

Paper or Plastic?

The term for the omission of words that are intended to be understood by the reader is ellipsis. Its extreme or irregular form has a name in Greek rhetoric: brachylogy, relying on the listener to supply the missing words, much as I relied on the reader to put a verb in the sentence fragment

“A profound question, that.”
— William Safire, “Microwave of the Future”, *New York Times*, 10 July 1990

The term comes from the Greek *brachy* (short) and *logos* (word). Brachylogy promotes economy of diction, which is the subject of this column.

The bagger at the checkout counter looks at me and raises an eyebrow.

“Paper or plastic?”

“Plastic.”

Those four scant words subsume a successful exchange that might have gone on for several words more. The bagger might have said *Would you like a paper or a plastic bag?* I might have answered *I would like plastic, please.* In theory the bagger might have simply held up a plastic bag in one hand and a paper bag in the other; I might have pointed to the one I wanted. Some gestures used by the hearing-impaired can convey highly abstract ideas—for instance, the ASL (American Sign Language) expression for the word *conflict*, which is executed by knocking together the knuckles of the closed hands with the two index fingers extended and crossing (think of jousting).

The editor’s challenge. Reducing a text—a phrase, sentence, or paragraph—to the fewest words possible that are consistent with the author’s intended meaning is difficult without producing “Dick-and-Jane” English. I use a three-element test—a sort of “editor’s razor” (see “William of Ockham” below)—that has worked well for me. I write (or edit) the text in three passes: first, for meaning; second, for minimal word count; and third, for aesthetics.

I like to cast this in a form that looks almost like something from a text on organicism:

1. Everything that’s necessary is there.
2. Everything that’s there is necessary.
3. The result is harmonious.

I have found that step 3 often takes the longest but is also the most satisfying.

William of Ockham (ca. 1288–ca. 1348) was a Scholastic philosopher who refined a theory that originated with the Greeks: *Numquam ponenda est pluralitas sine necessitate* (Plurality ought never be posed without necessity). Later known as Ockham’s razor, the theory is sometimes stated “Other things being equal, the simplest approach is usually the best one.” To me, that first clause is of great importance. In a given context, “other things” are very often not equal.

As used in information theory, Ockham’s razor has generated models of communication, such as the approach known as Minimum Message Length. One interpretation of that theory reduces it to a question: “What is the shortest possible message that is likely to be understood correctly by the greatest number of its recipients?” OK, fair question; but can’t spare, efficient language become so lean as to seem skeletal?

“This sentence is j-u-u-st right.” If Goldilocks had been an editor, that line might have been her motto before sending something off to press. It seems to me that the Gettysburg Address might not have fared well had the Minimum Message Length principle been applied to it. And consider what it might have done to John Kennedy’s “Ask not . . .” inaugural peroration. It might have yielded “Don’t ask the US for help; help it instead!”

Time to speak “Global”. And I think we should remember that we live in a shrinking world. If people overshorten their usage or get too idiomatic, comprehension might suffer among those raised in other traditions. As an example of what I mean, ask yourself which of these police commands would be clearest to an international crowd in New York:

“Stop where you are!”
“Halt!”
“Freeze!”
“Don’t make a move!”
“Hands up!”

I can’t say for sure, but depending on its hearers, “Freeze!” might not be wise. A *New York Times* article by David Sanger says that the Japanese often do not understand “Freeze!” in any sense other than that of refrigeration.

Tragic proof of Sanger’s contention?

The possibility of that is borne out by the 17 October 1992 death of the 16-year-old exchange student Yoshihiro Hattori in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Rodney Peairs, a homeowner, shot and killed Hattori on his doorstep when the young man—dressed in a Halloween getup—failed to stop approaching the door after Peairs yelled “Freeze!” (Hattori was searching for a party and mistook the address.) It became clear during the trial that the teen did not understand the expression and that “p” and “f” are difficult sounds for the Japanese to distinguish.

Nix the prolix. The US government is to be lauded for taking an axe to prolixity and a sharp pencil to bureaucratise wherever it lurks. The Plain Language initiative, which began in 1995, says that “plain language is defined by results—it is easy to read, understand, and use.”

Before: *When the process of freeing a vehicle that has been stuck results in ruts or holes, the operator will fill the rut or hole created by such activity before removing the vehicle from the immediate area.*

After: *If you make a hole while freeing a stuck vehicle, you must fill the hole before you drive away.*

Laurels to that one, but I think the following example sacrifices too much:

Before: *The Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends a half hour or more of moderate physical activity on most days, preferably every day. The activity can include*

brisk walking, calisthenics, home care, gardening, moderate sports exercise, and dancing.

After: *Do at least 30 minutes of exercise, like brisk walking, most days of the week.*

Sure, but I think the edited version could have benefited by including other examples besides brisk walking to stimulate the readers’ imaginations and spur their motivation. For instance, some people might not think of gardening as “moderate physical activity”.

Your turn: Considering everything in this article to this point, how would you turn the following *Newsweek* subheadline into the best brachylogic English?

Before: *The most far-reaching ideas are, perhaps not surprisingly, coming from folks who aren’t in the race. Too bad, but at least the current field can read Gore and Bradley.* Twenty-nine words, 167 characters (with spaces)—and no politics intended; rewrite with your candidates of choice.

My attempt: *Perhaps unsurprisingly, the noncandidates offer today’s farthest-reaching ideas, but at least the candidates can read XXXX and YYYYYYY.* Eighteen words, 135 characters (with spaces).

The phrase *most far-reaching* rather than *farthest-reaching* exemplifies a tendency that has emerged in recent years for writers to avoid using superlative adverbs and adjectives—or simply not to remember to use them. I see the situation often with *most well-known* for *best-known*. The phrase *most-innovative* (15 characters, no spaces) would also work in the original sentence and would use one less word and one less space than *most far-reaching*.

Worthy of Note: The *Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th edition, is now available online and fully searchable. The charge for a year’s subscription is \$30.

Chuckle of the Month: *Dear Abby*, 14 March 2007: “Years ago, I was office manager for a printing company that did work for the American Tobacco Company in North Carolina. The purchasing agent’s assistant there was a woman by the name of Flicka Ashe.—Dolores in Spartanburg, SC.”

Sources

1. “Freeze” Story: “Off to US, Japanese pack words, like ‘police’”. query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?sec=travel&res=9FOCE7D8143FF933A25752C0A965958260..
2. Plain Language: Improving communications from the federal government to the public. plainlanguage.gov/index.cfm.
3. Plain Language: Before and after—wordiness made spare. plainlanguage.gov/examples/before_after/wordiness.cfm.
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