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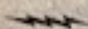

Cut it short.

I am ready to rebel against one of the most revered statements ever uttered by a teacher of writing. Delivered to his Cornell students over decades, this phrase was written by Professor William Strunk Jr. in the original version of *The Elements of Style:* "Omit needless words." To which he added a now oft-quoted paragraph:

> Vigorous writing is concise. 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.

I count sixty-five words in this worthy or wordy paragraph. So which is it? Worthy or wordy? To answer that question, I decided to try reining in that paragraph within the corral of a 140-character tweet. Such an experiment might reveal pathways to intelligent cutting. I began by plugging the paragraph into Twitter to find that those sixty-five words equaled 386 characters, 246 over the limit. I looked for ways to whittle it down:

> Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no extra words for the same reason that a drawing should have no extra lines. Not all sentences need be short and without detail. But every word must tell.

What have we done here?

- Preserved the topic sentence
- Substituted the shorter *extra* for *unnecessary* (not exact synonyms, but close)
- Cut the analogy to a machine, preserving the one about drawing, which is more organic and protects the use of *lines*, a measurement for both artists and writers
- Kept the focus on the writing and not the writer, eliminating words necessary to describe the producer in favor of the product

That got us from sixty-five to thirty-seven words, bringing the character count from 386 to 211, much tighter, but still not within Twitter margins. Let's try again:

> Strong writing is concise. A text should have no extra words like a drawing with no extra lines. A sentence can be long with detail. But every word must tell.

We've cut seven words and are down to 159 characters. Where will I find more "needless" words? I gained space by turning *vigorous* to *strong* and *sentence* to *text*, but I feel a slide toward brevity at the loss of nuance. But let's not stop now:

> Strong prose is tight. A text needs no extra words like a drawing with no extra lines. A phrase can be long with detail. But every word must tell.

One hundred forty-six characters. Almost there:

> Write tight. A text needs no extra words as a drawing needs no extra lines. A sentence can be long with detail. But every word must tell.

One hundred thirty-seven characters. Bingo! Three to spare. But at what cost?

Even E. B. White saw the problem and described it in his introduction to the book that would become known as Strunk and White:

> "Omit needless words!" cries the author on page 17, and into that imperative Will Strunk really put his heart and soul. In the days when I was sitting in his class, he omitted so many needless words, and omitted them so forcibly and with such eagerness and obvious relish, that he often seemed in the position of having short-changed himself, a man left with nothing more to say yet with time to fill, a radio prophet who had outdistanced the clock. Will Strunk got out of this predicament by a simple trick: he uttered every sentence three times. When he delivered his oration on brevity to the class, he leaned forward over his desk, grasped his coat lapels in his hands, and in a husky, conspiratorial voice said, "Rule Thirteen. Omit needless words! Omit needless words! Omit needless words!"

Too bad, because there's more to say about that famous phrase, especially if each word is placed under scrutiny: *omit, needless, words*. (By the way, Mr. White, I wonder what Professor Strunk might have said about your phrase "grasped his coat lapels in his hands." Did you need *coat*? Where else would he find lapels? And did you need *in his hands*? What else would he grasp them with?)

Merriam-Webster's defines *omit* as "to leave out or leave unmentioned." The literal and connotative meanings of the word lean toward the negative. There is the sense that something has been left out that could or should have been expressed. Compared to a sin of commission (as in Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch's "Murder your darlings"), there is something soft, tentative, if not sheepish, in Strunk's injunction that needless words should not even be "committed" to the page for examination.

My discomfort may come from that distinction among writers between the putter-inners and the taker-outers.

While most writers will on occasion go both ways, these differences are real. The first group will write a draft teeming with information, scenes, evidence, references, cases—whatever helps to make a story more compelling or an argument more solid. We put in whatever might be relevant. During revision, we take out the stuff that does not fit our focus. The second group, the taker-outers, will edit—mentally or physically—while they draft, making decisions as soon as they can about the removal of elements they find unnecessary. A putter-inner writes a tweet of 260 characters and cuts back to 140. A taker-outer may offer only 100 characters in a first take, adding 40 more if necessary.

While I'll never be mentioned in the same breath as Thomas Wolfe, who delivered manuscripts to Scribner's Maxwell Perkins in moving vans, I did send to Tracy Behar at Little, Brown a manuscript for *The Glamour of Grammar* that was twice the agreed-on length. I put in everything I could think of in an almost manic race to deadline. Tracy guided me diplomatically through the effort to take out 65,000 words, or fifty extra chapters, enough stuff for another book, however substandard.

So if your assignment is to write 300 words, are you better off writing 250 and then filling out to the margins by revision? Or 350 and then deleting the least helpful words? There is no right answer, except for this: A good short writer must be a disciplined cutter, not just of clutter, but of language that would be useful if she had more space. How, what, and when to cut in the interest of brevity, focus, and precision must preoccupy the mind of every good short writer.

Which brings us back to Strunk's *needless*. To use such a

word is like saying that lawyers should charge a "fair" price for their services. While most would favor the idea, the fighting would be fervent over the meaning of *fair*—and the meaning of *needless*. Each reader will bring a different level of need to the act of reading, so the writer is likely to make decisions on word choice based on some crude utilitarian notion of the greatest good for the greatest number. What if I chose to delete the Strunk sentence "Vigorous writing is concise" and to begin with the idea, "A sentence should contain no unnecessary words"? We'd have to vote to determine who among us found Strunk's sentence on vigor and concision needed or needless.

Here's how I think *needless* works as a piece of advice for writers. Writers should scrutinize each word through drafting and revision. "Do I really need you?" is the question that will apply standards and help writers make good choices about what to include.

Finally, *words*, though simple and straightforward, may not be as helpful as the word seems on first blush. "Omit needless words" suggests that the writer should begin to cut a text at the word level. I am on the prowl for big things to take out. Omitting or cutting words is nickeling-and-diming a text. I want to cut big pieces if I can—twenty-dollar bills, not dimes and nickels. Remember Donald Murray's aphorism: "Brevity comes from selection and not compression." I begin, as I wrote in *Writing Tools*, by pruning the big limbs before I shake out the dead leaves.

To find and trim weaker elements in our prose (those dead leaves), identify and preserve the stronger elements. In the Anglo-American tradition, strength manifests itself in specific, concrete nouns (especially in the subject position)

followed by vigorous, active transitive verbs. Concrete nouns give the reader things they can see (*mosquito, potato chip, clothespin, vise* rather than *vice*). Active verbs reveal the action performed by the subject (*blasted, yawned, gurgled, sprung*). Transitive verbs require an object. The full effect is a clear and direct sense of who did what: "The whiskey blurred his vision." When such elements are deemed strong, the weaker elements reveal themselves as targets for cutting.

Here is a list of the usual suspects:

- Adverbs
- Adjectives
- Strings of prepositional phrases (used as adjectives or adverbs)
- Intensifiers (*very, quite, incredibly*)
- Qualifiers (*seems, kind of, sort of, mostly*)
- Jargon (*instructional units* rather than *lessons*)
- Latinate flab (*adjudicate* rather than *judge*)

Most authors I know cut weak words as they find them, but some have organized their cutting strategies into useful categories. In his book *Style*, for example, Joseph M. Williams offers his "Five Principles of Concision":

1. Delete words that mean little or nothing [*kind of, really, actually*].
2. Delete words that repeat the meaning of other words [*various and sundry*].
3. Delete words implied by other words [*terrible tragedy*].

4. Replace a phrase with a word [*in the event that* becomes *if*].
5. Change negatives to affirmatives [*not include* becomes *omit*].

In *The Writer's Chapbook*, the editor George Plimpton reveals that no matter how famous the writer, the challenge remains the same: what to include and what to cut. Among his witnesses:

- Charles Dickens: "Run a moist pen slick through everything, and start afresh."
- Samuel Johnson: "Read over your compositions, and where ever you meet a passage which you think is particularly fine, strike it out."
- Ben Jonson: "The players have often mentioned it as an honor to Shakespeare, that in his writing, whatsoever he penned, he never blotted out a line. My answer hath been, 'Would he had blotted a thousand.'" (There is now good evidence that Shakespeare did!)

And what writer cannot identify with Oscar Wilde's indecision: "This morning I took out a comma and this afternoon I put it back in again."

GRACE NOTES

1. Write a brief description of your writing process, identifying yourself as a putter-inner or a taker-outer, or as someone in between.

2. Review E. B. White's description of his professor William Strunk Jr. Following my lead, look for words in the passage that White's teacher might have found "needless."

3. Review my multiple revisions of Strunk's paragraph, designed to cut it to the length of a tweet. At which revision do you feel something important is lost? At what point does the voice no longer sound like Strunk's?

4. Remember Donald Murray's advice, "Brevity comes from selection and not compression." And mine: "First prune the big limbs, then shake out the dead leaves."

5. Apply the "Five Principles of Concision" to a recent example of your writing. Record in your daybook the words and phrases you were able to cut.

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Add by contraction.

I have often described the language of digital media as being contractive, elliptical, acronymic, and emoticonic—the kind of text squeezed onto a personalized license plate. At its best, such language is quick, informal, and effective. At times, though, it violates a practical principle that marks communication in all cultures: redundancy. Writing stylists attack redundancy as needless repetition. The information scholar James Gleick has a different take:

> Redundancy—inefficient by definition—serves as the antidote to confusion. It provides second chances. Every natural language has redundancy built in; this is why people can understand text riddled with errors and why they can understand conversation in a noisy room. The natural redundancy of English motivates the famous