



## Words Can Muddle Good Writing

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You've just heard that familiar voice from the copy desk say, "We're not going to make it!" Your stomach quivers.

You're writing or editing that masterpiece for the next day's paper. But the inevitable deadline awaits, and you have another story to write, an assembly line of stories to edit or someone on the phone wondering when you're coming home.

You know the names and facts are correct. But check again. Your Mona Lisa has a handlebar mustache that must go -- your story has too many words. And you only have a few minutes left.

This situation faces many writers and editors daily. Those few minutes that you have to complete your editing -- to trim those excessive words -- may help keep a few more readers.

Here are four reasons why excessive words should concern you:

-- Despite increased emphasis on graphics, technology and design, the major part of any paper is words. "Like the trucks that carry other products to market they are part of the delivery system we use to reach readers with news, advertising and entertainment," Jack Hart wrote in his Writers Workshop column for Editor & Publisher. "But words not only carry freight, they also ARE freight. Nobody much cares about the color of the truck that delivered yesterday's canned corn. But every reader reacts to the way words, sentences and paragraphs come together to deliver the news. One bad word choice can cost a subscription."

-- A Poynter Institute study indicated that 75 percent or more of the participants processed or looked at the artwork and photos and more than 55 percent read the headlines. But only 25 percent read text.

-- Seventy-three percent of the regular and occasional newspaper readers "feel extremely time pressured," according to a recent report prepared for the American Society of Newspaper Editors. That means many readers think they have less time to read your stories.

-- American Press Institute studies have shown that 90 percent of readers easily understand sentences averaging 16 to 19 words. But the same 90 percent cannot understand sentences that average 30 words or more. "The higher the word count, the more difficult it is for the reader," Don Fry of the Poynter Institute has written.

That is why long sentences and leads of 44, 48, 59 words should be discouraged. Sure, some well-written sentences that contain details can be longer. And stories should have a range of short, medium and longer sentences.

But those extra and abstract words, the ones that lengthen your story or harm its clarity, must be trimmed. Thus, you should develop habits that will help you make those quick fixes.

So after you've checked the names and facts, remember these tips to trim the excess:

-- The ofs: Prepositions are good connectors, but they can add excessive words. So look for ways to trim prepositions: a native of Edmond should be an Edmond native, member of the planning commission should be planning commission member and the mayor of Tulsa should be Tulsa mayor. Also, look for prepositional phrases or clauses at the end of sentences that repeat information in your story.

-- Quotes: Many reporters complain that their good quotes are cut first. But quotes should be cut if they don't add emphasis to a story or help the flow. Cut or recast quotes with excessive ellipses or parentheses, repetitive information or that simply don't add to your story.

-- Background: Seek to trim unneeded or excessive background about the story's topic.

-- There, it's, it is and to be: All of us put too many of these in our first drafts.

Sentences that are rewritten without these words usually are shorter and clearer.

-- Active, not passive: Subject, strong verb and object are preferred unless you want to emphasize the sentence's object.

-- Repetition: Scan your story to see if you've repeated a full name, age, title or time reference. Also, look for parallel prepositions, ones that repeat a preposition: City council members were concerned about the new road and about its effect on nearby residents. The sentence should have been: City council members were concerned about the new road's effect on nearby residents.

-- Know your weaknesses: Even experienced writers and editors have trouble in certain areas. This could include the use of its and it's, using for example or of course too many times, misspelling separate or similar, or being too wordy. Rick Wilber, in his book "Writer's Handbook for Editing & Revision," says that good writers recognize their trouble areas and develop tricks to overcome them. Wilber says he has learned to do a computer word search for you so he can ensure that he's used your and you're correctly.

-- Simpler ways: This can be the most difficult on deadline. But you should seek simpler words and ways to replace clauses with phrases and phrases with single words. Here are some other ways recommended by Paula LaRocque, former writing coach of The Dallas Morning News: Trim vague qualifiers (very, really, truly, extremely, somewhat, quite and rather). Avoid excessive use of a, an, the, this, these, those and that. Cut unneeded infinitives and who, which and that clauses.

LaRocque adds your goal should not be to cut for no reason or write short. She recommends you use the right words and compress instead of cut. "Brevity is a companion of good writing, not its cause," she says. "Compression means being able to say everything while still making our work as solid, concrete and terse as possible."

Well, your time is up. Your story is due. But you've done the improbable. By developing habits for quick fixes, you've improved parts of your story -- and helped you and the readers feel better about it the next day.