

Creating Concise Sentences

As writers, we have rich, complex ideas to communicate to our audiences, but many of us struggle to convey those ideas in clear prose. Take the following sentence as an example:

The migration away from Java to Singapore by the British Royal Navy, which was a westward shifting of their base of power in Southeast Asia, was also the dominant factor in ensuring the Dutch were able to control Indonesia for decades.

This sentence definitely contains some strong ideas, but audiences might miss them due to the sentence's convoluted style. To ensure our readers never miss a single idea, we can retool this sentence with a simple two-step concision method: first, **identify** the symptoms of a wordy sentence, and second, **treat** them.

IDENTIFY

- Prepositional phrases
- "To be" verbs
- Nominalizations

TREAT

- Place agent and action together at beginning of sentence
- Prune unnecessary words

1. Identify Where Your Sentence Is Too Wordy

There are several things that can bog down your sentences. The worst offenders include:

Prepositions

Prepositions are usually small words (like *of*, *for*, *on*, *by*) that show relationships between nouns and other words in the sentence. These require readers to stack different relationships in their heads, especially when multiple prepositions appear in succession. Our sentence does this: from Java to Singapore by the British Royal Navy. That's a lot of stacked information!

"To Be" Verbs

"To be" verbs like *is* and *was* often glue together strings of unnecessary words. Removing the glue can also remove these word strings. Our sentence says was the dominant factor in ensuring, but it could just say *ensured* or *ensuring*.

Nominalizations

Nominalizations turn adjectives and verbs into nouns. For instance, a westward shifting acts as a noun in our sentence, whereas *shifted westward* would act as a verb. It might not seem like a big difference, but when we use adjectives or verbs in place of nouns, it often eliminates the long, circuitous phrases we see in our example sentence.

Now that we know what to look for, let's identify these three elements in our sentence. We're going to **box prepositions**, **circle "to be" verbs**, and **underline nominalizations**.

The migration away from Java to Singapore by the British Royal Navy, which was a westward shifting of their base of power in Southeast Asia, was also the dominant factor in ensuring the Dutch were able to control Indonesia for decades.

2. Treat, Delete, and Rewrite Wordy Areas

Since we understand where the problems exist, the next step is to erase those problems while emphasizing the sentence's main message.

Place Agent and Action Together at the Beginning of the Sentence

Every sentence should have a central *agent* and *action*. You can see agents as the main noun or subject that does something, and actions as the main verb. Be careful, though! Sometimes we only imply agents, especially when using passive voice.

This sentence could have a couple agents and actions, depending on our message. Let's select what begins the sentence, British migration. In that case, *the British Royal Navy* would be our agent, and *migration* -- or its verb form *migrated* -- would be the action:

The migration away from Java to Singapore by *the British Royal Navy*, which was a westward shifting of their base of power in Southeast Asia, was also the dominant factor ensuring the Dutch were able to control Indonesia for decades.

Clear sentences usually start with the agent and action together before including additional details. To practice this, let's put our agent and action at the beginning of the sentence, using our new verb form:

The British Royal Navy migrated...

Prune Unnecessary Words

Let's move from the beginning of the sentence to the prepositions, "to be" verbs, and nominalizations we found. We can cut these to create a concise sentence:

The British Royal Navy migrated from Java to Singapore
~~The migration away from Java to Singapore by the British Royal Navy, which was a~~
 their Southeast Asian power base westward and
~~westward shifting of their base of power in Southeast Asia, was also the dominant~~
 factor in ensuring the Dutch controlled Indonesia for decades.

Once we make all the edits, here's what our new sentence looks like:

The British Royal Navy migrated from Java to Singapore, shifting their Southeast Asian power base westward and ensuring the Dutch controlled Indonesia for decades.

Voilà! We have a clearer, sleeker sentence retaining all essential content in just over half the words!

Old Sentence	41 words
New Sentence	24 words (41% shorter!)