Five Quick Ways to Trim Your Writing

At the eleventh hour, you've got to do surgery on a crucial report and make it 30% leaner. Here's how to do it with a minimum of pain.

WORD COMES BACK from the boss on the report you labored weeks over: "This is good, but it needs to be a lot shorter." You throw up your hands in frustration. She didn't tell you what to cut or how. Not only does your report gather together all the information the committee needs to make a decision on the project, but it gathers that information together well. Every section furthers the argument, you say to yourself; there's nothing extraneous in it.

Similar situations crop up in many business settings. A presentation handout you want to keep on one page. A project description limited to 200 words. An executive summary of a complex, detailed report. Here are some tips for cutting length without losing meaning.

❶ Take a good, hard look at the structure

Which parts support the roof, and which can be cut away without collapsing the whole structure?

The old advice about previewing and then reviewing your message may be fine for lengthy reports and essays, but when you're squeezed for space, they amount to building three walls to do the job of one. Don't announce what you will say, just say it.

For example, you may have followed your old English teacher's advice to include in your introductory paragraph one sentence previewing each point you will make. Here's an easy cut: Delete the introductory paragraph and jump right into the message.

Additionally, the foundation you built may be more solid than you need. For example, maybe you've included detailed background information. Does your audience really need it all to understand and be persuaded by your argument? If not, summarize it briefly and get right to the bottom line.

Finally, some of your structure may be unnecessary. If a section exists mostly for show, it can go. Cut anything that illuminates something other than your main point.

❷ Stick to specifics

Specifics make up the meat of your argument, and generalities the carbs; put your writing on a high-protein, low-carb diet. A telling anecdote or statistic will stay with your audience longer than a generality and will usually convey the more general message.

Think of how politicians often expend their precious time in a speech or debate highlighting a specific hero's story. They know that telling a story (of a wounded soldier, laid-off worker, entrepreneur) is the best way to put forward a platform (better weapons, more unemployment insurance, lower taxes).

❸ Use formatting creatively

You might first think that adding illustrations or headings to a report will eat up space, but in fact this tactic can help you shave down how many words are needed to get your message across.

Headings. Headings are useful because they clarify a report's organization, eliminate the need for topic sentences, create white space, and help readers skim. But the way they're usually formatted—on a line by themselves, sometimes with a blank line following—takes up a lot of space. If you want the space back without losing the headings, convert them to in-paragraph headings like the one at the beginning of this paragraph.

Tables. If you want to compare and contrast various options, do so in a table rather than in running text. Just to start with, you won't have to keep repeating the names of the different companies, for instance, or the criteria on which you're judging them. More significantly, a table presents complex comparisons in a succinct way. Your readers can compare and contrast Options A and B, Options B and D, or Options A, B, and C, as they want; you don't have to write out all the similarities and differences between various options.

An added bonus: The audience's expectations change when they look at tables. They don't expect complete sentences, and they may be willing to look at text in a smaller font.

Maps and diagrams. Think how long it takes to write out directions: *Maple St. is the third stoplight. There's a Denny's on one corner and a used-car lot on the other corner, but if you get to the Clarksdale city limits you've gone too far.* A map conveys the same information concisely and accessibly. Flowcharts and organizational charts likewise convey complex relationships in easy-to-understand form.

Emphasis. To make sure your audience remembers what you have to say, you may be tempted to use phrases like *This is the key to the whole thing* or *If you take one message away from this document, let it be the following.* Instead, put that message in boldface and you've conveyed those phrases implicitly.

❹ Downshift your tone

There is something about writing a report that causes many people to adopt a formal, bureaucratic tone. When you write this way, you use bigger words, more parenthetical phrases, and a greater number of complex sentences. If you shift to a more informal tone, you may find yourself writing shorter.

Here's one place to start: Use contractions. It's not that changing *cannot* to *can't* and *will not* to *won't* saves so much space, but using contractions will help you avoid the long, formal style of bureaucrats, explains Edward P. Bailey in *Plain English at Work.*

Another way to shift your tone is to speak directly to your audience, using personal pronouns such as *you.* Maybe you had a teacher who didn't allow you to use *you,* so you developed wordy ways to avoid it. For example, *The lights must be turned off before the office is vacated.*

But *you* is fine in most business contexts, and using it can let you write a lot shorter. *You must turn off the lights before you leave.* We've gone from 60 to 45 characters—a savings of 25%.

❺ Cut and combine

Look over your document sentence by sentence, looking for ways to cut words by combining two sentences into one. Consider these sentences:

This presentation examines the benefits of outsourcing. It is my recommendation that we reduce overhead by outsourcing noncore processes such as customer service, fulfillment, and other support functions.

The first sentence is dead weight. Cut it out and write instead:

We could significantly reduce overhead by outsourcing such noncore support functions as customer service and fulfillment.

You've now both announced your topic and stated your position on it with wording that's almost 50% leaner than the original.

When the length of a document doesn't matter to the reader, you insert lots of phrases that help pinpoint what you're talking about. The previous sentence contains examples of such phrases: *of a document* and *to the reader.* You don't always need to be so specific. For instance, if we delete those phrases so that the sentence begins, *When length doesn't matter,* the word count has been significantly reduced without any loss of meaning.

Here are some other ways to crop words:

Drop lengthy titles. Rather than *Bob Smith, Assistant Vice President for Corporate Communications and Government Relations, says...*you could write *spokesperson Bob Smith says....*

Look out for the obvious. Rather than write, *Obviously, this means we will need to raise prices, which could reduce sales,* write instead, *Our need to raise prices could reduce sales.* Do a search for the word *obvious,* and see if the sentences in which it or *obviously* appears could be trimmed down. After all, if something is obvious, why waste precious space saying it?

Replace long words or phrases with shorter ones. In *Legal Writing in Plain English*, Bryan A. Garner notes some easy ways to tighten up your language. On its own, each such change may save just a little space, but it's like saving pennies: Eventually they add up to something meaningful.

Convert "of" phrases to possessives. For example, change *the success of the company* to *the company's success.*

Replace bloated phrases with simpler words. *An adequate number of* can be replaced with *enough, notwithstanding the fact that* is a windy way

of saying *although*, and *during such time as* simply means *while.*

Use active verbs. Passive constructions require more verbiage. For example, look again at the final example under "Downshift your tone." Avoiding *you* required using a passive construction (*The lights must be turned off before the office is vacated*) that was much wordier than the sentence with an active verb (*You must turn off the lights before you leave*).

Never express a number in both digits and words. There's no need to write *Twelve (12) people attended the meeting;* either the word or the numeral works fine on its own. Your corporate style manual may have specific guidelines on when to express numbers as numerals and when to express them as words, but following two general principles can save you space: (1) Never double up; (2) Always use numerals for large numbers (*200,000,* not *two hundred thousand*).

Some of these tips may sound suspiciously like the general advice you get on how to write well. That's no coincidence: Good writing is concise.

But the problem we set out to solve was that your boss told you to cut your report by 30%. Following these tips can do that for you. And if she comes back to you to say, "You know, that shorter version is a lot better written, too," that will just be a bonus. ❑

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(FURTHER READING)

Plain English at Work: A Guide to Business Writing and Speaking
by Edward P. Bailey
Oxford University Press ◆ 1996

Legal Writing in Plain English: A Text with Exercises
by Bryan A. Garner
University of Chicago Press ◆ 2001