would be a good idea to..."

Giving the life-story of the theory you're using

☒ "After a lot of study, the Ministry came up with..."

Apologising or making excuses

☒ "But there is not space to list them all..."

Giving a shopping list of every item in a theory (when not all are relevant to your issue)

☒ "... which are people, health, knowledge and skills."

Repeating words or phrases in the same sentence or paragraph

☒ "The concept of learning involves learning..."

Including vague comments or evaluations

☒ "It is a well known fact that...."

Checklist – check that you are:

Including in-text references

☑ "... a relatively recent practice (Cotterell, Wheldon, & Mulligan, 2007)."

Including short, insightful summaries of approaches and theories

☑ "This model is based on a broad and holistic view of social well-being."

Concise writing example

Staff members need to be clear about what they want IT to do for them before they can start incorporating it into their lessons (Brown, 2003). In schools today, nearly all classrooms have access to a computer. However, many schools mistake this as incorporating information technology into the curriculum. School staff need to research what IT is available and what would best serve the school's purpose, not simply purchase the latest equipment. Furthermore, there should be a policy stating how IT is going to assist pupils' development and what teachers want pupils to achieve (Reksten, 2000).