Lesson

9

Concision

Often I think writing is sheer paring away
of oneself leaving always something thinner,
barer, more meager.
—F. Scott Fitzgerald

The ability to simplify means to eliminate the
unnecessary so that the necessary may speak.
—Hans Hofmann

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

Understanding Concision

You write more clearly when you match your characters and actions to your subjects and verbs, when you get the right characters into topics and the right words under stress, when you motivate readers with well-crafted introductions, and when you frame your paragraphs, sections, and documents to help readers grasp their global coherence. But readers may still think your prose 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. And 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.

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
hopes and desires	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 others, especially its modifier (boldfaced):

Do not try to *predict* **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 (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, rules* implies *playing the game, 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 could 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 when to replace a phrase 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 these 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 many	→	few
not the same	→	different	not often	→	rarely
not allow	→	prevent	not stop	→	continue
not notice	→	overlook	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	*preclude, prevent, lack, fail, doubt, reject, avoid, deny, refuse, exclude, contradict, prohibit, bar*
Prepositions	*without, against, lacking, but for, except*
Conjunctions	*unless, except when*

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.

Exercise 9.1

Prune the redundancy from these sentences.

1. Critics cannot avoid employing complex and abstract technical terms if they are to successfully analyze literary texts and discuss them in a meaningful way.
2. Scientific research generally depends on fully accurate data if it is to offer theories that will allow us to predict the future in a plausible way.
3. In regard to desirable employment in teaching jobs, prospects for those engaged in graduate-school-level studies are at best not certain.
4. Notwithstanding the fact that all legal restrictions on the use of firearms are the subject of heated debate and argument, it is necessary that the general public not stop carrying on discussions pro and con in regard to them.
5. Most likely, a majority of all patients who appear at a public medical clinical facility do not expect special medical attention or treatment, because their particular health problems and concerns are often not major and for the most part can usually be adequately treated without much time, effort, and attention.

Where appropriate, change the following negatives to affirmatives, and do any more editing you think useful.

6. Except when expenses do not exceed $250, the Insured may not refuse to provide the Insurer with receipts, checks, or other evidence of costs.
7. There is no possibility in regard to a reduction in the size of the federal deficit if reductions in federal spending are not introduced.

8. Do not discontinue medication unless symptoms of dizziness and nausea are not present for six hours.
9. No one should be prevented from participating in cost-sharing educational programs without a full hearing into the reasons for his or her not being accepted.
10. No agreement exists on the question of an open or closed universe, a dispute about which no resolution is likely as long as a computation of the total mass of the universe has not been done.
11. So long as taxpayers do not engage in widespread refusal to pay taxes, the government will have no difficulty in paying its debts.
12. No alternative exists in this country to the eventual development of tar sand, oil shale, and coal as sources of fuel, if we wish to stop being energy dependent on imported oil.
13. Not until a resolution between Catholics and Protestants in regard to the authority of papal supremacy is reached will there be a start to a reconciliation between these two Christian religions.

Exercise 9.2

Here are two actual sentences from two "free" offers.

> You will not be charged our first monthly fee unless you don't cancel within the first thirty days.
>
> To avoid being charged your first monthly fee, cancel your membership before your free trial ends.

Which is less clear? Why might it have been written like that? Revise it.

Redundant Metadiscourse

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. When we prune it, 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.

How writers use metadiscourse varies by field, but you can usually cut these two types:

1. **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.

2. **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 mentioned at least once in the text previous to it:

   > **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 has long surpassed 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** has long surpassed Japan's industrial development.

Hedges and Intensifiers

Another kind of metadiscourse reflects the writer's certainty about what she is claiming. *Hedges* qualify your certainty; *intensifiers* increase it. Both can be redundant when used excessively. But they can also be useful, because they signal how well you balance caution and confidence and therefore influence how readers judge your character.

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*

Too much hedging sounds mealy-mouthed, like this:

> 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 massive historical evidence would make an assertion as flatly certain 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"

Intensifiers

These are common INTENSIFIERS:

Adverbs	*very, pretty, quite, rather, clearly, obviously, undoubtedly, certainly, of course, indeed, inevitably, invariably, always, literally*
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, however, is the absence of a hedge.

Without the hedges, Crick and Watson's claim would be more concise but more aggressive. Compare this (I boldface the stronger words, but most of the aggressive tone comes from the *absence* of hedges):

> We ~~wish to suggest~~ **state here** ~~a~~ **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.

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.

QUICK TIP: When most readers read a sentence that begins with something like *obviously, undoubtedly, it is clear that, there is no question that*, and so on, they reflexively think the opposite.

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.

QUICK TIP: In Lesson 7, we noted that problems demand solutions expressed as points or claims. But be careful about using metadiscourse when stating your solution, because it can allow you merely to announce a topic instead of advancing a claim. To avoid this pitfall, delete the metadiscourse (boldfaced) and rewrite what remains as a sentence:

> **In this study, I examine** the history of Congressional legislation to protect children in the workplace.

✓ Congress has legislated to protect children in the workplace.

If the resulting claim seems self-evident, like this one, you need to say more, or to do more thinking about what you want to say.

Exercise 9.3

Edit these for both unnecessary metadiscourse and redundancy.

1. But, on the other hand, we can perhaps point out that there may always be TV programming to appeal to our most prurient and, therefore, lowest interests.
2. In this particular section, I intend to discuss my position about the possible need to dispense with the standard approach to plea bargaining. I believe this for two reasons. The first reason is that there is the possibility of letting hardened criminals avoid receiving their just punishment. The second reason is the following: plea bargaining seems to encourage a growing lack of respect for the judicial system.
3. Turning now to the next question, there is in regard to wilderness area preservation activities one basic principle when attempting to formulate a way of approaching decisions about unspoiled areas to be set aside as not open to development for commercial exploitation.
4. It is my belief that in regard to terrestrial-type snakes, an assumption can be made that there are probably none in unmapped areas of the world surpassing the size of those we already have knowledge of.
5. Depending on the particular position that one takes on this question, the educational system has taken on a degree of importance that may be equal to or perhaps even exceed the family as a major source of transmission of social values.