Wordiness: Editing for concision

Sometimes we use more complicated wording than we need to, which makes writing unclear–and we should always strive for clarity in writing. **Concision** (or conciseness) is the quality of brevity and focus in writing. Writing that is concise is economical and precise–that is, it expresses an idea or information clearly and in few words. Concise writing aids clarity.

The examples below show how unnecessary words can weigh down a sentence, and how removing or altering them can improve clarity. It is not true that all such changes should always be made; sometimes there are stylistic or other reasons to leave things the way they are. Most often, though, the sentence will benefit from changes in favor of concision.

Edit to remove unnecessary words

Unnecessary modifiers:

It seems very clear that what Muehler actually meant to say was that all of the members of the committee had a reaction of enthusiasm at all times.

Unnecessary introductory phrases *(It goes without saying that… (It seems to be true that… (It is evident that…):*

It seems very clear that what Muehler actually meant to say was that all of the members of the committee had a reaction of enthusiasm at all times.

Unnecessary stock phrases[*] *(as a matter of fact, because of the fact that, due to the fact that…):*

It seems very clear that what Muehler actually meant to say was that all of the members of the committee had a reaction of enthusiasm at all times.

Unnecessary clauses:

It seems clear that what Muehler actually meant to say was that all of the members of the committee had a reaction of enthusiasm at all times.

Unnecessary phrasing:

It seems clear that what Muehler actually meant to say was that all of the members of the committee had a reaction of enthusiasm at all times.

Unnecessary nominalizations:

It seems very clear that what Muehler actually meant to say was that all of the members of the committee had a reaction of enthusiasm[**] at all times.

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[*] *See a handbook for a list of these phrases and their more concise alternatives.*

[**] *"Enthusiasm" is also a nominalization, but its verb form–"to enthuse"–is uncommon and carries a slightly different meaning than intended here.*

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Edited to remove or alter unnecessary words:

Original:
It seems very clear that what Muehler actually meant to say was that all of the members of the committee had a reaction of enthusiasm at all times. *(26 words)*

Remove unnecessary modifiers:
It seems ~~very~~ clear that what Muehler ~~actually~~ meant to say was that all of the members of the committee had a reaction of enthusiasm at all times. *(26 words)*

Remove unnecessary introductory phrases:
~~It seems clear that~~ what Muehler meant to say was that all of the members of the committee had a reaction of enthusiasm at all times.

Alter unnecessary stock phrases:
What Muehler meant to say was that all of the members of the committee had a reaction of enthusiasm ~~at all times~~.

Remove unnecessary clauses:
~~What~~ Muehler meant to say ~~was~~ that all of the members of the committee always had a reaction of enthusiasm.

Remove/alter unnecessary phrasing and convert nominalizations to verbs:
Muehler meant to say that all ~~of the members~~ ~~of the~~ committee members always ~~had a reaction~~ reacted ~~of enthusiasm~~ enthusiastically.

Muehler meant to say that all committee members always reacted enthusiastically. *(11 words.)*

Caution!

Be careful when you edit not to change meaning. Between the second and the third versions of the sentence below, the meaning has shifted subtly (from *feeling* alienated to *being* alienated). The last sentence may be more concise, but it doesn't mean the same thing anymore.

Her role as a mistress is responsible for her feelings of alienation from society. *Her role causes her to feel alienated; we don't know that she actually is alienated.)*

Her role as a mistress makes her feel alienated from society. *(Her role causes her to feel alienated; we don't know that she actually is alienated.)*

Her role as a mistress alienates her from society. *(She actually is alienated.)*

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