



Division of
Academic Enhancement
UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA



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Strategies for Reducing Word Count



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Whether you need to adhere to a strict page limit for a research paper or a short word count for an application essay, reducing length is a common writing challenge. An unedited first draft almost definitely has words you don't need, and cutting them will help your writing stand out as clear and concise, making your essay stronger overall.

Here are some starting strategies for achieving the reduction in word count you need.

Quick Keyboard Shortcuts

The first two strategies for reducing word count involve a handy keyboard shortcut. Open your essay document, then press control + F on a PC or command + F on mac. This will pull up a search bar that we can use to find specific words.

- First, search the word “[that](#).” This is a word that tends to sneak into essays as filler: it's common in speech, but can often be removed in writing while still maintaining correct grammar. For example, if we have the sentence:
 - From [that](#) day, I knew [that](#) I wanted to be a nurse. We can change it to:
 - From [that](#) day, I knew I wanted to be a nurse. And the meaning stays the same. We were able to remove one “that,” but needed to keep another. Go through your essay and test each instance of “that” to see if you need it. Reading aloud will help.
 - Next, use control/command + F again to look for another common source of extra words: [adverbs](#). Adverbs are words that add description or modify the meaning of verbs, and they're often easy to cut. Many adverbs end in “[ly](#),” and that's what to search for. For example, if we have the sentence:
 - He ran [quickly](#).
We don't need the adverb “quickly,” because it repeats meaning: all running is quick. Instead, we can either just delete the adverb, or rephrase the sentence with a new, more descriptive verb that incorporates the adverb's meaning:
 - He sprinted.
- Look through the adverbs in your essay, and take out any that aren't essential to what you're trying to express. Adverbs that just intensify what you're saying without adding more information, like:
- I would be [very/really/extremely](#) excited to accept this position.



Very/really/extremely can almost definitely go.

Sentence Level Revisions

- When writing application statements, students commonly make “I” statements, such as “I believe,” “I think,” or “I know.” These are unnecessary—when you write from a personal perspective, everything you write is something you think or believe, so you don’t need to say so directly. Deleting unneeded “I” statements makes your writing more direct and confident sounding. For example, if you’re wrapping up a cover letter with the sentence:

- As a good communicator, I know I will be a great contributor to this team.

Make a definitive statement and switch it to:

- As a good communicator, I will be a great contributor to this team.

Commit to your ideas, don’t hedge!

- Look out for passive voice. Passive voice describes a way of phrasing action with words like “is,” “was,” or “were” in a way that hides the subject, the person responsible for an action. If I read a sentence and can’t immediately answer the question of “who” is doing the action in the sentence, it’s probably passive voice. For example, if we have the sentence:

- A good performance review was written by my boss.

That part “was written,” is in passive voice, because it’s not immediately clear who the subject is. If you didn’t have the addition of “by my boss,” we wouldn’t know at all. Rephrasing to the active voice by answering the “who?” question:

- My boss wrote a good performance view.

Using the active voice saves words and makes your sentence clearer overall.

Major Content Revisions

If you’re still staring down a big reduction in word count, at some point you’ll need to shift to making major revisions in content, including stuff you really like. What you end up removing will depend on the needs of your individual essay. For application statements, one easy place to start is checking if you use too much generic positivity to praise the program where you’re applying. Obviously, you want to convey enthusiasm, but don’t waste space telling a company or school they’re good—they already know they’re good. A sentence like:

- Terry College provides an outstanding pre-business education with world-



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class professors.

Doesn't belong in an essay on its own, because it contains very little of your personal voice and just reiterates known marketing points. In situations like

this, take the sentence out, or think about how you could rephrase it to a shorter sentence that provides unique details in support of why you would belong as an individual.