

SENTENCE CONCISENESS IN THESIS ABSTRACTS OF ENGLISH DEPARTMENT STUDENTS

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Abstract

Concise sentences make academic writing effective. They can help writers write substantively and can help readers get information easily and quickly. This study descriptively analyzes to what extent EFL students produced concise sentences in their thesis abstracts. The result showed that their thesis abstracts comprised only 3% concise sentences. The other 97% sentences were inconcise of varied wordiness sources.

Keyword: *Concise Sentences*

Abstrak

Kalimat yang ringkas dapat membuat tulisan akademik lebih efektif. Kalimat yang demikian dapat membantu penulis lebih substansial dalam menulis, dan juga dapat membantu pembaca untuk mendapatkan informasi dengan lebih mudah dan cepat. Studi ini berusaha menganalisa secara diskriptif sejauh mana mahasiswa Bahasa Inggris (sebagai bahasa asing) dapat menulis kalimat-kalimat yang ringkas pada abstrak thesis mereka. Hasilnya menunjukkan bahwa abstrak-abstrak thesis mereka mengandung kalimat-kalimat yang ringkas hanya sebanyak 3%. Sedangkan 97% kalimat pada abstrak thesis mereka dapat dikatakan tidak ringkas karena berbagai sebab.

Kata kunci: *Kalimat Ringkas*

INTRODUCTION

Concise sentences are important in writing. They are effective for both writers and readers. Firstly, good writers should quickly get to the point in expressing their ideas. This is to show the readers that they (the writers)

understand the concepts being discussed in their writing. Getting to the point promptly can help a writer become a clear thinker and a more engaging writer. Moreover, concise writing will help writers write more substantively; the exclusion of unnecessary

information can promote clarity, unity, and cohesion. Kennedy, et al (2011) stated although taking more effort than wordiness, conciseness pays off in clarity. Blakesley & Hoogeveen (2008) also argued concise prose carries the readers from meaning to meaning with clarity. Furthermore, Strunk & White (2005) stated that a sentence should contain no unnecessary words. Therefore, by writing concise sentences, the readers can get the information they need quickly and easily. In short, concise sentences are important because they are effective. Concise sentence is effective (Kirszner & Mandell, 2012; Lunsford, 2010; Sova, 2004).

Conciseness can be defined being economical on words. According to Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2008), conciseness means *short and clear, expressing what needs to be said without unnecessary words*. However, regarding sentence, concise sentence is not always *short* as this definition suggests. Concise sentence is not always short; it may be long. This is because a sentence may have many complex idea(s) or information to tell the reader. Lunsford, Matsuda, & Tardy (2010) said that sentence length depends

partly on the purpose, intended audience, and topic. Consequently, sentence length –short or long sentence– does not define its conciseness.

According to Kirszner & Mandell (2012), a sentence is not concise simply because it is short; a concise sentence contains only the words necessary to make its point. Hacker & Sommers (2010) said long sentences are not necessarily wordy, nor are short sentences always concise; a sentence is wordy if it can be tightened without loss of meaning. From these statements, concise sentence should be built with meaningful or strong words. Moreover, Blakesley & Hoogeveen (2008) stated that writing concisely means making every word count. Strunk & White (2005) also said that in concise sentences, every word tells. This means that even long sentence can be concise too provided that each word is meaningful or implies more meaning.

Therefore, concise sentences contain only the words necessary to make its point, use strong or meaningful word choice, cannot be tightened without losing meaning, and are either short or long.

Besides using strong, meaningful, and specific words, writers should anticipate unnecessary words when writing concise sentences. Those unnecessary words should be removable without changing the sentence meaning or losing clarity. Since conciseness also principally employs as fewest words as possible, writers can construct their sentences in such a way using grammatical structures with the fewest words. Hacker & Sommers (2010) stated sentence is wordy if it can be tightened without loss of meaning.

Thus, writers to construct concise sentences should consider word selection and sentence structure.

The study investigates to what extent English Department students write concise sentences in their thesis abstracts. The subjects were the undergraduate EFL students in the academic year 2011-2012 at a private college conducting English Education and Teaching Program. The data were the thesis abstract sentences. They were descriptively categorized based on how to construct concise sentences.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Students' Sentence Conciseness

Type	Description	Number	Percentage	
Concise	1. Containing only the word necessary to make its point clearly	5	3%	
	2. Being unable to be tightened without losing meaning			
	<i>be</i>	1		
	1. Using <i>weak</i> instead of strong verb	-	2	1%
	<i>do</i>	1		
	<i>have</i>		9	5%
	2. Using nominalization			
	<i>Nature or character</i>	1		
	<i>Position</i>	-		
	<i>Condition /situation</i>	1		
	3. Using <i>empty</i> or <i>abstract</i> word(s)	1	40	21%
	<i>Aspect</i>	2		
	<i>Field</i>	28		
	<i>Kind/type/sort</i>	7		
	<i>thing</i>		15	8%
Inconcise	4. Using unnecessary modifying word		19	10%
	5. Using empty or wordy phrase		8	4%
	6. Using unnecessary introductory words		5	3%
	7. Containing obvious or excessive detail		39	20%
	8. Using unnecessary or wordy prepositional phrase		14	7%
	9. Using phrase instead of word		5	3%
	10. Using clause instead of phrase		21	11%
	11. Using adjective clause instead of noun phrase or adjective phrase		8	4%
	12. Using unnecessary passive voice instead of active voice		190	100%

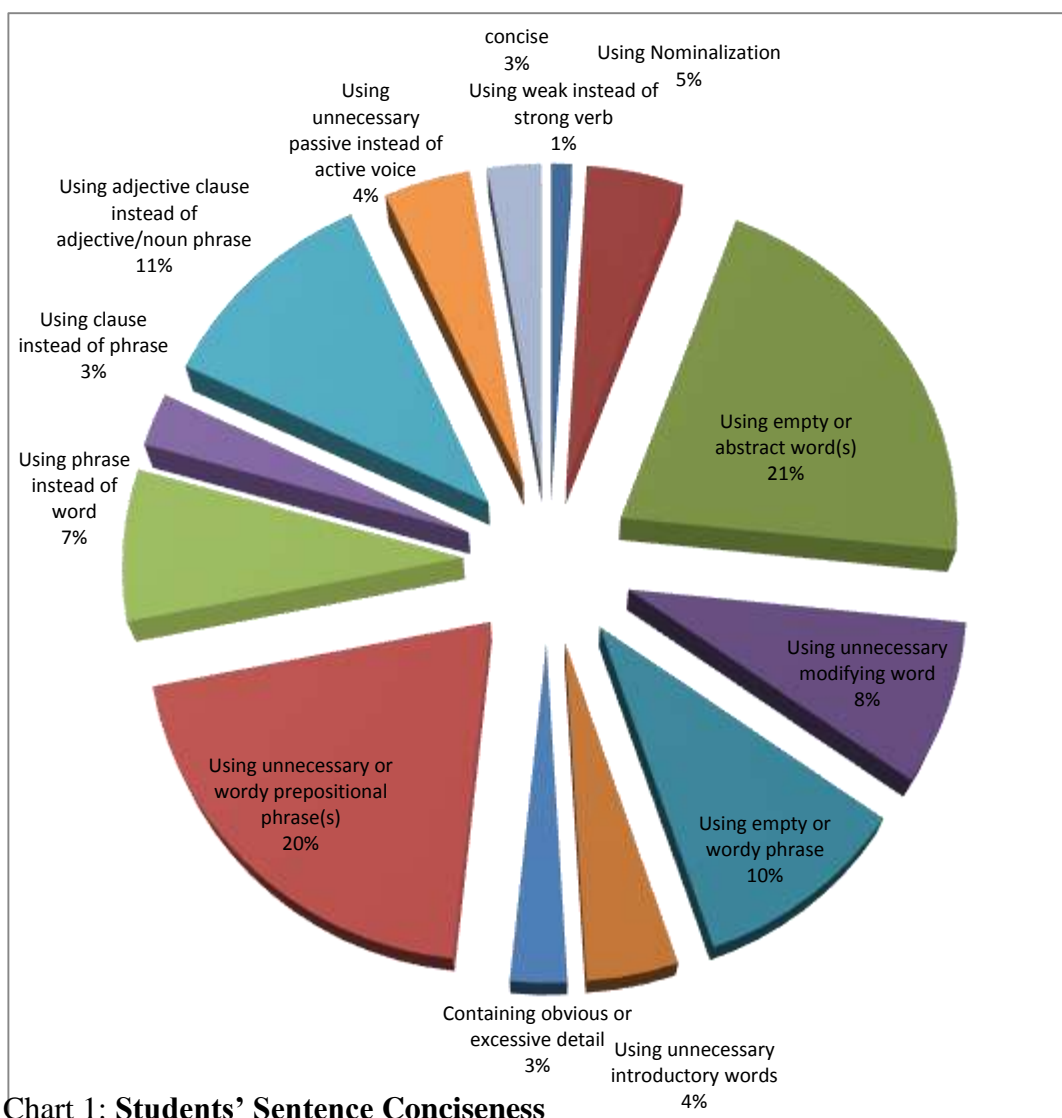


Chart 1: Students' Sentence Conciseness

English students writing thesis should have made effective writing style by crafting their sentences as concisely as possible, particularly in the abstract session. Yet, they significantly had produced more inconcise than concise sentences in their thesis

abstracts. Only 3% of the entire sentences were considered concise. The other 97% of the entire sentences were inconcise. Moreover, their inconcise sentences were varied wordiness sources with different percentages. Therefore, the inconciseness should

need much more concern. The following is the discussion of the inconciseness sources found in the students' sentences.

The students mostly used inconcise sentences with *empty words* implying *kind*, or *type*, or *sort* (21%). For instance, they wrote *speaking activity*, *speaking ability*, *written text*, *t-test formula*, *learning activity*, *descriptive qualitative design*, and many others. Besides using empty words implying *type* or *kind*, they also used empty words implying *nature* or *characters*, *condition* or *situation*, *aspect*, *field*, and *thing*. For example, they wrote *education field*, *way of teaching English*, etc.

Regarding this problem, Hacker & Sommers (2010) said that writers often repeat themselves unnecessarily because of worrying that they are not heard; they insist that a teacup is *small size* or *yellow color*. Lunsford, Matsuda, & Tardy (2010) also said writers sometimes say that something is *large in size* or *red in color* or two ingredients should be *combined together*. Unfortunately, the students also did the same. Referring to the statements, writing sentences with *empty words* is

indeed a common problem for (even experienced) writers, including EFL students.

Therefore, students should learn to identify words implying abstract ideas such as *type/kind/sort*, *nature*, *condition/situation*, and many others. When writing sentences, they should anticipate words repeating or implying similar ideas leading to redundancy. These words are usually empty or abstract words.

Besides employing empty words, the students also mostly used *unnecessary or wordy prepositional phrases* (20%). However, this can be a common writing problem because prepositional phrases are often the results of writer's thinking what to write (or to say) next. Since the students were beginner writers, they also normally use prepositional phrase(s) excessively, for example, *The standard of competence for writing in the second semester of the seventh grade* (thesis abstract 4 sentence 2). Their Indonesian grammar style may affect their writing too, particularly prepositional phrase(s). If the students had learnt concise sentences, they could have written *the writing standard competence in semester two for the*

seventh grade instead of lengthy prepositional phrase above.

In addition, students also used prepositional phrases followed with empty or abstract words such as “...*speaking in the form of descriptive*” (sentence 2 abstract 4). Markel (2012) stated unnecessary prepositional phrases are often used along with abstract noun and nominalization. Consequently, prepositional phrase(s) can often result in more wordiness. Therefore, students need to watch their preposition(s) and to immediately cut unnecessary or wordy prepositional phrase(s) in their sentences.

The students also used clause instead of phrase (3%), particularly using adjective clause instead of adjective/noun phrase (11%). They also used phrase instead of word (7%). This problem is likely a common writing problem too. Hinkel (2003) reported that even most advanced nonnative English-speaking students in U.S. universities –speakers of six languages: NSs of American English, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indonesian, and Arabic– employed excessive simple syntactic construction *be copula* as the

main verb most often associated with employing *predicative adjective* in their essays. For instance, they often wrote *students are careful* instead of *careful students*. In other words, they also often used clause instead of phrase or word.

Since readers always want to easily and quickly get the information they need, writers need to construct practical sentences for them. In other words, they need to simplify or economize their language whenever possible, for example using single word, noun phrase (appositive), or adjective phrase instead of using (adjective) clause. Therefore, students should learn to look for any opportunities to reduce clauses to phrases or phrases to single words for concise writing. The clarity and meaning must be preserved however.

The students also wrote sentences with *empty* or *wordy phrases* (10%). This is because they may have struggled to think, write, and clarify their ideas. Moreover, they were beginner/inexperienced EFL writers. They might use up space for writing length requirement. Thus, they wrote wordy prose such as *should be able to stimulate* instead of *should stimulate, in*

order to improve instead of *to improve*, and other wordy phrases.

Therefore, the lecturers teaching academic writing should introduce and emphasize common empty or wordy phrases. For instance, students should use *because* instead of *due to the fact that*, use *although* instead of *in spite of the fact that*, etc. Students should be familiar with such common wordy phrases. Practically, these wordy phrases can be reduced to or be replaced with a word or two words without loss of meaning (Lunsford, Matsuda, & Tardy, 2010; Lunsford, 2010; Hacker & Sommers, 2010). Students can also use strong or specific word choice to anticipate wordy phrases.

The students also wrote sentences with *unnecessary modifying words* (8%). They needlessly emphasized ideas(s) that is already clear. For instance they wrote *target population* (Thesis abstract 3 sentence 5), *selected technique* (Thesis abstract 2 sentence 3), or *just focused* (Thesis abstract 1 sentence 8). This problem is likely because of the similar ideas earlier.

Students should understand that a word can become meaningless modifier

when it adds no (new) meaning to the sentence. A clear example is the word *absolutely* in the phrase *absolutely important* would say nothing more than does the word *important*. Therefore, students need to be careful with modifying word(s). Many common adverbs denoting degree like *very*, *definitely*, *actually*, etc. are meaningless fillers (Kirszner & Mandell, 2012). Lunsford (2010) also said many modifiers are so common that they have become empty words, for example, *absolutely*, *awesome*, *awfully*, *central*, *definitely*, *fine*, *great*, *literally*, *quite*, *really*, *very*. And, qualifying words such as *rather*, *very*, *little*, *pretty* are redundant (Bowker, 2007; Strunk & White, 2005). This must be the concern for students. They should carefully use modifying word(s) –particularly adverbs.

Students also wrote sentences employing *nominalization* instead of using verb (5%). The problem is also likely the same. Since they were beginner writers, they might like to use up space to develop writing length requirement by nominalizing verbs. Thus, they wrote *to use English in speaking* (Thesis abstract 1 sentence 2)

instead of *to speak English*. They also wrote *make preparation of the subject* instead of *prepare the subject* (Thesis abstract 3 sentence 14). Fenton (2010) said *nominalization* always results in longer sentences than necessary. Blakesley & Hoogeveen (2008) also stated that nominalization –a verb turned noun– causes wordy prose. Furthermore, using nominalization may also involve and cause other wordy constructions, particularly with expletive *there is/are* or weak verbs (*be, do have*).

Therefore, students should make their sentences more straightforward by replacing a noun by a verb. Moreover, people tend to think that writing is more clear and direct when it relies on verbs rather than abstract nouns formed from verbs. Students should anticipate nominalization for clear and concise sentence style.

Students also used *unnecessary introductory words* in their sentences (4%). This problem is because students' indirectness style of native language might affect their writing style. Instead of getting to the point, they used circumlocution or introducing words before the main point. Thus, they wrote;

In this research, the writer used a descriptive design (Thesis abstract 3 sentence 3) instead of writing *This research is descriptive*. They should anticipate unnecessary introductory words by getting to the sentence point clearly. Bowker (2007) argued that academic writers should just state the point without a build-up.

Students also wrote obvious or excessive detail in their sentences (3%). The problem is also likely similar. They were beginner writers and might also like to use up space to reach writing length. Thus, they wrote unnecessary idea(s) the readers already understand. For instance, they wrote “... , so the null hypothesis that has been decided by the researcher is rejected and the operational hypothesis is accepted (Thesis abstract 4 sentence 12). Students should bear in mind that readers are unnecessarily informed (common) idea(s) they already understand. They should exclude obvious or excessive detail(s); it is indeed wordiness.

Students also used (unnecessary) passive instead of active voice (4%). Since Indonesian language style use passive more often than active voice, the indirectness of using passive voice

may also affect their writing. Students should anticipate using passive voice for the sake of conciseness. Hacker & Sommers (2010) stated that active voice is usually more effective because it is simpler and more direct. In line with Hacker & Sommers, Strunk & White (2005) also said active voice is more concise than the passive. Although passive voice is needed in some writing situation, it is always wordier than the active, and it often makes for dull or even difficult reading (Lunsford, Matsuda, & Tardy, 2010). Therefore, unless having very good reason for using passive –for instance emphasizing the object or the result of action, students should use active voice for the sake of directness and conciseness.

Regardless the percentages of inconciseness, the major problems of the students' writing inconcise sentences were likely because of two major points. Firstly, the students may not have learnt how to write concise sentences in academic writing subject; they were likely to have no information regarding concise sentence style and wordiness sources. Secondly, the lecturers of academic writing were likely neither to teach nor to emphasize

writing concise sentences for effective writing style.

Therefore, students need to learn writing concise sentences for effective writing style. They should understand that academic writing sentences should be not only grammatical but also concise for effective writing style. Effective sentences are concise (Kirszner & Mandell, 2012; Lunsford, 2010; Sova, 2004). Moreover, Whitetaker (2009) also stated in academic writing principle *writing style*, writers must write clearly and concisely.

The lecturer(s) teaching academic writing also need to teach students sentence conciseness for effective writing style. They should emphasize not only writing content but also sentence style when teaching academic writing. Regardless the percentages of inconciseness problems, the lecturer(s) teaching academic writing specifically need to emphasize various wordiness sources. This is because the most problem for writers, particularly EFL students, lies in recognizing wordiness sources. Therefore, the lecturer(s) need to teach students wordiness sources to anticipate sentence inconciseness in their next writing.

In line with this research finding, the problem of inconcise writing in general should need concern. In their study, Endriyani, Rozimela, and Tiarina (2013) also reported that 92% of English department students' writing was only fair, and 8% was poor in term of conciseness. They also suggested the lecturers give student more writing exercise to improve their writing quality.

CONCLUSION

English Department students under the study wrote concise sentences only 3% of their entire thesis abstract sentences. In other words, 97% of their sentences were still inconcise. Their sentence inconciseness were due to various wordiness sources with different percentages.

The research finding also confirms a theory and a previous study. The most frequent problem of inconcise sentences with *empty or abstract words* confirms Hacker & Sommers (2010) and Lunsford, Matsuda, & Tardy (2010). They stated that writers often repeat their language unnecessarily; for example, they say *large in size, blue color, combine together, basic essential,*

etc. Therefore, the problem of inconcise sentences with *empty words* can be said a common problem for not only beginner/inexperienced but also experienced writer, particularly inexperienced EFL writers.

The finding of inconcise sentences *using clause instead of phrase or word* also confirms a previous study by Eli Hinkel (2003). She also reported that even most advanced nonnative English speaking students –the speakers of six languages: NSs of American English, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indonesian, and Arabic– in U.S universities also excessively employed clauses instead of phrase or word(s) in their academic essays. This suggests that writing economically has become common writing problem for nonnative or EFL students.

Inconcise writing is likely still a common problem needing more improvement, particularly for EFL students. Almost in line with the finding, Endriyani, Rozimela, and Tiarina (2013) also reported that 92% of English department students' writing quality was only fair, and 8% was poor in term of conciseness. Therefore,

concise writing style for EFL students still needs concern.

The main problem of the students under this research is much likely that they may not have learnt how to write concise sentences in academic writing subject. In sentence level, the students unfortunately still wrote inconcise sentences. They seemed to have no information regarding concise sentences. The lecturer(s) teaching academic writing were likely neither to teach nor to emphasize concise sentences for effective writing style.

The main problem is confirmed when the researcher found that 97% of the inconcise sentences were due to varied wordiness sources with different percentages. Moreover, most of these sentences also have multiple inconciseness problems. Such patterns were mostly repeated over and over again in the entire thesis abstracts. This indeed confirms the main problems stated above.

Regardless the percentages, the inconciseness may also be because of other factors. Since the students were beginner or inexperienced EFL writers, they may have struggled to think hard to clarify their ideas in the target language.

Their indirectness style of native language might also affect their writing style. In addition, since academic writing also requires certain length of requirement, students may also just use up space to fulfill it. Therefore, they are wordy writers.

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