

# CENTER FOR BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

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## Revising for Clarity and Conciseness

Effective business writing is clear and concise, but when drafting a report, memo, letter, or other business document, it is easy to slip into wordiness and imprecision. But remember, a draft is just a draft. Writing effectively means *re-writing*. The principles outlined below were developed by an authority on writing and can be used to improve virtually any kind of text.

### Trimble's Principles of Revision

Source: Professor John Trimble • Department of English • University of Texas, Austin

#### I. I challenge myself to improve at least every other verb. Five ways:

1. Convert a passive construction into an active verb.  
*It was considered* → *They considered*  
*It is believed* → *They believe*
2. Substitute a verb with fewer syllables.  
*try* for *attempt*; *expect* for *anticipate*
3. Substitute a more precise verb.  
*caress* for *touch*; *sprint* for *run*
4. Substitute a single verb for a verb phrase or verb + preposition.  
*emphasize* for *place much emphasis on*; *discuss* for *talk about*.
5. Substitute a more vivid, pictorial verb, especially if the original verb is a form of the “to be” or linking verb—*is, are, am, was*.

#### II. I challenge myself to cut roughly a quarter of the words in each sentence. I always assume wordiness; I don't just look for it.

- *It is significant that* becomes *significantly*.
- *The large majority of us* becomes *Most of us*.
- *For him to deny the fact that he was guilty of wrongdoing is...* becomes *His denial of wrongdoing shows....*
- I especially like to cut adjectives and adverbs. It's pretty simple to do: just substitute a more precise noun or verb so that the modifier becomes unnecessary.
- *He ran quickly to the post office* becomes *He sprinted to the post office*.
- *Well known people* becomes *celebrities*

#### III. I try to minimize the number of polysyllabic words in each sentence . . .

. . . particularly when I've used two or three in succession. I count syllables exactly like words – i.e., every syllable saved is a word saved. If I've used a 3-syllable word, I search for a 2-syllable equivalent; if I have a 2-syllable word, then I search for a 1-syllable synonym. Every extra syllable is simply one more piece of data the reader must process. Cutting extra syllables is being kind to my reader. But it's also being kind to myself, since it increases the power & pace of my prose.

- Example: *expeditiously* becomes *promptly*

**IV. I am especially suspicious of every noun ending in “-ion” . . .**

[i.e., nominals, usually verbs or adjectives turned into nouns]. Those nouns are invariably too abstract & lardy; also, they’re often part of a whole phrase that can be converted into a single verb.

- Example: *take into consideration* becomes *consider*.

**V. I look for word clusters—e.g., *for the purpose of, in the event that, in order to, with the result that*—and get rid of them by recasting. Invariably this saves words and simplifies my style. You can get rid of a lot of clutter when you kill those word clusters.****VI. I change *which* to *that* about 90% of the time. It’s more idiomatic, more conversational, shorter, less bookish.****VII. I inspect each sentence to see that it’s instantly intelligible. If there’s even a chance that it might momentarily confuse a reader, I’ll rephrase the thought—or “translate” it, as I sometimes say, into plainer English.****VIII. I look hard at my opening paragraph. I ask myself: Does it go for the jugular or does it prance around and take its own good time getting to the point?**