

# Brevity

*Savage Chickens*

by Doug Savage



# Two ways to be brief

## (1) Reduce content

- Stick to your story

## (2) Use fewer and shorter words

- After you write (self-revision)
- Make every character of text justify its existence
- Can you be *too* brief?
  - Yes, although it's an uncommon problem.
  - What matters most is brevity of reading: if cutting more words makes the reader's job harder, then don't.

# Text-bulgers to watch for (1)

- Passive voice
- Nominalizations (*“achieve a reduction in length”* vs. *“reduce length”*)
- Long words (*“utilize”* vs. *“use”*)
- Roundabout phrases (*“the majority of”* vs. *“most”*)
- Tautologous modifiers (*“blue in colour”* vs. *“blue”*)
- Empty modifiers (*“quite strong”* vs. *“strong”*)
- Padding phrases (*“in this study we”* vs. *“we”*)

*“needless to say”*

*“for all intents and purposes”*

*“a number of”*

*“relatively”*

*“in those instances when”*

*“basically”*

# Text-bulgers to watch for (2)

- Redundancy
  - Keep each paragraph to its topic
  - Don't repeat Methods in Results, Results in Discussion, etc.  
(reminders are good; wholesale repetition is not)
  - Don't present the same material in text, table, and figure  
(text should summarize pattern, not repeat it)

# Text-bulgers to watch for (3)

- Excessive hedging

*“(Observation) could reasonably be assumed to possibly occur by chance”*

- Excessive metadiscourse

*“We believe that our results establish that...”*

*“As we established in the previous paragraph...”*

*“The objective of my study was to...”*

*“Consider the following examples...”*

- Excessive parentheticals

“Parenthetical”: phrase that interrupts an otherwise complete sentence (or sentence interrupting an otherwise complete paragraph); may be in parentheses, set off by commas or dashes, in a footnote, etc.

*“Studies like ours (which are common in the literature) generally establish that....”*

# How much should you aim to shorten?

- Only you can know how wordy you are!
- My own first drafts can almost always be cut 20%. Then that second draft can usually be cut by 20% more.
- Stop when further shortening makes reading harder.

# Today's workshop

## Bloat and cut

- Each group will be given a short excerpt from a paper. Revise to make it as unnecessarily *long* as possible.
- Each group will be given a longer excerpt from a draft manuscript. Revise to make it as *concise* as possible.