

Brevity: Every Word Must Earn Its Place

The Craft of Writing · By Simon Townsend · 2 min read

Brevity

Sometimes you use unnecessary words.

BREVITY is one of the basic elements of good writing.

You need to go over your work to weed out EVERY unnecessary word.

William Strunk Jr, an American professor, was co-author of a classic little book called *The Elements of Style* (which you must buy). Strunk wrote:

"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 every word tell."

FAT writing

Lean and vigorous

Why

When the soldiers were ordered to lift up their rifles and shoot, they lifted them up and shot them.

When ordered to shoot, the soldiers obeyed.

Your reader is not stupid. He/she does not need to be led by the hand and have the obvious pointed out.

Julie, to all intents and purposes, is in charge of the project.

Julie is in charge of the project.

It's a useless phrase. Drop it.

The man strode up the stairs, his arms thrashing around and flailing erratically as he went, two steps at a time, to the top of the steps.

Arms flailing, the man strode two steps at a time to the top.

Your reader is paying attention and will supply any missing words from the context of what you have written. (Flail means to move in a thrashing or erratic manner.)

That is an old adage.

That is an adage.

All adages are old.

All three members of the trio started singing at the same time.

The trio started singing.

If they'd started singing at different times, the writer would note that, otherwise the reader understands the implied idea that they began together, not separately.

Mike is a friend of Emma's.

Mike is a friend of Emma.

The word "of" indicates possession, so no need for the apostrophe-s.

First, they waved a greeting and next, they all took off.

They waved and left.

See how useless words make writing FAT?

The man admitted to robbing the woman.

The man admitted robbing the woman.

You admit something. You do not admit TO it.

The snarling, spitting, slathering, salivating mad wolf attacked savagely and without mercy and Bob died instantaneously.

The salivating wolf attacked Bob and killed him instantly.

FIVE adjectives? Can a wolf be "mad"? Do wolves sometimes kill with mercy and sometimes without?

I personally phoned Tom.

I phoned Tom.

Everything you do, you do personally.

There are six dogs at present who are now in need of discipline training.

Six dogs need discipline training.

"There are" and "who are" can often be deleted from fat writing.

It is possible that two women may make their decisions to perhaps stand for parliament.

Two women may stand for parliament.

Getting obvious, uh?

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