

chapter 5 |

Idea #1: Shorten That Text!



Cut Any Paper-Based Text by 50% **86**

Make Each Paragraph Short **91**

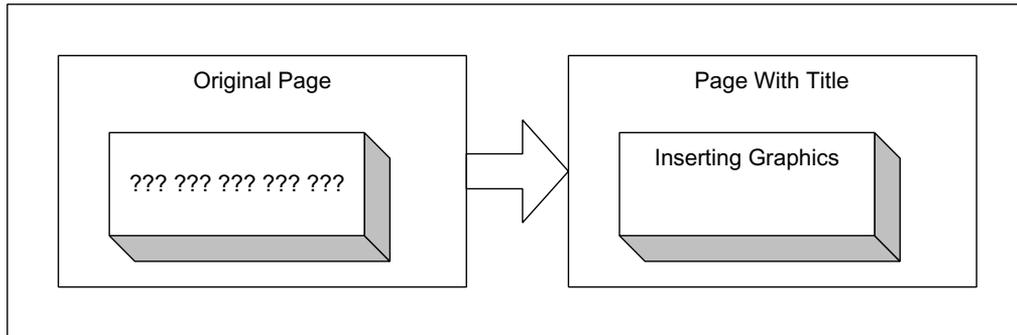
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Cut Any Paper-Based Text by 50%



BACKGROUND |

Don't make me read!

The computer builds each letter out of big fat dots on the screen, and these jagged-edged characters become so fuzzy that they challenge the eye, making the job of reading much harder than on paper. Jakob Nielsen's research, for instance, suggests that people read 25% slower from a computer screen than from paper.

Struggling to see the text on a blurry screen, people are also uncertain where they are within the site, doubtful whether your page really has the info they want, and distracted by ads. In such circumstances, people resent text. They resist reading in many clever ways. They cry out, "Don't make me read!" Nielsen's remedy: "Write 50% less text."

Cutting half the words in your text works. The point is not the number. Fewer words mean less reading. When you get close to half the words you would ordinarily use on paper, you're finally writing for people who see any extra words as "verbiage."

People use text, to put off reading

To figure out what topics to look at, people use the text that you create in menus, headings, and search results. To navigate through the site, people use the text in buttons and links. To decide whether or not to go ahead and read what you write on a particular

Pithy sentences are like sharp nails driving truth into our memory.

—Diderot

page, people use the text in the page title, headings, and introductory sentence. Using text is like using signs, not what we usually think of as reading. Only when a guest has successfully used your text to identify a topic as worthwhile will he or she actually slow down and read.

The way you write all the text that people must use just to find the right topic determines how much brainpower they have left to consider your actual ideas. Now they face the near illegibility of the actual characters, and the tempting art and ads around your article. And reading means they must also give attention to the many simultaneous tasks involved in figuring out and understanding the text. Reading is a tougher job than using text, and their attention is always being drawn away. If you want to be sure someone will read what you write on the web, write less.

Less text means less strain on a visitor's ability to concentrate, less material to juggle in short-term memory, and a faster rush to meaning.

Cut on-screen and off

When we cut text that we originally wrote for a paper magazine, we do it on-screen so we can see the characters blur just the way they will for our users. That near illegibility encourages trimming.

Sure, you can use a paper copy to slash away, but you may not go far enough. Paper pleads for more text. Coming from a background of books, magazines, and the Sunday New York *Times*, paper carries a tradition of long documents, thick paragraphs, and elaborate sentences. As experienced readers, we are used to lots of text—on paper.

If you insist on editing on paper, you'll know you have cut far enough when the printout begins to look quirky, abrupt, telegraphic. On-screen, that text will go down fast and smooth.

Take several whacks

We cut everything we can and then stop. When we look at the text again, we see it is too verbose.

We cut again and again and again. Sometimes, we have to make five passes to get rid of the last ounce of fat.

Don't expect to make all the cuts at once. Keep at it.

It is my ambition to say in ten sentences what others say in a whole book.

—Nietzsche

Save the meaning, cut away the rest

When looking for text to delete, cross out:

- Words that have been included just to emphasize your sincerity, like *really* and *truly*
- Words that don't add anything to what you have already said
- Unnecessary details
- Phrases that unnecessarily repeat words you have already used, when a pronoun would do
- Phrases that tell the readers something they already learned earlier
- Pompous b.s.
- Corporate speak (phrases only a committee could love)

Unfortunately, to edit in this way requires thought. You can't do it mechanically. In his admirable book of lessons on style, Joseph Williams points out that, "The only reliable way you can identify and remedy wordiness is to slog through every sentence, word by word. That's hard work."

*The more you say,
the less people remember.*

—Fénelon

EXAMPLES

Before

Using various technologies we intend to study, identify, or otherwise characterize changes in the physicochemical state of a myriad of plutonium compounds found in various residues, destined to be stored as interim waste over decades.

Uncertainties about the practical effects of possible changes, such as gas generation and corrosion and other possibly deleterious transformations that might lead to unsafe storage conditions, adversely affecting the waste form, result from inadequate previous studies of these complicated residues, as opposed to the more straightforward metal and pure oxides, which we will not study. The chemical behavior of this material, especially the material intimately in contact with the plutonium,

After

The problem: The lab intends to store some waste materials containing plutonium compounds for decades, but we do not know how these plutonium-containing materials will behave, chemically, over this long a time. We fear they may rust or give off gases, damaging the waste, or its environment.

This project: Excluding metal and pure oxides, the residues will be studied to identify potentially dangerous changes in the local chemical environment of the plutonium metal center.

Next step: Countermeasures.

77 words

needs to be studied over time to identify any chemical changes due to aging, corrosion, or gas generation of the problem residues. Once we can identify these possible changes, we can proceed to the next phase of our project, which is to suggest countermeasures.

149 words

Before

How do I check out when I am all done with my shopping at the stores within the Jumbo portal?

Whether you are buying one item, a dozen, or maybe a hundred, you can just simply click on the Shopping Cart icon, which appears at the top of every JumboShop page. Once you are in the shopping cart, you can do several things, if you want. Optionally, you can confirm that everything you wanted to buy has shown up in the order, enter billing and shipping information, and then click the Check Me Out button, to move the order along. At the moment you click the Check Me Out button, we send your order to the individual store. At that point, the transaction is between you and the store, and if there are any problems, you need to talk to the store. If you call us, we will only be able to help you with our part of the transaction, that is, before we actually send the order to the store.

171 words

After

How do I check out?

1. Click the Shopping Cart, at the top of the page.
2. Look over your order. (You can delete items if you want).
3. Enter billing and shipping info.
4. Click Check Me Out.

At that time, we send your order to the individual store.

50 words

Before

I am a little uncomfortable with some of the things you have been saying in the last few messages on this discussion group, and I know you don't intend to make people upset, but I have to share with you that I am feeling a little hurt at what you said about me, if you know what I mean. I hope you take this the right way. I am trying to reach out and clarify our relationship.

77 words

After

I'm hurt and angry at what you've been saying about me.

11 words

AUDIENCE FIT

If visitors want this...

TO HAVE FUN

How well does this guideline apply?

Once people decide they want to be entertained, they may choose to read and read and read, online. High tech researchers evidently never met a girl who wanted to have fun, so their usability studies have focused on techies looking for techie info—not personal insight, rants, or rambles. If you're writing a column for a webzine, you can take a few breaths, and write, well, as long as 500 words at a shot.

TO LEARN

Definitely relevant. Spike the lectures.

TO ACT

Ditto. Tell me what to do, and let me do it!

TO BE AWARE

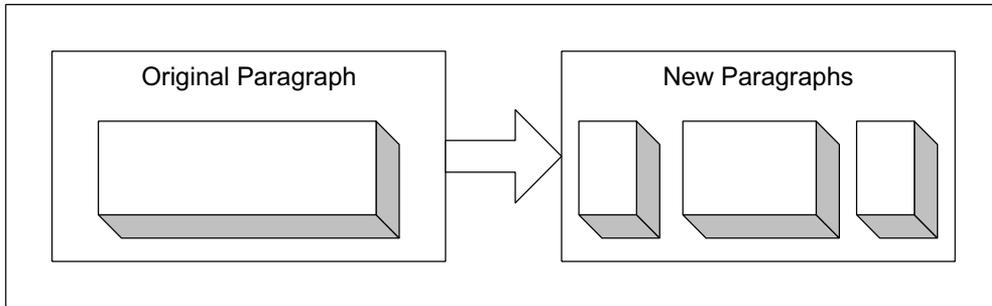
Lao Tse showed that you can say a lot in a little space. How about those short stories Jesus used to tell?

TO GET CLOSE TO PEOPLE

Rambling is usually bad form in a discussion group. In an e-mail, too much text drives me to the Delete button.

See: Baker & Goldstein (1966), Bork (1983), Glass (1989), Horton (1990), Krug (2000), Levine (1997), Morkes & Nielsen (1997, 1998), Nielsen (1997a, 1997b, 1999f), Spyridakis (2000), Sullivan (1998), Williams (1994).

Make Each Paragraph Short



BACKGROUND |

Let your guests skip and skim

Long paragraphs fill up the screen, demanding to be read or skipped. Like a barricade in the road, a thick paragraph slows you down. If you are really interested, you may condescend to read through one of these monsters. But if you are still trying to figure out whether or not to bother to read, this kind of text acts more like a roadblock, requiring that you stop to read, scroll past, or back out of there. However, if you scroll past one of these big blocks of text, you may not be able to pick up its point (or the point of the article) as you go on.

Dan Bricklin, who invented the first electronic spreadsheet and now sells a Web page editor, argues that short paragraphs help people dip and dive, taking a quick look, and, if that does not arouse their interest, skipping forward to the next paragraph. He says, “Short paragraphs help skimming.”

The ideal: 2 or 3 lines

How long should a paragraph be? Two or three lines—that’s the best. Sure, you’re going to need to write longer paragraphs once you get rolling. But keep in mind that on the Web one sentence is a great paragraph.

Figure you have short line lengths like a newspaper. In that situation, half a dozen lines begin to seem long; nine or more lines

There is no artifice as good and desirable as simplicity.

—St. Francis de Sales

Whenever you feel an impulse to perpetrate a piece of exceptionally fine writing, obey it—wholeheartedly—and delete it before sending your manuscript to press. Murder your darlings.

—Arthur Quiller-Couch

Everything that is needless gives Offense.

—Benjamin Franklin

go over the top. Crawford Kilian argues that if you have more than six or eight lines, you should break the paragraph up “into two shorter paragraphs.”

I’ll take the shortcut

If you give users a choice, they pick the shorter paragraph. In its Web guidelines, Apple admits that reading on-screen text is “more difficult and time-consuming” than reading hard copy, so people are “even less likely to thoroughly read long sections of text on a computer.” When Jonathan worked at Apple, he tested text taken directly from books, and bored the hell out of Help users, so he threw out introductions and reduced the hand-holding explanations to a sentence or two. Users started giving the online text thumbs up.

America Online, the most popular portal to the Internet, urges its content providers to make every paragraph short. “Users are not inclined to read long paragraphs.” These folks ought to know.

Use short words we all know

People understand some words faster and more accurately than others. Interestingly, if you pick short words that refer to concrete, physical objects, words most people can easily pronounce, and words that are used a lot, people will understand you. The fewer syllables, the higher the impact.

Choosing words like these turns out to be easier than it sounds because, in English, “these word features often correlate,” says Jan Spyridakis. A word like *vehicle* sounds elegant, but *car* means more to more people. Replacing *hiatus* with the simpler *gap* makes sense.

Making these edits makes your text more comprehensible. But you get another benefit. Your paragraphs end up shorter and easier to understand as units of content, and easier to skip.

EXAMPLES

Before

Under what circumstances will you charge me sales tax?

Generally, such taxes must be levied with respect to the ship-to address, rather than the bill-to address, on the assumption that the ship-to address is receiving the substantial benefit of the purchase. The tax is triggered if we have a physical store in the ship-to state. Currently, those states for which we must charge sales tax (when we ship to addresses in these states) are Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont. We regret any inconvenience.

87 words

Before

Practice moving your awareness up each leg, starting with your toes, then going on to extend your consciousness to the entire foot, gradually moving up to the ankle, and, over time, up the leg. Concentrate for a moment on the knee, and then go up the rest of the leg, being aware of your entire thigh.

56 words

Before

Bitmaps go back to the earliest days of computer graphics. Until bitmaps, people thought making a Christmas tree out of x's and v's was pretty artistic. But with the innovations of machines like Apple's Macintosh and the Xerox Star, the engineers conceived of the screen image not as a bunch of characters, but as a set of dots, in a grid. At the time, each dot, or picture element could either be on

After

When do you charge sales tax?

We have to charge sales tax on any orders we ship to states where we have physical stores—Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont. Sorry about that.

36 words

After

Sense your toes, feet, ankles, calves, knees, and thighs.

9 words

After

Originally, a bitmap image stored your picture by making a map, or grid. Each square of the grid represented a tiny portion of your screen—the amount displayed by one pixel, or picture element.

In those days, a pixel could either be on or off, that is, black or white—so it only took one bit of information to record its state. Hence, the file

(black) or off (white). So by recording the exact coordinates of every pixel, and its state (on or off), engineers could capture your picture. Thus, a bitmap image stored your picture by making a map or grid and populating it with bits. Each square of the grid represented a tiny portion of your screen—the amount displayed by one pixel or picture element. And each pixel was represented, electronically, by a single bit. That’s how the file came to be known as a bitmap.

But then along came grayscale—mixtures of black and white, from 0%, or white, to 100%, or black. That meant that each pixel had, somehow, to record more information than before (not just on or off, but a percentage of gray), and that took up more bits. Then came colors. When you just had 256 colors, you didn’t have to use a lot of bits to record the number of the color of a particular pixel. But then we began to see millions of colors. Just to record, say, “Color Number One Million Two Hundred Thousand One Hundred and Fifty Two” took up even more bits. That’s why you hear people talking about “8-bit color,” “16-bit color,” and so on. Each pixel in the map required a lot of bits.

287 words

Before

I found out how to sort my messages, something you were wondering about last week, and I thought you might like to know. I noticed that at the top of the message list there are words like New, and From, and Date, and Subject, and so on, and if I click one of those, the whole list gets reorganized that way. You know what I mean?

66 words

became known as a bitmap.

Now, of course, each pixel can record many levels of gray or one of millions of colors, so we have to use more bits per pixel to record all that information — hence, terms such as “8-bit color,” or “16-bit color.”

110 words

After

To reorganize the message list, click a column title such as New, From, Date, Subject, or Size.

Presto! The list is sorted that way.

24 words

AUDIENCE FIT

If visitors want this...

TO HAVE FUN

How well does this guideline apply?

Amusing, intriguing, erudite or aberrant prose can go on forever, like a Faulkner paragraph, and we don't object. In fact, we jump in. So if you're planning to entertain your readers, you might start with a short paragraph, and throw a few more in, but you can certainly take a long breath and expound, too.

TO LEARN

Definitely relevant. What looked fine in the lab handout looks intimidating online. Keep every fact, save every idea, but put them into distinct paragraphs.

TO ACT

To guide action, keep your paragraphs as short as you can, without making them cryptic.

TO BE AWARE

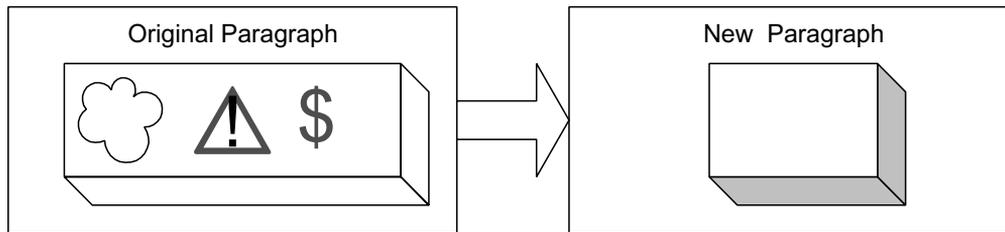
Compress the overtones by choosing words that resonate, rather than rambling on.

TO GET CLOSE TO PEOPLE

Long paragraphs make me scroll forward, whether I am reading e-mail, a discussion, or a Web site.

See: Abeleto (1999), America Online (2001), Apple (1997), Bricklin (1998), Gee et al (1999), Henderson & Bradford (1984), Holcomb et al (1999), Horton (1990), Hudson & Berman (1985), Kaiser (2000), Kilian (1999), Lynch (1997), Marschark & Paivio (1977), NCSA (1996), Spyridakis (2000), Sullivan (1998), Williams (1994), Zipf (1949).

Delete Marketing Fluff



BACKGROUND |

If you're out to describe the truth, leave elegance to the tailor.

—Albert Einstein

Most writers regard truth as their most valuable possession, and therefore are most economical in its use.

—Mark Twain

Filter out the hyperbole

Exaggeration makes your text less useful than objective prose. In one study by Nielsen (1997b), the objective language was 27% more usable than the promotional language because people understood the plain language faster, made fewer errors, and remembered the ideas longer. Nielsen hypothesized that people have to spend extra energy “filtering out the hyperbole to get at the facts.”

If you routinely describe your company with adjectives such as *premier*, *top-rated*, and *world-class*, you need to calm down. Let the facts speak for you. You don't need to give up your enthusiasm, just your adjectives and adverbs.

Be direct

Users mistrust anything that looks like an ad, so they tend to ignore logos, mission statements, and slogans.

If you want to earn your users' trust, turn down the hype. As Bricklin says, “Simple, direct language works better on-screen than flowery or ‘marketing-oriented’ prose.”

You can still do plenty of marketing on the Web. You just have to make your case with nouns and verbs, rather than adjectives and adverbs, particularly the ones that suggest you are being swept away by emotion or your own hype.

Features and benefits, yes. Hand-waving, no

If you are marketing a service or product, you have to point out your unique selling proposition, and you must stress the features and benefits. But keep the explanations simple and cut back on the exclamation points.

If you absolutely positively must have an adverb or two, or an adjective, well OK. Just make sure they don't look, well, silly.

EXAMPLES

Before

As the world's premier provider of e-mail services to the beauty industry, we are extremely proud to offer you the most imaginative creation and fastest delivery of highly targeted e-mail messages aimed at consumers, spa owners, and staff in beauty boutiques.

Before

Welcome to the incredibly useful FormFiller, with the revolutionary algorithm for filling in forms for you. No more remembering user names and passwords. No more typing the same address over and over. FormFiller is just so easy. You click once, and the form is filled in with your information. Our world-class recognition software reads the form and figures out what information should go where, enters that, and presses Enter, so the login form just whisks away. And it's super safe, because your personal information lives on your own computer, encrypted so no one else can read it.

After

If you want to send e-mail marketing beauty products to consumers, spa owners, or staff at beauty boutiques, let us help you create and deliver targeted messages.

After

The FormFiller bar saves you time by filling in forms for you.

It's easy. You don't have to type the same information over and over.

It's fast. You enter the information once, and FormFiller does it for you from then on. One click, and the form is filled.

It's safe. Your personal information is secure on your own computer, encrypted so no one else can read it.

AUDIENCE FIT

If visitors want this...

TO HAVE FUN

How well does this guideline apply?

Only a marketing manager thinks that raving about your product will actually amuse people.

TO LEARN

Any fluff interferes with learning. Cut it out. If you must save the promotional lingo, move it to a different location.

TO ACT

Marketing themes distract from instructions.

TO BE AWARE

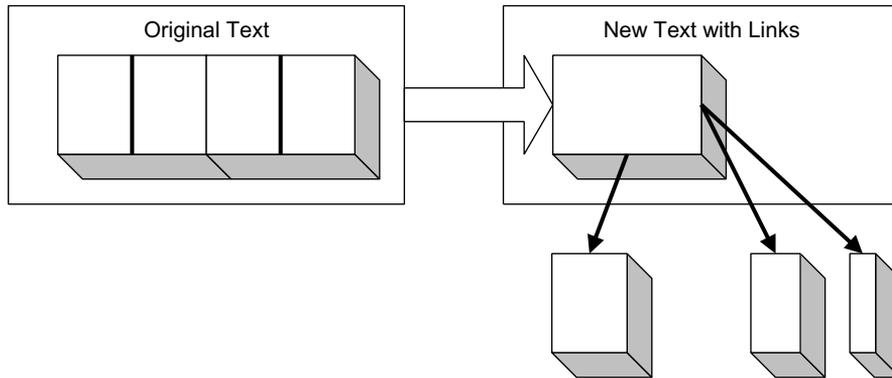
If you can't tell the truth about your topic, you're not making anyone more aware. You may fool some folks, or annoy them, but most people will react with anger when they encounter a pitch along the path to enlightenment.

TO GET CLOSE TO PEOPLE

Acceptable. You can be carried away with enthusiasm for your product or service. But if we suspect that you are insincere, or just voicing the party line, we delete your message.

See: Bricklin (1998), Morkes & Nielsen (1997), Nielsen (1997b, 1999f, 2000a, 2000b), Spyridakis (2000).

Move Vital but Tangential or Supplemental Material



BACKGROUND |

If most people know it, move it

To let your readers know that you, too, belong to their community, mention ideas they are familiar with. But even more convincing proof that you are a member of the community is what you leave out. You understand what can be taken for granted as part of the shared knowledge of the community, so you omit it.

Unfortunately, on the Web, you cannot always tell how knowledgeable a visitor may be. So you take your best guess at the audience, and, instead of omitting the basics, or the extras, you put them elsewhere on the site and link to them. That way, a beginner can find out more, an eager learner can explore at will, but the impatient or experienced visitors do not have to stumble over the material.

If your product is complex enough that you cannot provide all the information someone needs in one presentation (and most of ours are that complex), make it easy for them to get more information.

(Rick Levine, *Sun Guide to Web Style*)

Move the baby talk, and the esoterica

When looking for passages to pull out of your page and move to secondary pages, grab:

- Basic background
- Laborious history
- Abstract theoretical discussions
- Information of interest only to a small fraction of the audience
- Advanced arguments for the benefit of the cognoscenti
- Important topics that do not belong here

But don't just carve up a single long article into a bunch of short takes, just because you can. Downloading a bunch of little segments slows up the process of reading, and makes printing a headache.

Let's go to the sidebar

In the O.J. Simpson trial, we learned that when the prosecutor and defense lawyers huddled with the judge, they were "having a sidebar."

Magazines run extra information in boxes next to the main article, and those boxes are also called *sidebars*.

Web designers have adopted the sidebar as the place for a quick digest of a long story and links to supplementary information. Usually, the Web page sidebar shows up on the far right, near the top of the story, just below some annoying ad.

Both the summary and the links let users know what the whole story centers on, so they help people decide whether or not to bother reading on. In some cases, people like the links more than the story, and jump right to the secondary pages.

Remove the irrelevant

If users bump into irrelevant info, it blinds them to the info they want. Unnecessary info actually keeps them from finding what they are looking for.

Of course, you have to be psychic to know what information your visitors will consider most relevant. But if you can figure that out and move the rest elsewhere, visitors will voluntarily sharpen

One who uses many periods is a philosopher; many interrogations, a student; many exclamations, a fanatic.

—J. L. Basford

their focus on your ideas, understand them better, and remember more. When readers find content to be relevant, they give it more attention. So figure out what most visitors will find intriguing and relevant to their own interests, and then put any other info into a sidebar or links.

EXAMPLES

Before

Another benefit of TAPI is that it accommodates multiple applications on a single phone line. (The Telephone Application Programming Interface, or TAPI, is the standard proposed by Microsoft for making the computer work as a telephone.) TAPI lets several applications use the same phone line, so one can be waiting to receive a call while another places one. So you can leave a fax program running, waiting for a fax you know is coming, while using dial-up networking to pick up your e-mail. In the past you had to cancel the first program, to free up the modem, before you could launch a second program using the modem. With TAPI, the fax program simply recedes into the background, like background printing.

After

Another benefit of TAPI is that it accommodates multiple applications on a single phone line.

Pop-up text:

The Telephone Application Programming Interface (TAPI) is the standard proposed by Microsoft for making the computer work as a telephone.

Moved to another window:

TAPI lets several applications use the same phone line, so one can be waiting to receive a call while placing another call. So you can leave a fax program running, waiting for a fax you know is coming, while using dial-up networking to pick up your e-mail. In the past you had to cancel the first program, to free up the modem, before you could launch a second program using the modem. With TAPI, the fax program simply recedes into the background, like background printing.

Before

Following Montaigne, Emerson studies his own mind at work. He describes composing a speech by assembling a series of sentiments, facts, and illustrations that work together to fire the audience. “Every link in this living chain he found separate; one, ten years ago; one, last week; some of them he found in his father’s house or at school when a boy; some of them by his losses; some of them by his sickness; some by his sins.”

Montaigne’s essays strengthened Emerson’s conviction that he would be his own best subject, and when he reflected on the way a writer goes about creating, he recognized “a multitude of trials and a thousand rejections, and the using and perusing of what was already written.” In this interest in the internal give and take, the subjective piling up of associations, he imitates Montaigne, “the grand old sloven.”

After

Emerson studies his own mind at work following Montaigne. Emerson describes composing a speech as assembling a series of sentiments, facts, and illustrations drawn from different eras in his life. He calls these links a living chain.

Separate window on Montaigne’s influence on Emerson:

Montaigne’s essays strengthened Emerson’s conviction that he would be his own best subject. When Emerson reflected on the way a writer goes about creating, he recognized “a multitude of trials and a thousand rejections, and the using and perusing of what was already written.” With this interest in the internal give and take, the subjective piling up of associations, he imitates Montaigne, “the grand old sloven.”

Pop-up quote:

“Every link in this living chain he found separate; one, ten years ago; one, last week; some of them he found in his father’s house or at school when a boy; some of them by his losses; some of them by his sickness; some by his sins.”

AUDIENCE FIT

If visitors want this...

TO HAVE FUN

How well does this guideline apply?

Jumping around can be a game in itself. But people want time to immerse themselves in your personal point of view, so give them an uncensored rant before linking out to supporting evidence, background, or additional opinions.

TO LEARN

Good teachers work hard at figuring out what ideas they must present first, second, and third—postponing the advanced ideas for later. Learning is a gradual climb up the mountain, so separate each stage of the journey, so that students can absorb it fully before moving on.

TO ACT

Pull together only what people need to carry out the immediate action. Move anything else.

TO BE AWARE

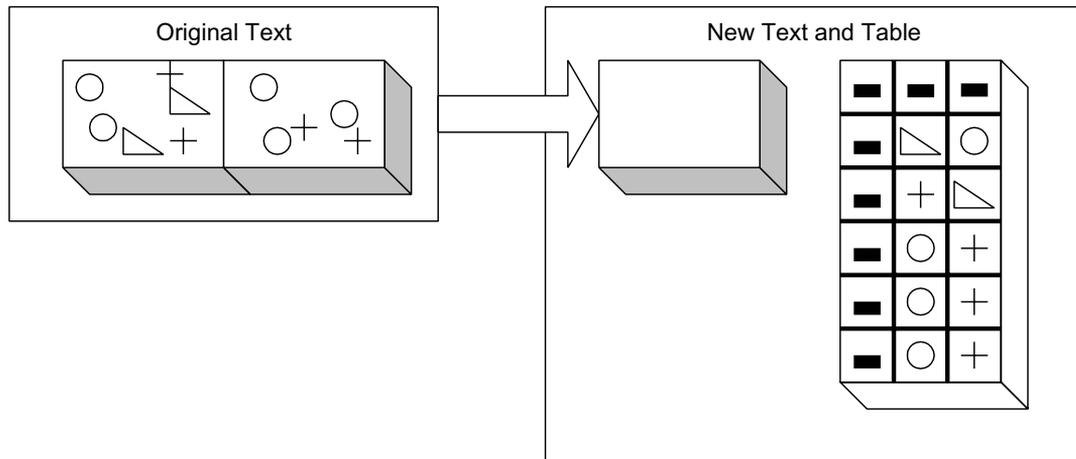
One idea at a time, even though each one connects with all the others.

TO GET CLOSE TO PEOPLE

Think of this guideline as advocating patience. Take it easy. Slow down the pace of new ideas, unless you just want to give the effect of a total brain dump.

See: Asher (1980), Baldwin, Peleg-Bruckner and McClintock (1985), Bricklin (1998), Celsi and Olson (1989), Horton (1990), Levine (1997), Morkes & Nielsen (1997b), Rajani & Rosenberg (1999), Slatin (1988), Spyridakis (2000), Stevens (1980).

Move Repeating Categories of Information into Tables, Charts, or Graphs



BACKGROUND |

If you want people to compare the data, move it out of the text

The great data visualizer, Edward Tufte remarks, “The conventional sentence is a poor way to show more than two numbers because it prevents comparisons within the data.”

By removing the numbers you want people to compare, you simplify your text. But where do you put the numbers?

Help people visualize the data

You make the numbers easier to compare by yanking them out of the running text and lining them up in rows and columns.

If you want to stress a progression, use a chart or graph to make the overall trends easier to spot.

If you have a small data set, or need to offer a lot of particular comparisons, use a brief table.

EXAMPLES

Before

Steel shipments rose dramatically during the first five years of this decade, then declined over the last three years, as estimated by the American Steel Institute. Steel used for automobiles rose from 14,610,000 short tons, in 1990, to 20,123,000 in 1995, and if trends continue, will dip to 14,475,000 for 1998, putting us behind the high point of 1990. Similarly, steel for construction rose from 9,664,000 tons in 1990 to 11,836,000 tons in 1995, then sank below 1990 levels, in estimates for 1998. Other market sectors showed 1998 slightly ahead of 1990, but still substantially behind 1995. For instance, rail manufacturers of freight cars and passenger cars bought 2,525,000 short tons of steel in 1990, then bought 3,805,000 short tons in 1995, and only 3,098,000 in 1998. The only sector showing an advance over 1995 levels are the growing number of steel distributors, who bought 11,125,000 short tons in 1990, then moved up to 14,813,000 short tons in 1995, and soared to 16,025,000 short tons in 1998.

167 words.

After

Steel shipments rose dramatically from 1990 to 1995, then fell in most market categories to levels below 1990 (in autos, and construction), or at least below the swollen figures of 1995 (railroad cars). The only group that continued to increase shipments beyond the highs of 1995: steel distributors. (See [table](#)).

50 words

Steel Shipments Comparison Table			
Steel Products	Net Shipments by Market Classes, in thousands of short tons		
Market Class	1990	1995	1998
Steel for converting and processing	2,928	3,932	3,443
Independent forgers	841	1,250	1,048
Steel distributors	11,125	14,813	16,025
Construction	9,664	11,836	8,913
Automotive	14,610	20,123	14,475
Rail	2,525	3,805	3,098

AUDIENCE FIT

If visitors want this...

TO HAVE FUN

How well does this guideline apply?

Yes, get those serious numbers out of the text. I may not look at the table, but I will eventually look at a chart, after reading the caption (Nielsen 2000b).

TO LEARN

Very helpful. Tables isolate the data and make it easier to study. Ditto charts and diagrams.

TO ACT

Much faster if I have to pick one item, or compare two or three.

TO BE AWARE

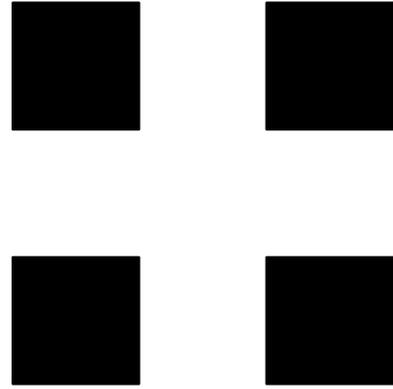
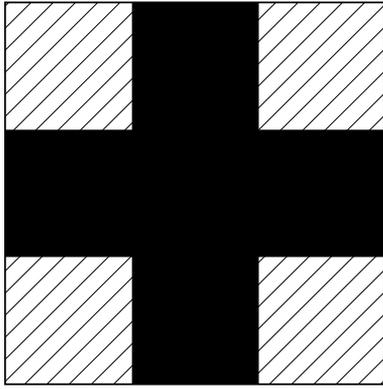
Relevant data backs up your argument best if you separate the numbers out in their own world.

TO GET CLOSE TO PEOPLE

Unless you are trying to relate to a scientist or an engineer, numbers are not going to build intimacy. If you must provide them, move them out of the text, as a courtesy.

See: Brusaw, Alred, & Oliu (1997), Horton (1990), Nielsen (2000b), Tufte (1983).

Beware of Cutting So Far That You Make the Text Ambiguous



BACKGROUND |

Preserve *that* and *which*

If you cut out connective tissue such as *that* and *which*—particularly in a long sentence—you may make it hard for people to understand the connection between the parts of your sentence. For instance, you may make readers think a sentence is headed in one direction, only to startle them later with a reversal or change of meaning at the end. In these circumstances, people wonder: what is the main subject? Is this the verb that goes with that subject? But what is this other verb over here?

Their mind reconsiders the sentence, taking it one way and then the other. Judith Ramey calls this confusion an Escher effect, after the artist whose birds turn out to be holes in a pattern, as our eye flips them from foreground to background. “Escher effects force users to consider the context in which information appears, rather than simply taking in the information offered. They force users to analyze particular phrases and sentences.” This dissonance slows the readers down, reducing their confidence in you.

When Calvin Coolidge, asked by his wife what the preacher had preached on, replied “Sin,” and, asked what the preacher had said, replied, “He was against it,” he was brief enough. But one hardly envies Mrs. Coolidge.

—F. L. Lucas

So cut everything else, but leave *that* and *which*.

Also, leave those little articles, *a* and *the*, that sometimes indicate whether you are talking about the same thing as before, or a generic object of that type.

Leave the guts

When cutting your text, preserve the meaning. If you drop a key fact or a supporting idea, you have gone too far. Being concise does not mean saying less—just using fewer words.

Punctuation that won't be missed

At first you might think the way to condense your text would be to replace a verb phrase with a colon, to shorten a phrase like “of New Mexico” into “New Mexico’s” or to glue two sentences together with a semicolon. No. Those changes rely too heavily on little punctuation marks the reader can miss.

Because the text is so hard to read on-screen, you cannot count on people spotting those little dots that make up a colon, semicolon, or apostrophe.

- Missing a colon, people barrel into a list or definition without realizing they have shifted from the first part of the sentence to the second.
- Missing a semicolon, people continue the meaning of one sentence right on into the subject and verb of the next sentence—the one that began after the semicolon.
- Missing the apostrophe, people turn a possessive into a plural, and then get confused.

Result: your users get puzzled, and, if they care, they must re-read to straighten out the difference between the two possible interpretations. Oh, so this is one sentence, and that is another!

Attention has shifted from your point to the challenge of parsing your syntax. And for many people, that loss of attention tells them it's time to click on—away from your annoying prose.

To keep people focused on your meaning:

- Instead of the strange condensed abbreviation, spell the term out.
- Instead of “it's” write “it is.”

- Instead of a colon introducing a list or a definition, use a dash (—) or ellipsis (...). We can see that.
- And get rid of a semicolon connecting two main clauses. Create two distinct sentences.

EXAMPLES

Before

The pyrochemical team expected a surge in gaseous emissions, and their associated environmental impacts, when released, would not occur.

After

The pyrochemical team did not expect a surge in gaseous emissions and their associated environmental impacts.

Before

As entered, the program reformats data.

After

The program reformats the data as you enter it.

Before

As core technology activities mature, they will be terminated, as one might expect, following carefully designed implementation schedules, by transfer to the applied projects areas: the radiation area, the pulsar area, or the quantum information area.

After

As core technology activities mature, they will be transferred to the applied projects areas. Each transfer follows a carefully designed implementation schedule. The applied projects areas focus on radiation, pulsars, or quantum information.

Before

No reformat now; reformat when in report.

After

I'm sorry, but you cannot reformat now. To reformat, you must enter report mode.

AUDIENCE FIT

If visitors want this...

TO HAVE FUN

How well does this guideline apply?

Even the fun-lovers hate to be confused. You can entertain without a lot of apostrophes, colons, and semicolons. Of course, you can't give up the exclamation point!

TO LEARN

Simplifying does not ruin your dignity.

TO ACT

Avoiding these ambiguities makes your instructions easier to follow.

TO BE AWARE

Why not? If you cut too far, you just shift attention away from your deeper meaning, turning the reader's mind to grammatical exegesis.

TO GET CLOSE TO PEOPLE

In the heat of a rant, any punctuation goes, because people type so badly when responding to a discussion or e-mail. But don't tighten up too far. Let yourself ramble, and you'll avoid the worst problems we describe here.

See: Bricklin (1998), Galitz (1985), Horton (1990), Ramey (1989), Waite (1982).

POST |

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