Teaching with Writing (TWW) Tip
Word counts: Asking students to say more and less

Instructors can have a vexed relationship with the quantity of writing students produce. In the same course, even the same assignment, students can produce vastly different quantities of words. Some longer documents will be well detailed, rich, and thoughtful, while others may contain tangents and filler. Some shorter documents will be clear, concise, and complete, while others may lack critical details, appear incomplete, or seem glib. How can faculty encourage writing that is well detailed and sophisticated, yet compact and concise?

Strategies for encouraging depth

Ask students to perform complex cognitive tasks: Some writing tasks, like summarizing the main point of an article, providing a definition, or answering objective questions based on a data set can encourage students to offer narrow responses. Writing assignments that ask students to solve complex problems or take a position and defend it with evidence can give students more opportunity to show their thinking through writing.

For example, if you want students to understand how pollutants might disperse within a given atmospheric volume, a simple task might be to ask students to define a Gaussian distribution of an aerosolized pollutant. A more cognitively complex task might offer the following scenario:

> Imagine someone's keychain pepper spray accidentally discharges inside the coat check room of a theater. With its door closed, the coat check is unoccupied and not connected to the theater's HVAC system. If the spray canister completely empties within the sealed room, how will the aerosol disperse within that volume? What will the consequences be when the room is opened to the larger, turbulent air volume in the theater lobby?

Design assignments to build upon each other: Incorporating brief, ungraded writing assignments with graded assignments can help students to perform more effectively in larger writing tasks. Sequencing smaller, simpler writing tasks that are formative of larger processes can provide opportunities for students to practice adding details. For more information about assignment sequencing, consult our Teaching with Writing materials on [assignment design](#).

Encourage drafting by asking how *and* why *questions:* Rather than providing comments or corrections on early drafts, engage students with meaningful questions about their work and require written responses to those open-ended questions. By asking for explanation and justification (*why* questions) or requiring examples and extensions (*how* questions), you can encourage your students to provide added depth and specificity. This formative feedback will be most valuable early in the drafting process.

Strategies for encouraging conciseness

Narrowly define the task, audience, and format: Students are more likely to stray off topic when faced with large, broadly defined writing prompts. By providing details about the purpose of a piece of writing, what the audience values, and what the format might be, you can press students to make choices that promote conciseness. For example, rather than asking a broad question, like "Explain differentiated cognitive development in children," an instructor might use the following prompt:

Writing Across the Curriculum, Center for Writing, and Office of Undergraduate Education

10 Nicholson Hall
216 Pillsbury Dr. SE
Minneapolis, MN 55455

Office: 612-625-0791
Fax: 612-625-7580

Taylor is an eight-year-old whose parents are worried about possible developmental delays. While Taylor's academic development has been rapid, some of Taylor's social skills seem to have remained unchanged since kindergarten. In a brief email to Taylor's, explain the wide range of normal in children's cognitive development.

Reduce word counts between drafts and final versions: Some tasks might require students to write their way to an effective answer by following steps in a process or using a pattern of reasoning. While you might ask them to write out all the steps in their thinking initially, you might require them to submit something smaller for submission and grading.

Provide examples of concise writing in your field and model effective sentence editing: Providing students with examples of effective, concise writing in your discipline can help them to recognize how conciseness is achieved in your field. Note that what counts as concise differs by field and genre. In some medical fields, it is common to eliminate articles and pronouns in chart descriptions. At the same time, those elements would be necessary for other medical genres.

Finally, using examples of student writing or that you create, model strategies for students how to achieve conciseness. For example, to model the elimination of unnecessary introductory phrases, you could show the following example:

Initial sentence: In her 2008 essay in the *Journal of Medieval Listening*, Weinberg says that while the physiology of the ear has not changed much since the Middle Ages, medieval listeners understood the distinction between listening and hearing differently than contemporary audiences.

Revised sentence: Weinberger (2008) argues that the distinction between listening and hearing has changed since the Middle Ages, even if the ear is physically indistinguishable.

Learn more

- Eberly Center, Carnegie Mellon University [Helping students to become better writers](#)

- IEEE Professional Communication Society, [Writing clearly and concisely](#)

- Joseph Williams, [Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace](#)

Further support: Visit us online at http://writing.umn.edu/tww. To schedule a phone, email, or face-to-face teaching consultation, [click here](#).

Our purpose is to provide practical strategies for teaching with writing. Our goal is to offer timely and pragmatic support to faculty members and instructors who teach with writing in undergraduate and graduate courses in all disciplinary areas.

Writing Across the Curriculum, Center for Writing, and Office of Undergraduate Education

10 Nicholson Hall
216 Pillsbury Dr. SE
Minneapolis, MN 55455

Office: 612-625-0791
Fax: 612-625-7580