Writing wizardry 101: Trimming length without cutting content

Welcome to the first blog post for the Visiting Scholar Program (VSP) now running in the Department of Pediatrics. This post recaps the VSP's launch event on June 23, 2021.

Your dilemma: Your grant proposal or manuscript has a limit on the number of pages or words or characters allowed. You've already used the big tools to tame length:

- You've pared down the content to just the absolute essentials that your audience of reviewers will need.
- You've had feedback from colleagues on what to include or omit.
- You've used figures and tables effectively to summarize details

BUT, the writing is still longer than allowed. What to do?

1) Shun the "-tion"

   Stronger and shorter: "We **evaluated**…"

   Weaker and longer: "We undertook **an evaluation**…"

A short, strong verb—*evaluated*—becomes a longer, feeble noun—*evaluation*—with extra words around it. To trim text easily, we can hunt for words ending in **-tion** and replace them with shorter, stronger verbs. This also works for **-ment** words.

You can test your skill at this. See the sample text in the VSP Resources, and try trimming the first short paragraph.

2) Give the action to simple, strong verbs

   Stronger and shorter: "We **will interview** patients."

   Weaker and longer: "We **plan to engage in interviewing** patients."

We want our ideas expressed clearly and confidently. To trim text easily, we can hunt for action words (the verbs) and replace a long cluster of weak verbs—*plan to engage in interviewing*—with a simple strong verb—*will interview*.

Test you skill on the second short paragraph of the sample text in the VSP Resources.

3) Declutter

- Remove filler words e.g. very, actually, generally
- Remove throat-clearing e.g. in fact, needless to say, it appears that, in regards to, with reference to, the amount of, the field of...
- Remove redundant words e.g. successful solution, past history
- Remove statements of generic, common knowledge e.g. "Cancer is a serious health problem in Canada."

Traditional academic writing was highly formal. It used these types of words and phrases frequently. The unfortunate effect is a style that sounds pompous today. It's also more wordy than necessary.

We want our ideas to stand out strongly and clearly, not obscured by extra words. Our writing can still have a professional tone without unnecessary flourishes and frills.

Test you skill by decluttering the third short paragraph of the sample text in the VSP Resources.

Bonus tip: Use shorter words. Check out http://ironicsans.com/thsrs/ for equivalent shorter words

During the VSP launch event, your colleagues suggested **more strategies to trim length** without cutting content. Examples:

- Find a "trim buddy" to help you spot unnecessary length in each other's writing
- Search for anthropomorphisms such as "This study showed that…" and replace with "We found that…"
- Try the *Hemingway* app (one review) and consider *ProWritingAid* (one review). Apps won't cure all writing problems, but they can highlight useful suggestions.
- Practice composing on Twitter
- Delete "the" when it isn't necessary

What's your best tip to trim the length of your writing most easily?