Creating Concise Sentences

As writers, we have rich, complex ideas to communicate to our audiences, but many of us struggle
to convey those ideas in clear prose. Take the following sentence as an example:

The migration away from Java to Singapore by the British Royal Navy, which was a westward
shifting of their base of power in Southeast Asia, was also the dominant factor in ensuring the
Dutch were able to control Indonesia for decades.

This sentence definitely contains some strong ideas, but audiences might miss them due to
the sentence’s convoluted style. To ensure our readers never miss a single idea, we can retool
this sentence with a simple two-step concision method: first, identify the symptoms of a wordy
sentence, and second, treat them.

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1. Identify Where Your Sentence Is Too Wordy

There are several things that can bog down your sentences. The worst offenders include:

Prepositions
Prepositions are usually small words (like of, for, on, by) that show relationships
between nouns and other words in the sentence. These require readers to stack
different relationships in their heads, especially when multiple prepositions appear in
succession. Our sentence does this: from Java to Singapore by the British Royal Navy. That’s a lot of stacked information!

“To be” Verbs
“To be” verbs like is and was often glue together strings of unnecessary words. Removing the glue can also remove these word strings. Our sentence says was the
dominant factor in ensuring, but it could just say ensured or ensuring.

Nominalizations
Nominalizations turn adjectives and verbs into nouns. For instance, a westward shifting
acts as a noun in our sentence, whereas shifted westward would act as a verb. It might
not seem like a big difference, but when we use adjectives or verbs in place of nouns, it
often eliminates the long, circuituous phrases we see in our example sentence.

Now that we know what to look for, let’s identify these three elements in our sentence. We’re going
to box prepositions, circle “to be” verbs, and underline nominalizations.

The migration away from Java to Singapore by the British Royal Navy, which was a
westward shifting of their base of power in Southeast Asia, was also the dominant
factor in ensuring the Dutch were able to control Indonesia for decades.
2. Treat, Delete, and Rewrite Wordy Areas

Since we understand where the problems exist, the next step is to erase those problems while emphasizing the sentence’s main message.

Place Agent and Action Together at the Beginning of the Sentence

Every sentence should have a central agent and action. You can see agents as the main noun or subject that does something, and actions as the main verb. Be careful, though! Sometimes we only imply agents, especially when using passive voice.

This sentence could have a couple agents and actions, depending on our message. Let’s select what begins the sentence, British migration. In that case, the British Royal Navy would be our agent, and migration -- or its verb form migrated -- would be the action:

The British Royal Navy migrated from Java to Singapore, shifting their Southeast Asian power base westward and ensuring the Dutch were able to control Indonesia for decades.

Clear sentences usually start with the agent and action together before including additional details. To practice this, let’s put our agent and action at the beginning of the sentence, using our new verb form:

The British Royal Navy migrated from Java to Singapore, shifting their Southeast Asian power base westward and ensuring the Dutch were able to control Indonesia for decades.

Prune Unnecessary Words

Let’s move from the beginning of the sentence to the prepositions, “to be” verbs, and nominalizations we found. We can cut these to create a concise sentence:

The British Royal Navy migrated from Java to Singapore, shifting their Southeast Asian power base westward and ensuring the Dutch were able to control Indonesia for decades.

Once we make all the edits, here’s what our new sentence looks like:

The British Royal Navy migrated from Java to Singapore, shifting their Southeast Asian power base westward and ensuring the Dutch controlled Indonesia for decades.

Voilà! We have a clearer, sleeker sentence retaining all essential content in just over half the words!

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<tr>
<th>Old Sentence</th>
<th>New Sentence</th>
<th>41 words</th>
<th>24 words (41% shorter!)</th>
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<tr>
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