

Cutting Clutter



“The airline pilot who announces that he is presently anticipating experiencing considerable precipitation wouldn’t think of saying it may rain. The sentence is too simple – there must be something wrong with it. . . . Strip every sentence to its cleanest components.” – William Zinsser, *On Writing Well*.

We often take too long to say too little. Writing clearly and cleanly takes work, but it’s vital. When we write simply, we know what we’ve said, and we know other people will understand it. Here are a few ways to keep language brief and simple:

Tips for Cutting Clutter

- **Use the active voice—put the actor in the sentence**

It was decided that the committee would meet tonight. → **The committee will meet tonight.**

- **Skip “It is” or “There is” beginnings**

There were some Vikings who traded in Samarkand. → **Vikings traded in Samarkand.**

She is the one who skewered me. → **She skewered me.**

You can often take out “who”, “which” or “that” clauses like this as well.

- **Use verbs, rather than noun forms of verbs**

Active verbs take less space than gerunds (a noun with –ing, like frittering and spicing) or infinitives (to shout, to muzzle).

Dancing is hard for me. → **I can’t dance.**

To dream is soothing. → **Dreams soothe.**

- **Cut to the quick**

When writers waffle, we can use words that mean nothing, like these introductions:

It should be pointed out. . .

I might add. . .

It is interesting to note that. . .

Or hedging – a bit, sort of, in a sense, it’s as though . . . Words like that make it look like we aren’t sure of what we’re saying and make our arguments less believable.

- **Avoid general adjectives or adverbs**

These words don’t tell the reader anything important—they just take up space:

kind of, sort of, individual, specific, definitely, actually, generally, really, basically, for all intents and purposes.

- **If one word will do, stick to it**

One way to do this is to change negatives to affirmations:

Not many → few

Not difficult → easy

Tips for Cutting Clutter (continued)

Here are common phrases compressed into one word:

the reason for for the reason that owing/due to the fact that in light of the fact that considering the fact that on the grounds that	= because, since, why
During the period of time that on the occasion of in a situation in which	= when
as regards in reference to with regard to concerning the matter of	= about
it is crucial that it is necessary that there is a need/necessity for it is important that	= must, should
is able to has the opportunity to has the capacity for	= can
it is possible that there is a chance that it could happen that	= may, might, could

- **Replace long words with short ones**

Assistance (help), numerous (many), facilitate (ease), individual (man or woman), remainder (rest), initial (first), implement (do), sufficient (enough), attempt to (try).

- **Take out words that have no use**

Words that add no meaning: order **up** a meal, give **out** advice.

Words that repeat other words: full **and complete**; any **and all**

Adjectives that carry the same meaning as the noun: tall skyscraper, unexpected surprise

Adverbs that carry the same meaning as the verb: ran **quickly**, yawned **sleepily**, boasted **arrogantly**, tricked **slyly**

Tips for Cutting Clutter (continued)

- **We may imply many things in a few words**

Imagine someone trying to learn the rules for playing the game of chess. → **Imagine learning chess.**

Learning implies someone trying; playing a game implies rules; learning a game implies learning its rules; and chess is a kind of game. So simplify: **Imagine learning chess.**

- **Use short sentences**

When in doubt, break sentences down.

Make each clause its own sentence.

Remember, one word can make a sentence. See!

- **Deja Vu all over again**

Try not to repeat ideas or words that mean the same thing, or to tell in detail what your readers already know.

Sample paragraph

Here is a sample paragraph at its bulkiest and at its leanest.

- **Original:**

For nearly 20 years when asked the question what I would like to be when I grow up, I always used to think about writing, but I did not always consider writing as something I might like to be doing full-time. The foundation of my career goals started out in fifth grade, when my teacher told me a story I had written might be at a high enough standard to be publishable in the future. I was intrigued by this profession because I was always reading, but at the time I was always reading about marine mammals and had formed the impression that I would like to become a marine biologist because I had read everything about whales. As time passed and I became better acquainted with the study of science, I found that the job of a writer was something that would fit very well with my personality and goals in life, because it allows you to read about anything you want and you do not have to make a lot of measurements. (173 words)

- **Stripped down without losing any of the meaning:**

For 20 years I have liked writing, but I did not always think of making a living by it. I first thought of writing as a job when my fifth grade teacher told me I might turn a story of mine into a children's book. I read all the time, but back then I read about whales. I thought I wanted to study Marine Biology. As I learned more about research, I found I liked talking about whales better than swimming with them. (83 words).

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