



Summary Writing : Strategies for Shortening Sentences

When you have few words to spare, such as in the Summary Writing exercise, making small changes to tweak your text can add up to a lot – metaphorically – in helping to trim the word count. The bottom line in writing summaries effectively is to cut the clutter, or cut the words, in other words. A simple rule-of-thumb would be to ensure that the words you use will add meaning. If some words can be removed without losing the importance of a point, then you have to delete them.

How can you have a coherent response **and** meet the word limit?

1. Delete 'the'

Omitting the word 'the' from your text may not necessarily result in the loss of any meaning.

For example:

Original phrasing: The clarity of your writing would depend on both **the** content and **the** style.
(14 words)

Revised: Clarity of your writing would depend on both content and style.
(11 words)

2. Erase 'that'

The word 'that' is too often used in writing and can be deleted with ease.

For example:

Original phrasing: We found **that** cells **that** amplify the genetic abnormalities tend to migrate swiftly across porous barriers.
(16 words)

Revised: We found cells amplifying genetic abnormalities tend to migrate swiftly across porous barriers.
(13 words, after erasing 'that' and 'the')

3. Remove Adverbs and Adjectives

Adverbs modify verbs; adjectives modify nouns. Most of the time, it would be best to leave out unnecessary adverbs and adjectives, to make your writing more concise.

For example:

Original phrasing: The **entire** treatment lasted four days, with the drug **greatly** enhancing patients' health.
(13 words)

Revised: The treatment lasted four days, with the drug enhancing patients' health.
(11 words)

4. Trim Wordy Phrases

De-clutter your writing when tackling the summary question. Look out for redundant words that can be deleted, as well as long phrases that can be condensed.

For example:

Original phrasing: During **the course of the study, the majority of** respondents **died in response to the administration of** the drug.
(19 words)

Revised: During **the study, most** respondents died after treatment **with / using** the drug.
(11 words)

5. Choose the Active Voice

The active voice uses fewer words than the passive voice. Having an active voice makes your writing much more compelling, besides helping to reduce the number of words.

For example:

Passive Voice: The samples **were collected** by the researcher.
(7 words)

Active Voice: The researcher **collected** the samples.
(5 words)

6. Review and Revise to Omit Needless Transitions

Transitions ensure that your writing is coherent, making it easier for the reader. Yet, there are needless transitions that can and should be deleted, such as 'indeed', 'definitely' and 'having said that'.

For example:

Original phrasing: **Indeed**, we realised that human behaviour can be complex.
(9 words)

Revised: We realised that human behaviour can be complex.
(8 words)

7. Eliminate Conjunctions; Use Punctuation Judiciously

Conjunctions (*and, or, but, however*) connect two independent statements that can often be rewritten as two separate sentences, or separated using a semi-colon, if appropriately used. However, do take note that the flow has to be considered as well, and if conjunctions serve a useful linking purpose, then they should remain.

For example:

Original phrasing: Patients treated with Drug X were asymptomatic after five days, and patients treated with Drug Y were asymptomatic after seven days.
(21 words)

Revised: Patients treated with Drug X were asymptomatic after five **days**; patients treated with Drug Y were asymptomatic after seven days.
(20 words)

Hyphens should also be judiciously used, so as to shorten phrases.

For example:

Original phrasing: By inducing a coma, the doctors were able to successfully treat the patient after the patient had had a period of restful recuperation.
(23 words)

Revised: Doctors successfully treated the patient through the **coma-induced** recuperation.
(9 words)