

HBS Sentence Revision Guide

Creating clear sentences is essential for all writers. Most writers need to revise their writing several times to achieve a clear, concise, polished product. Using strong sentences will ensure a solid document.

This guide explains some of the most common writing errors.

Sentence Structure

Sentences have two main parts, the **Subject** (noun, doer of action) and **verb** (the action).

Sentence fragments are phrases that lack a subject or verb. Fragments are completely unacceptable in business writing.

- Correct: The five days spent in the library were boring.
- Incorrect: The five days in the library.

Agreement in number and tense. Subjects and verbs and nouns and pronouns must agree.

- “A company is” is correct; “a company are” is incorrect (number).
- “I wrote” is correct; “I written” is incorrect (tense).

Fused sentences are complete sentences run together without punctuation

- Correct: I didn't know which job I wanted. I was too confused to decide.
- Incorrect: I didn't know which job I wanted I was too confused to decide.

Comma splices occur when two complete sentences are joined by a comma. Eliminate comma splices by replacing the comma with a period, a conjunction (and, but etc.), or a semicolon.

- Correct: I woke up late this morning. I didn't have time for breakfast.
- Incorrect: I woke up late this morning, I didn't have time for breakfast.

Wordiness

Wordiness occurs when a message has more words than necessary to communicate the meaning of the message. Wordiness is the most common business writing problem. A concise message is easier for people to understand.

Unnecessary words

- Concise: We will meet on Monday at 10 a.m.
- Wordy: We will be meeting Monday morning at 10 a.m.

Inflated wording

- Concise: Cut extra words from your writing.
- Wordy: Condense your writing by eliminating unnecessary verbiage

Redundancy

- Concise: emphasize, my opinion
- Wordy: emphasize and draw attention to, my personal opinion.

Examples of redundancies include:

- The reason why is because
- Six in number
- Following after
- 10 a.m. in the morning
- In my personal opinion
- I personally think
- Bring to a conclusion
- Past history
- One and the same
- And also

Empty words and phrases

- Concise: now, because
- Wordy: at the present time, due to the fact that

Active or Passive verbs; use active verbs whenever possible:

- Concise & active: The boss returned the report to the accountant.
- Wordy & passive: The report was returned to the accountant.

Expletives; "there" and "it:"

- Concise: Some people think cover letters are unnecessary.
- Wordy: There are some people who think cover letters are unnecessary.

Filler Phrases

- It is important to note that....
- As stated above....
- This is one of the reasons why

Multiple Verbs

Sometimes, writers fill their sentences with extra verbs, compounding them, and making sentences convoluted. Simple verb forms are easiest for readers to understand.

Multiple verbs are highlighted

- Wordy: If they **learned to move** away from the political frame and **adapt** a structural frame...
- Concise: If they adapted a structural frame....
- Wordy: Bob **should have been able to speak up** and tell Bill he **could not finish** the project.
- Concise: Bob should have told Bill he could not finish the project.
- Wordy: The heads of each department **should sit down** with one another and **get a realistic idea** of their needs.
- Concise: The department heads should meet to discuss their needs.

Semicolons and Colons

Semicolons are used to join complete thoughts. They generally appear before transition words such as *however, therefore, consequently*. Both examples below show correct semicolon use.

- Rachel was about to graduate; she was looking for a position.
- Rachel was about to graduate; consequently, she was looking for a position.

Colons are used to introduce lists and long quotations. Occasionally, colons separate two clauses when the second clause explains the first. The following examples show correct colon use.

- Rachel started by checking two popular sites: Monster and CareerBuilder.
- The recruiter said: "A thoughtful follow-up letter carries as much clout as a cover letter. Be sure to send both."