

Here are three things to note about writing concisely:

1. Avoid restating the same sentence over and over again using slightly different words.

For example, suppose your text reads: "I don't think that in order to have a meaningful life one has to have happiness. Why would enjoyment be required for having a purposeful life? No; in my opinion, one's life can be worthwhile even if one doesn't experience a lot of joy."

This would be best rendered:

"I don't think that in order to have a meaningful life one has to have happiness."

2. Avoid structuring your paper in a way that requires you to unnecessarily repeat earlier parts.

For example, suppose your text reads: "The idea that a meaningful life is just a happy life faces two problems. One is that there seem to be cases in which lives are meaningful but not happy, e.g. a soldier fighting a just war. A second is that there seem to be cases in which lives are happy but not meaningful, e.g. someone who devotes their entire life to counting blades of grass, with no other purpose in mind.

There are responses to both of these problems. For example, the first case was supposed to be an example of someone who had a meaningful life that wasn't happy; it involved a soldier fighting a just war. Someone could say that living one's entire life as a soldier isn't a meaningful life; instead, at some points in the soldier's life, she has to spend time with friends and family, and that this will be happy time. Likewise, the second case involved someone who was happy without a meaningful life, namely someone who counted grass blades and did nothing else. But it could be responded that in judging that the person won't have a meaningful life we're implicitly assuming that the person in question

would be even happier doing other things besides counting grass blades. It's hard for us to imagine someone who would only be happy counting grass blades, and so our judgment about such a person should carry little weight.

But there are counter-responses to both of these responses. For example, recall that the first case was ..."

This would best be rendered as follows (Note: To save space, I've left out some stuff, assuming it's obvious what goes where):

The idea that a meaningful life is just a happy life faces two problems. One is that ... But someone could respond ... But there is a counter-response, namely ... A second problem is that ... but someone could respond ... But there is a counter-response, namely ..."

3. You only need to provide enough background as is necessary to make the points you want to make.

For example, suppose your text reads: "According to Susan Wolf, having a meaningful life requires three components: (i) getting pleasure (ii) from something that's objectively valuable (iii) which you interact with. For example, she would say that grass counting doesn't amount to a meaningful life because grass counting is not objectively good, but saving lives as a doctor does because saving lives is meaningful. My main problem with her account is that I don't think a meaningful life requires pleasure because ..."

This would better be rendered:

"According to Susan Wolf, having a meaningful life requires pleasure. My main problem with her account is that I don't think a meaningful life requires pleasure because ..."

Here are two examples for you to work on.

1. “Buddhists say that life is suffering, that the suffering is caused by desires, and that the key to the meaning of life is the removal of these wants. Removing these cravings will allow one to achieve Nirvana. I don’t think they’re right that life is suffering. To be fair, Buddhists acknowledge that there’s some happiness, but they think it’s temporary; according to them, our bodies gradually decay, friendships fade, and so on. This is what they mean when they say that life is suffering. But our bodies don’t have to fade; as technology advances, we’ll be able to create robotic body parts and live forever.”

2. “Sartre is an atheistic existentialist. He shares with theistic existentialists the belief in existentialism, but he disagrees with them about whether God exists. Sartre doesn’t believe in a deity, whereas the theistic existentialists do. That said, both theistic and atheistic existentialists believe in existentialism. This is the view that we determine who we are through acting. I have two problems with Sartre’s view. The first comes from the atheism. But because there are existentialists who are not atheists, that is, existentialists who believe in God, I can agree with the general view — existentialism — while disagreeing with Sartre’s atheistic version. After all, existentialism just says that we determine ourselves through acting; this is something that all existentialists agree on. My main problem is that I don’t think we determine ourselves through acting. Unlike my complaint about theism, this complaint is about something that all existentialists share; they all accept the idea that we determine ourselves through acting. So in criticizing it, I will be criticizing all existentialists. I think the idea that we determine ourselves through acting is problematic because ...”