

Lesson

6

Concision

To a Snail: If "compression is the first grace of style,"
you have it.

—MARIANNE MOORE

UNDERSTANDING CONCISION

You get close to clarity when you match your characters and actions to your subjects and verbs, and closer yet when you get the right characters into topics and the right words under stress. But readers may still think your prose is a long way from graceful if it's anything like this:

In my personal opinion, it is necessary that we should not ignore the opportunity to think over each and every suggestion offered.

That writer matched characters with subjects, and actions with verbs, but in too many words: opinion is always personal, so we don't need *personal*, and since this statement is opinion, we don't need *in my opinion*. *Think over* and *not ignore* both mean *consider*. *Each and every* is redundant. A suggestion is by definition offered. In fewer words:

✓ We should consider each suggestion.

Though not elegant, that sentence at least has style's first grace—compression, or as we'll call it, *concision*. Concision, though, is only a start. You must still make your sentences shapely. In this lesson, I focus on concision; in the next, on shape.

DIAGNOSIS AND REVISION

Six Principles of Concision

When I edited that sentence about suggestions, I followed six principles:

1. Delete words that mean little or nothing.
2. Delete words that repeat the meaning of other words.
3. Delete words implied by other words.
4. Replace a phrase with a word.
5. Change negatives to affirmatives.
6. Delete useless adjectives and adverbs.

Those principles are easy to state but hard to follow, because you have to inch your way through every sentence you write, cutting here, compressing there, and that's labor intensive. Those six principles, though, can guide you in that work.

1. **Delete Meaningless Words** Some words are verbal tics that we use as unconsciously as we clear our throats:

kind of actually particular really certain various
virtually individual basically generally given practically

Productivity actually **depends on** certain **factors that** basically **involve psychology more than** any particular **technology**.

- ✓ Productivity depends on psychology more than on technology.

2. **Delete Doubled Words** Early in the history of English, writers got into the habit of pairing a French or Latin word with a native English one, because foreign words sounded more

learned. Most paired words today are just redundant. Among the common ones:

full and complete	hope and trust	any and all
true and accurate	each and every	basic and fundamental
hope and desire	first and foremost	various and sundry

3. **Delete What Readers Can Infer** This redundancy is common but hard to identify, because it comes in so many forms.

Redundant Modifiers Often, the meaning of a word implies its modifier:

Do not try to *predict* those **future** events that will **completely revolutionize** society, because **past history** shows that it is the **final outcome** of minor events that **unexpectedly surprises** us more.

- ✓ Do not try to predict revolutionary events, because history shows that the outcome of minor events surprises us more.

Some common redundancies:

terrible tragedy	various different	free gift
basic fundamentals	future plans	each individual
final outcome	true facts	consensus of opinion

Redundant Categories Every word implies its general category, so you can usually cut a word that names it. Compare (the category is boldfaced):

During that *period of time*, the *membrane* **area** became *pink in color* and *shiny in appearance*.

- ✓ During that *period*, the *membrane* became *pink* and *shiny*.

In doing that, you may have to change an adjective into an adverb:

The holes must be aligned in an *accurate* **manner**.

- ✓ The holes must be aligned *accurately*.

Sometimes you change an adjective into a noun:

The county manages the *educational* **system** and *public recreational* **activities**.

- ✓ The county manages *education* and *public recreation*.

Here are some general nouns (boldfaced) often used redundantly:

large in size	round in shape	honest in character
unusual in nature	of a strange type	area of mathematics
of a bright color	at an early time	in a confused state

General Implications This kind of wordiness is even harder to spot, because it can be so diffuse:

Imagine someone trying to learn the rules for playing the game of chess.

Learn implies *trying*, *playing the game* implies *rules*, chess is a game. So more concisely,

Imagine learning the rules of chess.

4. **Replace a Phrase with a Word** This redundancy is especially difficult to fix, because you need a big vocabulary and the wit to use it. For example:

As you carefully read what you have written to improve wording and catch errors of spelling and punctuation, the thing to do before anything else is to see whether you can use sequences of subjects and verbs instead of the same ideas expressed in nouns.

That is,

- ✓ As you edit, first replace nominalizations with clauses.

I compressed five phrases into five words:

carefully read what you have written	→	edit
the thing to do before anything else	→	first
use X instead of Y	→	replace
nouns instead of verbs	→	nominalizations
sequences of subjects and verbs	→	clauses

I can offer no principle that tells you what phrases to replace with a word, much less give you the word. I can point out only that you often can, and that you should be alert for opportunities to do so—which is to say, try.

Here are some common phrases (boldfaced) to watch for. Note that some of them let you turn a nominalization into a verb (both italicized):

- We must explain **the reason for** the *delay* in the meeting.
 - ✓ We must explain **why** the meeting is *delayed*.
 - Despite the fact that** the data were checked, errors occurred.
 - ✓ **Even though** the data were checked, errors occurred.
 - In the event that** you finish early, contact this office.
 - ✓ **If** you finish early, contact this office.
 - In a situation where** a class closes, you may petition to get in.
 - ✓ **When** a class closes, you may petition to get in.
 - I want to say a few words **concerning the matter of** money.
 - ✓ I want to say a few words **about** money.
 - There is a need for** more careful *inspection* of all welds.
 - ✓ You **must** *inspect* all welds more carefully.
 - We **are in a position** to make you an offer.
 - ✓ We **can** make you an offer.
 - It is possible that** nothing will come of this.
 - ✓ Nothing **may** come of this.
 - Prior to** the *end* of the training, apply for your license.
 - ✓ **Before** training *ends*, apply for your license.
 - We have noted a **decrease/increase in** the number of errors.
 - ✓ We have noted *fewer/more* errors.
5. **Change Negatives to Affirmatives** When you express an idea in a negative form, not only must you use an extra word: *same* → *not different*, but you also force readers to do a kind of algebraic calculation. These two sentences, for example, mean much the same thing, but the affirmative is more direct:
- Do not write in the negative. → Write in the affirmative.

You can rewrite most negatives:

not careful	→	careless	not allow	→	prevent
not many	→	few	not stop	→	continue
not the same	→	different	not notice	→	overlook
not often	→	rarely	not include	→	omit

Do not translate a negative into an affirmative if you want to emphasize the negative. (Is that such a sentence? I could have written, *Keep a negative sentence when . . .*)

Some verbs, prepositions, and conjunctions are implicitly negative:

Verbs	<i>preclude, prevent, lack, fail, doubt, reject, avoid, deny, refuse, exclude, contradict, prohibit, bar</i>
Prepositions	<i>without, against, lacking, but for, except</i>
Conjunctions	<i>unless, except when</i>

You can baffle readers if you combine *not* with these negative words. Compare these:

Except when you have **failed** to submit applications **without** documentation, benefits will **not be denied**.

- ✓ You will receive benefits only if you submit your documents.
- ✓ To receive benefits, submit your documents.

And you baffle readers completely when you combine explicitly and implicitly negative words with passives and nominalizations:

There should be **no** submission of payments **without** notification of this office, **unless** the payment does **not** exceed \$100.

Do not **submit** payments if you have not **notified** this office, unless you are **paying** less than \$100.

Now revise the negatives into affirmatives:

- ✓ If you pay more than \$100, notify this office first.
6. **Delete Adjectives and Adverbs** Many writers can't resist adding useless adjectives and adverbs. Try deleting every

adverb and every adjective before a noun, then restore *only* those that readers need to understand the passage. In this passage, which ones should be restored?

At the heart of the argument culture is our habit of seeing issues and ideas as ~~absolute and irreconcilable~~ principles ~~continually~~ at war. To move beyond this ~~static and limiting~~ view, we can remember the ~~Chinese~~ approach to yin and yang. They are two principles, yes, but they are conceived not as ~~irreconcilable polar~~ opposites but as elements that coexist and should be brought into balance ~~as much as possible~~. As sociolinguist Suzanne Wong Scollon notes, "Yin is always present in and changing into yang and vice versa." How can we translate this ~~abstract~~ idea into ~~daily~~ practice?

—Deborah Tannen, *The Argument Culture*

Here's the point: Readers think you write concisely when you use only enough words to say what you mean.

1. Delete words that mean little or nothing.
2. Delete words that repeat the meaning of other words.
3. Delete words implied by other words.
4. Replace a phrase with a word.
5. Change negatives to affirmatives.
6. Delete useless adjectives and adverbs.

A PARTICULAR KIND OF REDUNDANCY: METADISOURSE

Lesson 4 described metadiscourse as language that refers to the following:

- the writer's intentions: *to sum up, candidly, I believe*
- directions to the reader: *note that, consider now, as you see*
- the structure of the text: *first, second, finally, therefore, however*

Everything you write needs metadiscourse, but too much buries your ideas:

The last point I would like to make is that in regard to men-women relationships, it is important to keep in mind that the greatest changes have occurred in how they work together.

Only nine of those thirty-four words address men-women relationships:

men-women relationships . . . greatest changes . . . how they work together.

The rest is metadiscourse:

The last point I would like to make is that in regard to . . . it is important to keep in mind that . . .

When we prune the metadiscourse, we tighten the sentence:

The greatest changes in men-women relationships have occurred in how they work together.

Now that we see what the sentence says, we can make it still more direct:

- ✓ Men and women have changed their relationships most in how they work together.

Some teachers and editors urge us to cut all metadiscourse, but everything we write needs some. You have to read with an eye to how good writers in your field use it, then do likewise.

There are, however, some types that you can usually cut.

Metadiscourse That Attributes Your Ideas to a Source Don't announce that something has been *observed*, *noticed*, *noted*, and so on; just state the fact:

High divorce rates **have been observed** to occur in areas that **have been determined to have** low population density.

- ✓ High divorce rates occur in areas with low population density.

Metadiscourse That Announces Your Topic The boldface phrases tell your reader what your sentence is "about":

This section introduces another problem, that of noise pollution. **The first thing to say about it is** that noise pollution exists not only . . .

Readers catch the topic more easily if you reduce the metadiscourse:

- ✓ **Another** problem is noise pollution. **First**, it exists not only . . .

Two other constructions call attention to a topic, usually one already mentioned in the text:

In regard to a vigorous style, the most important feature is a short, concrete subject followed by a forceful verb.

So far as China's industrial development **is concerned**, it will take only a few years to equal that of Japan.

But you can usually work those topics into a subject:

- ✓ **The most important feature of a vigorous style** is a short, concrete subject followed by a forceful verb.
- ✓ **China** will take only a few years to equal Japan's industrial development.

Metadiscourse That Hedges and Intensifies Some metadiscourse reflects the writer's certainty about what she is claiming. This kind comes in two flavors, *hedges* and *intensifiers*. Hedges limit your certainty; intensifiers increase it. Both can influence how readers judge your character, because they signal how well you balance caution and confidence.

Hedges These are common hedges:

Adverbs *usually, often, sometimes, almost, virtually, possibly, allegedly, arguably, perhaps, apparently, in some ways, to a certain extent, somewhat, in some/certain respects*

Adjectives *most, many, some, a certain number of*

Verbs *may, might, can, could, seem, tend, appear, suggest, indicate*

Some readers think all hedging is not just redundant, but mealy-mouthed:

There **seems to be some** evidence to **suggest** that **certain** differences between Japanese and Western rhetoric **could** derive from historical influences **possibly** traceable to Japan's cultural isolation and Europe's history of cross-cultural contacts.

On the other hand, only a fool or someone with vast historical evidence would make a claim as confident as this:

This evidence **proves** that Japanese and Western rhetorics differ because of Japan's cultural isolation and Europe's history of cross-cultural contacts.

In most academic writing, we more often state claims closer to this (note my own hedging; compare the more assertive, *In academic writing, we state claims like this*):

- ✓ This evidence **suggests** that **aspects** of Japanese and Western rhetoric differ because of Japan's cultural isolation and Europe's history of cross-cultural contacts.

The verbs *suggest* and *indicate* let you state a claim about which you are less than 100 percent certain, but confident enough to propose:

- ✓ The evidence **indicates** that some of these questions remain unresolved.
- ✓ These data **suggest** that further studies are necessary.

Even confident scientists hedge. This next paragraph introduced the most significant breakthrough in the history of genetics, the discovery of the double helix of DNA. If anyone was entitled to be assertive, it was Crick and Watson. But they chose to be diffident (note, too, the first-person *we*; hedges are boldfaced):

We **wish to suggest a** [not *the*] structure for the salt of deoxyribose nucleic acid (D.N.A.) A structure for nucleic acid has already been proposed by Pauling and Corey **In our opinion**, this structure is unsatisfactory for two reasons: (1) **We believe** that the material which

gives the X-ray diagrams is the salt, not the free acid (2) **Some of** the van der Waals distances **appear** to be too small.

—J. D. Watson and F. H. C. Crick, "Molecular Structure of Nucleic Acids"

Without the hedges, their claim would be more concise but more aggressive. Compare this (I boldface the stronger words, but most of the more aggressive tone comes from the absence of hedges):

We ~~wish to suggest~~ **state here the** structure for the salt of deoxyribose nucleic acid (D.N.A.) A structure for nucleic acid has already been proposed by Pauling and Corey ~~In our opinion~~, [T]his structure is unsatisfactory for two reasons: (1) ~~We believe that~~ [T]he material which gives the X-ray diagrams is the salt, not the free acid (2) ~~Some of~~ [T]he van der Waals distances ~~appear to be~~ **are** too small.

Intensifiers These are common intensifiers:

Adverbs *very, pretty, quite, rather, clearly, obviously, undoubtedly, certainly, of course, indeed, inevitably, invariably, always*

Adjectives *key, central, crucial, basic, fundamental, major, principal, essential*

Verbs *show, prove, establish, as you/we/everyone knows/can see, it is clear/obvious that*

The most common intensifier is the absence of a hedge. In this case, less is more. The first sentence below has no intensifiers at the blanks, but neither does it have any hedges, and so it seems like a strong claim:

_____ Americans believe that the federal government is
_____ intrusive and _____ authoritarian.

- ✓ **Many** Americans believe that the federal government is **often** intrusive and **increasingly** authoritarian.

Confident writers use intensifiers less often than they use hedges because they want to avoid sounding as assertive as this:

For a century now, **all** liberals have argued against **any** censorship of art, and **every** court has found their arguments so **completely**

persuasive that **not a person any** longer remembers how they were countered. As a result, today, censorship is **totally** a thing of the past.

Some writers think that kind of aggressive style is persuasive. Quite the opposite: if you state a claim moderately, readers are more likely to consider it thoughtfully:

For **about** a century now, **many** liberals have argued against censorship of art, and **most** courts have found their arguments persuasive **enough** that **few** people **may** remember **exactly** how they were countered. As a result, today, censorship is **virtually** a thing of the past.

Some claim that a passage hedged that much is wordy and weak. Perhaps. But it does not come on like a bulldozer. It leaves room for a reasoned and equally moderate response.

Here's the point: You need some metadiscourse in everything you write, especially metadiscourse that guides readers through your text, words such as *first, second, therefore, on the other hand*, and so on. You also need some metadiscourse that hedges your certainty, words such as *perhaps, seems, could*, and so on. The risk is in using too many.

For the best writers, a concern with style always begins by thinking about readers. That's what motivated the founder of the Methodist church, John Wesley:

I write for those who judge of books, not by the quantity, but by the quality of them: who ask not how long, but how good they are? I spare both my reader's time and my own, by couching my sense in as few words as I can.

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