

Writing Concisely

“*Vigorous writing is concise,*” wrote William Strunk. “A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that he make every word tell.”

But how can we do that?

Cut By 10%

Here’s one solution offered by Ellen Sung of the *Raleigh News & Observer*:

Our new managing editor, John Drescher, said at a staff meeting that he thought almost all stories could be improved by a 10 percent cut in the number of words. So my team (four reporters and an editor) decided to do an exercise next week where we all cut the same story by 10 percent, trying not to sacrifice content, and then compare our cuts.

I read this letter in a discussion of writing and revision on the great website poynter.org and thought that this sounded like something the students in my high school journalism class might try. Whenever a writer thought the work was done, he would sit down with me and cut the story by 10%. We found that inevitably the writing became more focused and vigorous.

The exercise forced us to consider exactly what the story was about and trim away irrelevant details. This helped us eliminate about 7-8% of the words. And the other 2-3%? We found that by strengthening the subject-verb relationship and cutting adverbs, we could reach our goal. In the end we had more coherent, focused stories and stronger more engaging sentences.

In his book, [Writing Tools: 50 Essential Strategies for Every Writer](#), Roy Peter Clark of the **Poynter Institute** offers these hints about the cutting process:

- Begin by cutting the big stuff. Donald Murray taught me that “brevity comes from selection, not compression.” That requires lifting whole parts from the work . . .
- If your goal is to achieve precision and concision, begin by pruning the big limbs. You can shake out the dead leaves later.
- Cut any passage that does not support the focus of the story.
- Cut the weakest quotations, anecdotes, or scenes to give greater power to the strongest.

Clark also offers some tips for cutting the fat from sentences. He advises us to look for and reconsider:

- Adverbs that intensify rather than modify: just, certainly, entirely, extremely, completely, exactly.
- Prepositional phrases that repeat the obvious: in the story, in the article, in the movie, in the city.
- Phrases that grow on verbs: seems to, tends to, should have to, tries to.

- Abstract nouns that contain active verbs: consideration becomes considers; judgment becomes judges; observation becomes observes.
- Restatements: a sultry, humid afternoon.

Here's what William Zinsser has to say about rewriting, which just might be the real work of writing: "*With each rewrite I try to make what I have written tighter, stronger, and more precise, eliminating every element that is not doing useful work.*"

References

Clark, R. P. (2008). *Writing tools: 50 essential strategies for every writer*. Little, Brown and Company.

Scanlan, C. (2003). *The ten percent solution* | Poynter. Retrieved January 7, 2011, from <http://www.poynter.org/how-tos/newsgathering-storytelling/chip-on-your-shoulder/10574/the-ten-percent-solution/>