

## Thsd-Wd Ed Clm

The present letter is a very long one because I had no time to make it shorter.

Blaise Pascal (1623–1662)  
*Lettres Provinciales*, 16th letter:  
 “Aux révérends pères jésuites”

A friend and I were discussing abbreviations recently when he asked me if I had ever seen the TV comedy-drama starring Alan Alda and Carol Burnett that used only abbreviations in its title. “Oh yes,” I said. “It had something to do with an apartment overlooking the Hudson.” “Yes,” he replied. “It was based on a Broadway play called *Six Rooms River View* but spelled without many consonants and with even fewer vowels.”

I looked up the play/TV show later that day. Its title was rendered as *6 Rms Riv Vu*. Produced in 1972 (the play) and 1974 (the TV show), it involved a couple who accidentally get locked in a vacant apartment that was touted in the newspaper in space-saving ad-ese. So you might call the subject of this column “minimum acceptable readability”—or “min acptbl rdblty”—using that approach and those that appear in the next paragraphs.

At about the time of the conversation cited above, I learned about a book called *Not Quite What I Was Planning: Six-Word Memoirs by Writers Famous and Obscure*, by Larry Smith and Rachel Fershleiser.<sup>1</sup> Smith and Fershleiser collected and published almost 1000 submissions to a Web journal that had challenged readers to write an autobiography along the lines of a six-word story supposedly written by Ernest Hemingway: “For sale: baby shoes, never worn”. (My own would probably read something like, “Disliked teaching, found editing; perfect fit”.)

One more happenstance influenced my subject: I stumbled on an extensive glossary of instant messaging (IM) terms.<sup>2</sup> Often called texting by a large, often very young, subset, the medium facilitates fast peer-to-peer communication that can prove baffling to outsiders. Some terms are funny, some are imaginative, some are deliberately designed to thwart parental oversight. (Were I the parent of a preteen or teen, I would probably find a few of the

terms unsettling.)

Herewith, a few terms chosen at random:

Term	Meaning
420 (pronounced “four-twenty”)	Let’s get high (or LGH); refers to April 20, or 4:20 PM, a date and time related to a 1971 event that involved crowd marijuana consumption
BTDT	Been there, done that
GIAR	Give it a rest
KPC	Keeping parents clueless
L33T	Leet, meaning “elite”
LMIRL	Let’s meet in real life
NIFOC	Naked in front of computer
OOTD	One of these days
PIR	Parent in room
POS	Parent over shoulder
SLAP	Sounds like a plan
T+	Think positive
WOMBAT	Waste of money, brains, and time
w00t! (two zeros)	Expresses exuberance or victory; back-formed (a “backronym”) from “We own the other team!”
YRYOCC	You’re running your own cuckoo clock

All the above prompted me to think about how severely one could prune a sentence or phrase without sacrificing its intelligibility. As an exercise, I studied some phrases from public signage, user manuals, and news headlines to see whether I could think of ways to reduce the verbiage without obfuscating the meaning—still preserving the style, tone, and voicing of the original.

Consider, for instance, “Please pull gate closed behind you”, a sign on an entry to a garden near my home. You could omit the *please* without appearing peremptory, I think. “Close the gate” might appear too dictatorial, especially if followed by an exclamation point. (The phrase reminds me of my mother’s saying “Close the door!”, often adding “Were you born in a barn?”) “Please close gate” would probably serve well, as would “Keep gate closed”, and for some reason, just plain “Close gate” strikes my ear as less imperative than if the two words are separated by *the*.

A warning in the owner’s manual for the Magellan Maestro 4250 GPS automobile navigation device: “It is recommended that the Magellan Maestro is not left in plain view while unattended for reasons of theft.” Ouch! That’s as gaseous as the Michelin Man! Let’s take some air out of it. How about “To prevent theft, conceal the GPS unit when you leave your vehicle”? Or maybe “Never leave the GPS unit in plain view when away from your car”?

Here’s a recent headline in a local paper: “Governor’s Big Gamble on Budget”—5 words and 31 characters. That could be reduced to “Budget: Arnold’s Big Bet”

(4 words and 24 characters), or “Budget: Gov’s Risky Bet” (4 words and 23 characters). Which one to settle on would probably depend first on space constraints, then on the style of the publication (breezy or stodgy), then perhaps on the political stance of its home city.

This is a sign in the city where I live: “Purple Zone: 2 hour parking. After time expires, no reparking in the Purple Zone before 5 PM” (17 words and 93 characters). (The city assigns colors—purple, coral, lime, and blue—to its free-parking sectors and tracks how long you spend in each zone; too long in any one color and you risk a ticket.) Could all that talky-talk not be subsumed within “2-hour limit in any color zone between 8 AM and 5 PM” (12 words—*2-hour* counts as 1 word—and 53 characters)?

Adjacent to that lot is a merchant’s freight dock. A sign over one side says “Customer pick-up entrance”. You can see that it’s an entrance, so why not just write “Customer pick-up” or “Merchandise delivery”? Next to that one is another sign: “Facility Hours: 8 AM to 6 PM”. Can we agree that it’s a facility and say simply “Hours: 8 AM to 6 PM”?

**My last column** analyzed three thesauri, and it is sad and ironic that I now treat another, *The Highly Selective Thesaurus for the Extraordinarily Literate* (1994). I am pained to report the death on 5 April of its author, Eugene Ehrlich, whom *The New York Times* eulogized as a “word connoisseur”.<sup>3</sup> Not a general thesaurus in

the same sense as the one by Peter Mark Roget, Mr Ehrlich’s book was nonetheless a valuable contribution to the language and a feast for word lovers. No less than the late William F Buckley said of Mr Ehrlich’s text, “I know of no book to contend in usefulness with this resourceful, voluminous, and appetizing smorgasbord.” The *Times* estimated in its article that Mr. Ehrlich wrote more than 3 million words about words. He was also coeditor of the *Oxford American Dictionary*.

**Chuckle of the Month.** The California Department of Motor Vehicles has on record a personalized license plate bearing the words “BAA BAA”. Its owner drives a black Jeep.

## References

1. Smith L, Fershleiser R. Not quite what I was planning: six-word memoirs by writers famous and obscure. New York: Harper; 2008.
2. Yahoo!Xtra. 3 February 2008. “What are good texting abbreviations?” [Internet]. Yahoo!Xtra Answers; 2008 nz.answers. [cited 8 May 2008]. Available from: [yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20080302155804AAWlqg2](http://yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20080302155804AAWlqg2).
3. Martin D. Eugene Ehrlich, 85, word connoisseur, dies. [Internet]. New York Times Online Edition. 15 April 2008. [cited 8 May 2008]. Available from: [www.nytimes.com/2008/04/15/books/15ehrlch.html?\\_r=1&ex=1365912000&en=16109e4a8ad80703&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/15/books/15ehrlch.html?_r=1&ex=1365912000&en=16109e4a8ad80703&oref=slogin).