Avoiding the main writing pitfalls for complex content

The idea that complex or technical content must be wordy and stilted is common. Shifting to simple language makes your content more relatable and helps your audience understand your message. Make your content more readable by avoiding these common pitfalls.

Long sentences

The ideal average sentence length depends on the audience. In general, the broader the audience, the shorter the sentences should be. Aim for an average of 15 words per sentence for content for a general audience and no more than 25 words per sentence for more technical content.

You can shorten sentences by:

- removing unnecessary words or replacing long phrases with simpler alternatives (e.g. *due to the fact that* becomes *because*). Try to identify which words add meaning to your writing and which just take up space
- making clauses into sentences
  (e.g. *The national reserve system includes protected areas and reserves across Australia which provide long-term protection for examples of Australia's diverse ecosystems and plant and animal species*, becomes
  The national reserve system includes protected areas and reserves across Australia. These provide long-term protection for examples of Australia's diverse ecosystems and plant and animal species.)
- changing lists within sentences to bullet points. This is especially useful for web content.

Excessive passive voice

In an active sentence, the agent is the subject and does something (e.g. *John developed the test*). In a passive sentence, the subject has something done to it by an agent (e.g. *The test was developed by John*).

The active voice has a strong, direct, clear tone, whereas the passive voice is weaker, evasive and more vague. Active language is often easier to understand, and makes clear who is doing what.

Make a passive sentence active by adding an agent:

> *The textbook was written.*
>
> becomes
>
> *The professor wrote the textbook.*

Describing actions with nouns

Complex and formal language often replaces verbs with nouns – verbs like *avoid*, *reduce* and *decide* are replaced by the nouns *avoidance, reduction* and *decision*. But English sentences need verbs, so if we use nouns instead of verbs we must add verbs to make our sentences work. This makes our writing wordier and less clear.

Describe actions using verbs to create shorter, more direct sentences:

The members *made* [verb] a *decision* [noun] to *conduct* [verb] an *investigation* [noun] into the options.

becomes

The members *decided* [verb] to *investigate* [verb] the options.

We should *invest* [verb] in *advertising* [noun] to *generate* [verb] an *improvement* [noun] in our revenue.

becomes

We should *advertise* [verb] to *improve* [verb] our revenue.

Jargon and unnecessarily complex words

Jargon and unnecessarily complex words can make meaning unclear. To make your content more readable but still accurate:

- avoid grandiose words (e.g. *The committee performs a function analogous to* ... becomes *The committee has a similar function to* ...)
- replace technical and complex terms (e.g. *The drug is fungitoxic but not phytotoxic* becomes *The drug is toxic to fungi but not to plants*)
- add definitions (e.g. *These species are affected by increasing water temperatures and eutrophication (excess nutrients in the water)*).

Unnecessary wordiness

Keep an eye out for common wordy constructions in your writing and see if you can replace them with more concise words or phrases. Here are shorter substitutes for some common wordy phrases:

Because, not *The reason for*, *For the reason that*, *Due to the fact that*, *Owing to the fact that*, *In light of the fact that*, *Considering the fact that*, *On the grounds that*

Although, not *Despite the fact that*, *Regardless of the fact that*

If, not *In the event that*, *If it should happen that*, *Under circumstances in which*

When, not *On the occasion of*, *In a situation in which*, *Under circumstances in which*

Can, not *Is able to*, *Is in a position to*, *Has the opportunity to*, *Has the capacity for*, *Has the ability to*

Must or **should**, not *It is crucial that*, *It is necessary that*, *There is a need/necessity for*, *It is important that*