

# *DukeWrites* Enrichment Suite

## Sentence structure, part one

*With Margaret Swezey, Assistant Director of Writing Studio*

I'm Margaret Swezey, the assistant director of the Writing Studio. And today we're going to be talking about ways to make sentences clearer and more concise.

What's important in sentences varies from one culture to another. For example, in some countries, it's important to have long and beautiful sentences. In the U.S., on the other hand, it's important to be clear, direct, and concise.

The module on verbs has some really helpful information on the important role that verbs play in clarity and conciseness, but there're also some other things that help improve clarity and conciseness and directness.

In this module, we'll be talking about reducing the use of prepositional phrases, redundant pairs, and unnecessary words. And we'll also talk about having clear reference for pronouns.

First, one way to make your writing clearer and more concise is to reduce the use of prepositional phrases. Prepositions include words such as: in, on, for, from, to, by, and so forth.

Of course it's fine to use prepositions in your writing, um, but using too many prepositional phrases can make your sentences sound awkward and also can make them unclear.

Here's an example: A revision of the program will result in increases in our efficiency in the serving of our customers. One way to see if your draft has any prepositions that you can cut out is to circle all the prepositions, then look at those places and see if you can rephrase any of them so that cut out the preposition but still keep your meaning.

I'm going to start by circling the prepositions in this sentence. So, as you can see, there're five prepositions in that sentence, which is a lot for one sentence. And as you can tell when you listen to it, it sounds kind of wordy and boring.

So there's more than one way to revise this, but here's one possible revision: Revising the program will increase our efficiency in customer service.

This revision (sic) still ~ excuse me, this revision still has a preposition, but it's fine of course to have prepositions in sentences. It's just good to avoid having a lot of them.

Another good way to revise is to just ask yourself what you're trying to say. Sometimes there's a more direct way to express your idea. Sometimes by leaving out prepositions, sometimes by doing other things. So let's try using that method for this next example.

The reason for the failure of the quidditch team of Gryffindor to win against the team from Slytherin was because of the inability of the offense on that day to score any goals.

So, what is the writer trying to communicate here? Here's one possible revision:  
Gryffindor lost the quidditch match to Slytherin because they did not score any goals.

As you can see, it's shorter and more concise and also more direct than the original.

Another way to make writing more concise is to look for redundant pairs. These are pairs of words connected by the word "and" or the word "or" that have pretty much the same meaning. And sometimes they may occur in pairs but sometimes there may be three of them or sometimes even four of them.

So be on the lookout for these pairs or trios or four for instances of words that mean pretty much the same thing.

Let's look at an example: My writing teacher said I needed to see and understand my mistakes in order to improve.

In this sentence, see and understand have similar meanings, so you can choose one and cut out the other. Here, understand is a more specific and more appropriate word. So it's the one to keep and you can take out see.

So our revision would be:

My writing teacher said I needed to understand my mistakes in order to improve.