The Word Hawk

by Bob Johnson

Concision: The Art of Linguistic Liposuction

Murder your darlings.
— Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch

A sundial in the corner of a garden not far from here bears this epigram on its base: “The moving finger writes, and, having writ, moves on; Nor all your piety nor wit shall lure it back to cancel half a line, nor all your tears wash out a word of it.”

Despite the antique usage, for me those 34 words of Omar Khayyam distill the brevity of life, the finality of death, and the regret over roads untaken—and mistaken—in a way longer writings do not. They succeed as an example of the power of language to capture an idea succinctly.

Editors are paid to render writing more efficient—to “boil that cabbage down”, in the words of the old fiddle tune. But how do we do this without writing “stick-English” (think of the stick-figures in art class) or resorting to a metronomic “proces-sion of neat monosyllables”, as Amy Einsohn expresses it in The Copyeditor’s Handbook? How do we compress our authors’ ideas into their irreducible but still graceful components?

Here are a few suggestions for walking the line between paucity and gratuitousness.

**Prune pointless adjectives.** Consider: A tall skyscraper (do you ever see a short one?); my personal opinion (do you ever have an impersonal one?); in close proximity (is proximity ever remote?). Not every oak has to be gnarled or every problem thorny. And what is a guarantee if not absolute?

**Strike empty adverbs.** Where possible, delete vacuous modifiers and what Sir Ernest Gowers (in Plain Words: Their ABC calls “adverbial dressing gowns”)—in such couplets as completely unique, wholly unjustifiable, thoroughly mistaken, woefully inadequate. Have the courage to leave a word unmodified. If a word is too weak to stand alone, scour your vocabulary for a stronger one before resorting to a modifier.

**Switch to the active voice.** In some documents, you can save a lot of space simply by switching passive-voice constructions to active. Not only do passive-voice constructions enfeeble the writing, they require more words.

No building company ever posted a sign in front of a house under construction that said “Pride in our work is taken by us.” No suitor ever dropped to his knee before his beloved and proclaimed “You are loved by me.” “We take pride in our work” requires only six words, and “I love you” only three.

**Nuke circumlocution.** Circumlocution is omnipresent in today’s academic writing. It constitutes a form of backdoor passive voice. “These data are indicative of perturbations to the genome that are deserving of further study.” No. “These data indicate perturbations to the genome that deserve further study.”

**Cull hedge words and intensifiers.** In Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace, Joseph M Williams indicts the following “hedge words and intensifiers”, saying that they make writing appear “not just redundant, but mealy-mouthed”:

- usually
- often
- sometimes
- almost
- virtually
- possibly
- perhaps
- apparently
- somewhat
- most
- many
- some
- may
- might
- can
- could
- seem
- appear
- suggest
- indicate
- very
- pretty
- quite
rather
clearly
obviously
undoubtedly
certainly
of course
indeed
central
crucial
basic
major
principal
essential
show
prove
establish

In fact, I recommend the entirety of
Williams’s chapter (titled “Concision”) as
an admirable summary of the principles of
linguistic liposuction.

An excellent list of unneeded words and
phrases appears in CSE’s own Scientific Style
and Format, sixth edition (pp 123-6).

Try a bulleted list. Where formatting and
style permit, a bulleted list can eliminate
repeated introductory words or phrases:

“Nellie has high blood pressure. She
also has cataracts and glaucoma. In
addition, she suffers from pain in her

left hip, left knee, and left foot.”

Nellie has
• High blood pressure.
• Cataracts and glaucoma.
• Pain in her left hip, knee, and foot.

Think like a headline writer. Newspaper
editors agonize over their front pages,
where every millimeter is precious.
Although inelegant, “Solons Eye Agenda”
captures the idea with fewer characters
than “Senators Consider Schedule”. This
breezy approach is inappropriate for elevat-
ed prose, but you get the idea. When you
have finished your editing and it appears
grammatically correct, reread it with the
idea of using shorter, simpler words and
fewer adjectives and adverbs. Reread,
rethink, trim, compress.

Chuckle of the Month: Palo Alto Daily
News headline: “Law Aims to Curb Hot
Dogs.”

The story is not about improving human
nutrition, but about mandating adequate
summertime ventilation for canines in
unattended vehicles.