



W. L. Adams Center for Writing

Conciseness, Clarity, Correctness: Three Traits of Good Writing

Among the most important principles of good writing for business and for most other academic disciplines is to *be concise*. Let purpose determine length. Longer is not necessarily better. This principle does not mean that conciseness itself is the primary goal. Clarity is the goal. If you need ten pages to cover and communicate a topic fully, then take ten pages. If you can achieve the same results in five pages, take five.

Get to your point as soon as possible, supporting your ideas with sufficient evidence, and then conclude as gracefully as you can. Hold the attention of your reader from the beginning to the end. Readers will often abandon a piece if they can't discern the purpose in the introduction. Likewise, readers will not continue reading a document whose content fails to justify its length. A quotation often attributed to Mark Twain (but also to Pascal, Proust, and many other writers) is "I made this letter longer because I have not had the time to make it shorter." Brevity requires time and effort. But if conciseness helps you communicate important ideas clearly, you will have spent the time wisely.

In *The Elements of Style*,¹ an inexpensive book every writer should own, William Strunk and E.B. White offer a number of ways to achieve clarity and brevity:

1. **Place yourself in the background:** "Write in a way that draws the reader's attention to the sense and substance of the writing, rather than to the mood and temper of the author" (p. 56). In most cases, the ideas in a memo or report are more important than the person who is conveying them, so it's best to keep obvious references to yourself to a minimum.
2. **Work from a suitable design:** "Before beginning to compose something, gauge the nature and extent of the enterprise and work from a suitable design" (p. 57). Tradition determines the design of most documents in the business or academic worlds. Memos and reports have particular forms and features without which readers would not recognize them, and so do academic essays, newspaper articles, poems, and screenplays. The circumstances surrounding the act of writing will vary, of course, calling for variations in the design of particular pieces of writing (so traditional forms serve mainly as handy guidelines).
3. **Omit needless words:** "Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for

¹ Strunk, William, and E.B. White, *The Elements of Style*. McMillan, 1959.

the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts” (p. 17). Cut every word that does not serve a vital purpose in a document.

4. ***Do not overstate, or explain too much:*** Avoid exaggeration and explanations of points readers can and should understand on their own. As Strunk and White say, “When you overstate, the reader will be instantly on guard, and everything that has preceded your overstatement as well as everything that follows it will be suspect in his mind because he has lost confidence in your judgment or your poise” (p. 59). Avoid extreme language such as “never,” “always,” “forever,” or “every time” because they cost you credibility (or what the ancient Greeks called *ethos*). Calm, accurate, and appropriate language builds credibility.
5. ***Avoid fancy words:*** “Avoid the elaborate, the pretentious, the coy, and the cute. Do not be tempted by a twenty-dollar word when there is a ten-center handy, ready and able” (p. 63). This principle applies not simply to high-sounding words intended to convey sophistication, but also to technical jargon, which can block communication if the reader is unfamiliar with it. Jargon exchanged by technicians may help clarify communication. Jargon used by a technician to a CEO may obstruct meaning.
6. ***Be clear:*** “Since writing is communication, clarity can only be a virtue.... Muddiness is not merely a disturber of prose, it is also a destroyer of life, of hope: death on the highway caused by a badly worded road sign, heartbreak among lovers caused by a misplaced phrase in a well-intentioned letter” (p. 65). Ambiguity may be appropriate in a poem or short story, but it is seldom appropriate in a memo or report. The confusion sown by unclear language can lead to personal and professional disaster.
7. ***Do not take shortcuts at the cost of clarity:*** Some attempts at conciseness actually impede clarity. Strunk and White urge writers to avoid using abbreviations, since readers may not understand them, and to emphasize clarity of meaning over conciseness. Writers should also take care not to cut words from sentences if doing so makes the sentence less rather than more clear (p. 67).

Four Ways to Cut Extra Words or Clarify Sentences

1. ***Avoid passive voice.*** The use of the passive voice where the active would work usually results in extra words, backward sentence constructions (object-verb-noun), and confusion. Passive sentences contain the “to be” verb combined with another past-tense verb. Consider the following sentence, for example: “The company was ruined.” The question this passive sentence raises is “Who ruined the company?” Even if we answer the question by

saying, “The company was ruined by fiscal mismanagement,” we still have a passive sentence, with the object of the verb coming before the verb and noun. To express the sentence in active voice, position the subject of the sentence as the actor: “Fiscal mismanagement ruined the company.” Or perhaps even better: “The chief executive officer’s fiscal mismanagement ruined the company.”

2. ***Avoid passive constructions.*** Passive constructions nearly always contain extra words. For example: “There was a man who invented the Frisbee and got rich.” We can cut three words out of this sentence and lose little meaning: “A man invented the Frisbee and got rich.” Even better: “Ed Headrick invented the Frisbee and got rich.” To find passive constructions, look for variations of “There is” and “It is” at the beginnings of sentences.
3. ***Avoid overusing indefinite (vague) pronouns.*** Don’t use *this*, *it*, *which*, *that*, *these*, or *those* unless you’re sure the reader understands precisely what the pronouns refer to. Consider the following sentence, for example: “This gave me the sense that everything was okay and I developed trust.” The question becomes “This what?” This ritual? This custom? This practice? By using “this” without a specific referent, the author makes the reader do too much work—often forcing the reader to go back over earlier passages in an attempt to understand.
4. ***Avoid dangling modifiers.*** Dangling modifiers indicate that the wrong noun is performing the primary action in a sentence. For example: “While working on the report, several problems were encountered.” This sentence literally says that “several problems” worked on the report. Often associated with passive voice, as in this case, dangling modifiers are illogical and create confusion. To revise, we need to determine who is working on the report and activate the sentence: “While working on the report, the team encountered several problems.”

