The Economic and Labour Relations Review (2025), **36**, 1–4
doi:10.1017/elr.2025.10018

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

EDITORIAL

Down with verbosity: A plea for shorter sentences

Diana Kelly

University of Wollongong, Wollongong, Australia and University of New South Wales, Canberra, ACT Australia
Email: di@uow.edu.au

(Received 8 May 2025; revised 8 May 2025; accepted 8 May 2025; first published online 09 June 2025)

Dear fellow researchers, please can you join me in a campaign to kill the long sentence?

In recent years, I have reviewed, copy-edited, or proofread many dissertations and journal articles across a swathe of humanities and social sciences fields. In the process, I have become increasingly impatient with wordy sentences (50, 60, 70+ words), replete with multiple clauses and contingent commentary. Just as difficult are short 40- or 50-word sentences with multi-syllabic words and pompous, tortuous phrasing.

No sentence should be more than 35 words – and preferably fewer words. This is so for at least three reasons.

First, clarity demands succinct writing. Clarity should be at the heart of our writing. What is the point of excellent theoretical underpinnings, compelling evidence, or insightful documented findings if they are communicated in rambling multi-topic sentences that do not convey arguments, evidence, or analysis clearly?

Second, all scholars need to remember that many of their readers have English as a **second** language. Here, in the mainly monolingual Antipodes, for example, we do not appreciate enough what it is to be a scholar researching and reading in a second (or even third) language. Imagine taking your school French or Indonesian and writing a scholarly article; your French or Indonesian could not possibly achieve that level of nuance or depth. Yet we expect international readers to engage with our work. Long complex sentences that are designed to impress an elite few may sound 'clever', but really they are just long/wordy/prolix. If we are writing for an international journal, then we should respect the international readers of that journal and avoid multi-clause sentences with contingent notions.

The final main reason for achieving clarity through succinct writing is so that authors can avoid sounding as if an Artificial Intelligence (AI) machine has written their article. In this respect, I recently discovered a whole world of AI software that actually aims to help authors extend their sentences.

One of the options in an AI system is called 'sentence expander'. Clearly, for some AI software, long sentences are better. It does not augur well for academic writing!

Look at these two examples. The first I wrote, and the AI expansion is second, in both examples.

ORIGINAL 33 words

Too often authors are using lengthy sentences. Long sentences are likely to be less effective in convincing readers of your argument. Short sentences are better for clarity. 'Omit Needless Words', said William Strunk.

AI GENERATED BY SENTENCE EXPANDER 205 words – saying the exact same thing.

© The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of The University of New South Wales.

https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2025.10018 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Too often, authors are using lengthy sentences that can obscure their intended messages, leading readers to feel overwhelmed rather than engaged. While it may be tempting for writers to showcase their vocabulary and craft intricate sentences, the reality is that long sentences are likely to be less effective in convincing readers of your argument. This is particularly true in an age where attention spans are shorter and readers are inundated with information from various sources, making it imperative for authors to present their ideas clearly and concisely. Short sentences, by contrast, are better for clarity; they cut through the noise and provide readers with digestible pieces of information that can be easily understood and retained. "Omit needless words," said William Strunk, a principle that underscores the importance of brevity in writing. By eliminating unnecessary verbiage, authors can sharpen their prose, allowing their arguments to resonate more powerfully with their audience. Ultimately, adopting a more succinct writing style not only enhances readability but also fosters a stronger connection with readers, ensuring that the core message is communicated effectively and persuasively. Such clarity is essential, as it not only respects the reader's time but also reinforces the author's credibility and authority on the subject matter being discussed.

Example 2 A mere 82 words expanded to 321 words – saying the same thing!!

ORIGINAL 82 words

Most notably authors who rely too heavily on AI tend to use passive prose. Passive voice is where actions are described as x doing something to y. "There was a large number of overqualified employees working in the firm" compared with "Many overqualified employees worked in the firm". The latter sentence has fewer words and is clearer. Over-reliance on AI is often evident in articles with long sentences in passive voice. As far as possible, authors should minimise use of AI.

EXAMPLE 2 ORIGINAL AS REWRITTEN BY AI SENTENCE EXTENDER 321 words

Most notably, authors who rely too heavily on AI tend to use passive prose, which can detract from the clarity and engagement of their writing. Passive voice is a grammatical structure where the subject of the sentence is acted upon rather than performing the action, effectively obscuring the doer of the action. For example, consider the sentence, "There was a large number of overqualified employees working in the firm." In this construction, the focus is on the existence of these employees rather than their active role, which can create a distance between the reader and the narrative. In contrast, the more direct sentence, "Many overqualified employees worked in the firm," not only conveys the same information more succinctly but also enhances the immediacy and vigour of the statement. The distinction between these two forms is crucial, especially in a landscape where over-reliance on AI is becoming increasingly evident in various forms of writing, particularly in articles and reports characterised by long, convoluted sentences that often employ passive voice. This tendency can lead to a monotonous reading experience, where the dynamism of the subject's actions is lost, and the writing becomes bogged down in ambiguity and verbosity. Clear, active prose invigorates the text, making it more accessible and engaging for the audience. As such, authors should strive to minimise their reliance on AI-generated content whenever possible, particularly in contexts where clarity and directness are paramount. This involves not only a conscious effort to use active voice but also a commitment to honing one's writing skills through practice and revision. By doing so, writers can cultivate a more authentic voice, ensuring that their unique perspectives and insights shine through, rather than being drowned out by a mechanical and impersonal style. Ultimately, embracing active prose can transform writing from a mere transmission of information into a compelling narrative that captivates and resonates with readers, fostering a deeper connection and understanding of the material presented.

https://originality.ai/blog/sentence-expander

I find these examples a compelling reason for avoiding AI-supported writing as much as possible. Why quadruple the size of a paragraph? Why use more words? Perhaps it is old-

https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2025.10018 Published online by Cambridge University Press

fashioned, and with the (probably inevitable) spread of AI, we will all start sounding like old teachers with verbal diarrhoea. No one will notice we use 300 words when 82 – or even fewer – would do?

Perhaps more usefully, we could make sure all the language banks are filled with references to the ancient but incomparable W Strunk & EB White's *The Elements of Style*, which was published in several editions from 1959. For the earliest version of Strunk and White, see https://www.griffith.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0031/825556/Elements-of-Style-1959.pdf.

By 2014, my favourite stricture in *Elements of Style* – 'Omit Needless Words' – had moved from the 13th Elementary Principle of Composition to the 17th. (Even scholars promoting brevity are capable of expansion, it seems.) You can find the 2014 fourth edition free online, for example, https://archive.org/details/pdfy-2_qp8jQ61OI6NHwa/page/n1/mode/2up, or buy a hardback or online book for a few dollars, almost anywhere. I commend it to authors everywhere regardless of your preferred language.

It goes with the reminder – read it and learn from it ***before*** you start plugging into AI. It is **thorough**, **succinct**, and **clear**. These attributes should be the goal of every piece of academic writing. And it promotes short sentences!

Of course, AI resources are both a saviour and an even greater danger for international scholars. Publishing in a second or third language, as I said above, is a huge challenge. Even so, scholars must not depend wholly on AI. It is highly likely that scholars will use translator apps when some of their writing is in a first language, but dependence on AI for expression and communication should come with many caveats.

Scholars unsure of their language skills will hope that AI writing sources will help overcome any language deficit. But this is not quite true. As the two examples above demonstrate, AI can remove the authentic voice of the scholar and replace it with long woolly expression. It may be useful, for example, to undertake reverse translations to be sure AI has not buried your voice in a morass of verbiage. In other words, get some help from AI by all means, but then translate it back into your language, so you can be sure you are not turgidly waffling.

I repeat my call. Let's campaign for the short sentence! Down with long sentences!!

We have been grateful that the authors in this issue are succinct and clear – and therefore persuasive. This first issue of 2025 is certainly a wonderful and challenging issue.

It begins with an outstanding **Themed Collection (Indigeneity, Labour Relations and Work)** comprising six topical and rigorously researched articles. The Guest Editors of the Themed Collection, **Sharlene Leroy-Dyer, Mark Jones and Diana Ruwhiu,** discuss those six important articles in their **Guest Editorial: Themed Collection on Indigeneity, Labour Relations and Work**.

The Themed Collection articles are followed by an outstanding and serendipitous group of eight 'general' articles. They all investigate aspects of work and labour markets across the world – Romania, Indonesia, the Republic of the Philippines, India and Italy, Uruguay, the United Kingdom, Europe more broadly, and China.

First, in her article **The best time to be young? A retrospective study of graduates' transition to employment in Romania**, **Pantea** draws on rich veins of theory combined with in-depth interviews to explore the realities and myths of employment for new graduates in post-socialist Romania.

Anggara and Auwalin offer considerable insights into the success and potential of active labour market programmes (ALMPs) in their analysis, **Evaluating active labour market programmes: Possibilities for youth employment in Indonesia and beyond**. The gig economy is almost the antithesis of ALMPs, as **Caboverde and Flaminiano** demonstrate in their analysis of the experiences of different kinds of gig workers (location dependent and home based) in **Future-proof work? The experiences of gig economy workers in the Philippines**.

https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2025.10018 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Padmini offers a fascinating comparative analysis in **Collective and individual resistance: Exploring worker-driven factors limiting platform labour agency**, exploring how workers negotiate their agency and contest power dynamics in India (Mumbai and Guwahati) and Italy (Milan and Bologna). A greater emphasis on the role of unions in managing agency and power imbalance is the focus of **Pucci, Cutro Dumas and Menéndez,** in their article, **Union action in digital platform companies in Uruguay. The case of the company 'Pedidos Ya'**.

In contrast, **Derbyshire, Grosskopf, Blackmore, Goodwin and Spencer** offer important insights into the preferences and opportunities for workers with disabilities in the UK in their fine article, **Widening inclusion: A discrete choice experiment of job preferences of people with disabilities**.

Otoiu, Titan, Paraschiv and Manea take a broader approach to the impact of modern economic and technological changes in order to question whether these phenomena do indeed polarise jobs or upgrade them in their article, **Job polarisation ~~OR~~ AND upgrading! Recent evidence from Europe**.

The final scholarly article in this issue, **The impact of labour law reforms on economic growth and labour relations in China: analysing the role of regulatory policies in shaping workforce**, from **Zhang and Yang**, seeks to explore the significance of labour-related laws and regulations, taking account of the role of the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese government, particularly concerning labour, unemployment, and reform challenges.

The issue concludes with a poignant **Obituary** from **Bloch and Foster** commemorating **John Stanley Metcalfe – 20 March 1946 to 15 March 2025**. They discuss Metcalfe's collegiality and support, as well as his important contributions to international economics, macroeconomics, and, more recently, the economic study of innovation and its sources and consequences.

As ever, the *ELRR* is deeply indebted to its authors, reviewers, associate editors, and the wonderful Editorial Board and International Advisory Board. In the next issue, we will introduce new members of both Boards. In the meantime, many thanks to the Book Review Editors, Neil Hart and Norbert Ebert, who are always seeking recommendations for books to review and offers to review books. We must not lose sight of this important academic activity. And, of course, many thanks, as ever, to the Emerita Editor, Honorary Associate Professor Anne Junor, and Technical Coordinator Jason Antony. Thank you!!

Cite this article: Kelly D (2025). Down with verbosity: A plea for shorter sentences. *The Economic and Labour Relations Review* **36**, 1–4. https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2025.10018

https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2025.10018 Published online by Cambridge University Press