



Cutting Clutter

“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—make the subject the actor of the sentence’s action.**

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

- **Skip “It is” or “There is” beginnings and “who”, “which”, or “that” clauses.**

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

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

- **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).

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

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

- **Cut to the quick**

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

“It should be pointed out...”

“I might add...”

“It is interesting to note that...”

Additionally, hedging—a bit, sort of, it’s as though--makes it look like they aren’t sure of what they’re saying and makes their argument less believable.

- **Avoid general adjectives or adverbs.**

These words—kind of, sort of, specific, definitely, really, very, actually, generally, basically—don’t tell the reader anything important. They just take up space.

- **Never use multiple words to say what you can with one.**
One way to do this is to change negatives to affirmations:

Example: Not many → few

Example: Not difficult → easy

Here are some common phrases compressed into one word:

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



- **Replace long words with short ones.**

Assistance (help), numerous (many), facilitate (ease), individual (man, woman, person), remainder (rest of), 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**.

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

Example: 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.

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 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 the 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. (172 words).

Stripped down without losing any of the meaning:

I have liked writing for 20 years, but I did not always think of doing it for a living. I first thought about it 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 mostly just about whales, so 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. (78 words)

