

ELIMINATING WORDINESS: PART 2, NOUNS AND PREPOSITIONS

Has an instructor ever written “wordy” in their comments on your writing? Often, when a reader thinks something is “wordy,” it means that you’ve used too many nouns. In the examples below, nouns are highlighted to illustrate what happens when the number of nouns exceeds the number of active verbs in a sentence.

✗ An **abundance** of **studies** show the **need** for the **refinement** of written **communication skills** in the **Health Sciences**.

In the above sentence, six nouns hide and weigh down the sentence’s only verb, “show.”

✓ Multiple **studies** conclude that **researchers** in the **Health Sciences** need to improve their written **communication skills**.

Note that the ratio of verbs to nouns in the revised sentence is greatly improved (from 1:6 to 2:4). The greater number of verbs to nouns means that the revised sentence is much more *active*—it emphasizes actions instead of things. If you read the two sentences out loud, you can hear the difference this makes!

PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES

Prepositional phrases are not necessarily a bad thing. Sometimes a writer needs them to be as specific as possible. However, too many prepositional phrases can be difficult for a reader to follow. Also, while prepositional phrases give specific information about location, direction, and relationship, sometimes that information is extraneous, which is to say that it might be irrelevant, off-topic, or unnecessary. Finally, beginning a sentence with a prepositional phrase “defers” or delays the action of the sentence, which means that your reader will not understand the point of your sentence at its outset. In the examples below, prepositional phrases are highlighted. For each, ask yourself, “Is this information necessary?”, and, “Does this prepositional phrase hide or defer the action in the sentence?”

Some Key Terms Defined...

Traditional English grammar classifies words based on eight parts of speech. This QuickSheet discusses three: verbs, nouns, and prepositions.

Verbs are the actions of a sentence. They are what a person, place or thing *does*. (Ex. Raihana **was reading** her social geography textbook.)

Nouns are persons, places, or things. They are the *doers* in a sentence, or they are the *receivers* of an action. (Ex. **Raihana** was reading her **social geography textbook**.)

Prepositions are short words that indicate placement, direction and relationship. (Ex. Raihana was reading her social geography textbook **in** the library **for** class the next day.)

Prepositional Phrases are strings of words made up of a **preposition** and its “object,” or the person, place or thing to which the **preposition** refers. (Ex. **In the basement of the library**, Raihana was reading **about social geography**.)

ACADEMIC

✗ One of the benefits of the new reforms is the improvement of care for terminal patients in tertiary care-giving facilities.

The above example contains five prepositional phrases (“of the benefits,” “of the new reforms,” “of care,” “for terminal patients,” and “in tertiary care-giving facilities”) and only one verb, “is.” The information each of these phrases convey is necessary, but the prepositional phrase at the beginning of the sentence makes it seem weak, or actionless.

✓ The new reforms will improve care for terminal patients in tertiary care-giving facilities.

The revised sentence is more powerful and easier to read because it eliminates the prepositional phrase, “One of the benefits,” and gets right to the action of the sentence. Note that the inactive verb “is” is replaced with the active verb “improve,” and that the doer of the action, “The new reforms,” is placed at the beginning of the sentence.

IDENTIFYING PREPOSITIONS

A List of Prepositions: If any of the words in the table below do not have an object (i.e., is not followed by a person, place or thing) when used in a sentence, then the word is *not functioning* as a preposition. The words below can be *used* as a preposition in a prepositional phrase.

about	below	in spite of	regarding
above	beneath	instead of	since
according to	beside	into	through
across	between	like	throughout
after	beyond	near	to
against	but (meaning except)	of	toward
along	by	off	under
amid	concerning	on	underneath
among	down	on account of	until
around	during	onto	up
at	except	out	upon
atop	for	out of	with
because of	from	outside	within
before	in	over	without
behind	inside	past	

REFERENCES

Kehrwald Cook, C. (1985). Loose, baggy sentences.” *Line by line: How to edit your own writing*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.