

Concision: The Art of Linguistic Liposuction

Murder your darlings.
— Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch

A sundial in the corner of a garden not far from here bears this epigram on its base: “The moving finger writes, and, having writ, moves on: Nor all your piety nor wit shall lure it back to cancel half a line, nor all your tears wash out a word of it.”

Despite the antique usage, for me those 34 words of Omar Khayyam distill the brevity of life, the finality of death, and the regret over roads untaken—and mistaken—in a way longer writings do not. They succeed as an example of the power of language to capture an idea succinctly.

Editors are paid to render writing more efficient—to “boil that cabbage down”, in the words of the old fiddle tune. But how do we do this without writing “stick-English” (think of the stick-figures in art class) or resorting to a metronomic “procession of neat monosyllables”, as Amy Einsohn expresses it in *The Copyeditor’s Handbook*? How do we compress our authors’ ideas into their irreducible but still graceful components?

Here are a few suggestions for walking the line between paucity and gratuitousness.

Prune pointless adjectives. Consider: A tall skyscraper (do you ever see a short one?); my personal opinion (do you ever have an impersonal one?); in close proximity (is proximity ever remote?). Not every oak has to be gnarled or every problem thorny. And what is a guarantee if not absolute?

Strike empty adverbs. Where possible, delete vacuous modifiers and what Sir Ernest Gowers (in *Plain Words: Their ABC* calls “adverbial dressing gowns”)—in such couplets as *completely* unique, *wholly* unjustifiable, *thoroughly* mistaken, *woefully* inadequate. Have the courage to leave a word unmodified. If a word is too weak to stand alone, scour your vocabulary for a stronger one before resorting to a modifier.

Switch to the active voice. In some documents, you can save a lot of space simply

by switching passive-voice constructions to active. Not only do passive-voice constructions enfeeble the writing, they require more words.

No building company ever posted a sign in front of a house under construction that said “Pride in our work is taken by us.” No suitor ever dropped to his knee before his beloved and proclaimed “You are loved by me.” “We take pride in our work” requires only six words, and “I love you” only three.

Nuke circumlocution. Circumlocution is omnipresent in today’s academic writing. It constitutes a form of backdoor passive voice. “These data are indicative of perturbations to the genome that are deserving of further study.” No. “These data indicate perturbations to the genome that deserve further study.”

Cull hedge words and intensifiers. In *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, Joseph M Williams indicts the following “hedge words and intensifiers”, saying that they make writing appear “not just redundant, but mealy-mouthed”:

usually
often
sometimes
almost
virtually
possibly
perhaps
apparently
somewhat
most
many
some
may
might
can
could
seem
appear
suggest
indicate
very
pretty
quite

rather
clearly
obviously
undoubtedly
certainly
of course
indeed
central
crucial
basic
major
principal
essential
show
prove
establish

In fact, I recommend the entirety of Williams's chapter (titled "Concision") as an admirable summary of the principles of linguistic liposuction.

An excellent list of unneeded words and phrases appears in CSE's own *Scientific Style and Format*, sixth edition (pp 123-6).

Try a bulleted list. Where formatting and style permit, a bulleted list can eliminate repeated introductory words or phrases:

"Nellie has high blood pressure. She also has cataracts and glaucoma. In addition, she suffers from pain in her

left hip, left knee, and left foot."

Nellie has

- High blood pressure.
- Cataracts and glaucoma.
- Pain in her left hip, knee, and foot.

Think like a headline writer. Newspaper editors agonize over their front pages, where every millimeter is precious. Although inelegant, "Solons Eye Agenda" captures the idea with fewer characters than "Senators Consider Schedule". This breezy approach is inappropriate for elevated prose, but you get the idea. When you have finished your editing and it appears grammatically correct, reread it with the idea of using shorter, simpler words and fewer adjectives and adverbs. Reread, rethink, trim, compress.

Chuckle of the Month: *Palo Alto Daily News* headline: "Law Aims to Curb Hot Dogs."

The story is not about improving human nutrition, but about mandating adequate summertime ventilation for canines in unattended vehicles.