

# Skimming the Fat Off Your Writing

When Rudyard Kipling finished a story, he would put the manuscript away in a drawer. After a month or so, he took it out, read it over, and struck out every word he then saw to be unnecessary. Kipling called this “letting it drain,” and Kipling’s “letting it drain” is among the chief assurances of persuasive writing.

So “let it drain,” not necessarily in Kipling’s way by revising your pleading, contract, or opinion after a 30-day cooling-off period, but certainly by rewriting your first draft in accordance with two related principles inspired by Kipling’s example.

First, eliminate. Examine each word sitting there on your page and ask it, “What do you do for me?” If the answer is that it merely loiters, doing nothing, make the superfluous word get up and move along. Let lazy language take its ease elsewhere, but never in your writing.

Second, boil down. A briefer version is always better than a longer. Remember, verbosity endangers. Language is as precious as any coinage and as easily debased. The spendthrift of words risks a fate even worse than that awaiting the spendthrift of money. All the latter need fear is an empty pocket; the former hazards an empty head.

“Draining” lends precision to your ideas. You can’t eliminate unnecessary words without first determining which are the necessary words. You can’t boil down unless you have first thought hard about what you propose to say.

Further, eliminating unnecessary words gives your prose clarity of focus. Boiling down leads to economy of effort, the parsimonious adaptation of linguistic means to intellectual ends. These two qualities—clarity and economy—bespeak a mind at work, and when your reader perceives a mind at work, persuasion is only a step away.

To illustrate, take the opening paragraph of the Supreme Court’s opinion in *Roe v Wade*, 410 US 113 (1973):

*This Texas federal appeal and its Georgia companion . . . present constitutional challenges to state criminal abortion legislation. The Texas statutes under attack here are typical of those that have been in effect in many States for approximately a century. The Georgia statutes, in contrast, have a modern cast and are a legislative product that, to an extent at least, obviously reflects the influences of recent attitudinal change, of advancing medical knowledge and techniques, and of new thinking about an old issue.*

This wants revision. One respectfully wishes the author had proceeded as follows:

First sentence. (1) Because the United States Supreme Court is a federal court, to describe the appeal as “federal” is redundant. Eliminate. (2) What do Supreme Court appellants do but challenge state legislation under the Constitution? Boil down *present constitutional challenges*. (3) *State criminal abortion legislation*, a string of four nouns with the first three serving as adjectives, is barbarous English. A verb would handle the job better.

Second sentence. (1) Given the first sentence’s reference to the statutes under attack, the phrase *under attack here* adds nothing. Eliminate. (2) The clause *that have been in effect* can be boiled down.

Third sentence. (1) By describing the Georgia statutes as modern and, in the pre-

ceding sentence, the Texas statutes as old, the author has already drawn the contrast. Eliminate the unnecessary phrase *in contrast*. (2) *Modern cast* means “modern.” Why two words instead of one? And why expend a word to label the Georgia statutes modern when the rest of the sentence elucidates their modernity? (3) To say that “statutes . . . are a legislative product” is to say that statutes are statutes. Boil down. (4) The phrase *to an extent at least* is inconsistent with the adverb *obviously*. Neither is necessary. Eliminate. (5) *Reflects* means “shows the influence of” something. Hence, *reflects the influence of* is redundant. Boil down. (6) *Recent attitudinal change*. People always have attitudes. A recent attitude must, therefore, be a change from old attitudes. Boil down. (7) “Medical knowledge” includes “techniques.” Boil down.

Rewritten, the paragraph reads as follows:

*This Texas appeal and its Georgia companion . . . challenge state legislation making abortion a crime. The Texas statutes are typical of those in effect in many states for approximately a century, while the Georgia statutes reflect recent attitudes, advancing medical knowledge, and new thinking about an old issue.*

Consider this general method for writing persuasively. (1) Since clear ideas make clear writing, think about your meaning before trying to express it. (2) Use verbs liberally, especially verbs other than *to be*, and preferably verbs in the active voice. (3) “Let it drain” by eliminating the superfluous and boiling down the verbose. ♦

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