



Writing Tools

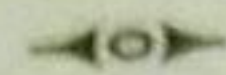
50 ESSENTIAL STRATEGIES
FOR EVERY WRITER



ROY PETER CLARK

"Writers will be inspired to pick up their pens." —*Boston Globe*

TOOL 10



Cut big, then small.

Prune the big limbs, then shake out the dead leaves.

When writers fall in love with their words, it is a good feeling that can lead to a bad effect. When we fall in love with all our quotes, characters, anecdotes, and metaphors, we cannot bear to kill any of them. But kill we must. In 1914 British author Arthur Quiller-Couch wrote it bluntly: "Murder your darlings."

Such ruthlessness is best applied at the end of the process, when creativity can be moderated by coldhearted judgment. A fierce discipline must make every word count.

"Vigorous writing is concise," wrote William Strunk in the first edition of *The Elements of Style*.

A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that he make every word tell.

But how to do that?

Begin by cutting the big stuff. Donald Murray taught me that brevity comes from selection, not compression, a lesson that re-

quires lifting blocks from the work. When Maxwell Perkins edited Thomas Wolfe, he confronted manuscripts that could be weighed by the pound and delivered in a wheelbarrow. The famous editor once advised the famous author: "It does not seem to me that the book is over-written. Whatever comes out of it must come out block by block and not sentence by sentence." Perkins reduced one four-page passage about Wolfe's uncle to six words: "Henry, the oldest, was now thirty."

If your goal is to achieve precision and concision, begin by pruning the big limbs. You can shake out the dead leaves later.

- Cut any passage that does not support your focus.
- Cut the weakest quotations, anecdotes, and scenes to give greater power to the strongest.
- Cut any passage you have written to satisfy a tough teacher or editor rather than the common reader.
- Don't invite others to cut. You know the work better. Mark optional trims. Then decide whether they should become actual cuts.

Always leave time for revision, but if pressed, shoot for a draft and a half. That means cutting phrases, words, even syllables in a hurry. The paradigm for such word editing is the work of William Zinsser. In the second chapter of *On Writing Well*, he demonstrates how he cut the clutter from final drafts of his own book. "Although they look like a first draft, they had already been rewritten and retyped . . . four or five times. With each rewrite I try to make what I have written tighter, stronger and more precise, eliminating every element that is not doing useful work."

In his draft, Zinsser writes of the struggling reader: "My sympathies are entirely with him. He's not so dumb. If the reader is lost, it is generally because the writer of the article has not been careful enough to keep him on the proper path." That passage seems lean enough, so it's instructive to watch the author cut the fat. In his revision "entirely" gets the knife. So does "He's not so dumb." So does "of the article." And so does "proper." (I confess

that I would keep "proper path," just for the alliteration. But "path" contains the meaning of "proper.")

The revised passage: "My sympathies are with him. If the reader is lost, it is generally because the writer has not been careful enough to keep him on the path." Twenty-seven words outwork the original thirty-six.

Targets for cuts include:

- Adverbs that intensify rather than modify: *just, certainly, entirely, extremely, completely, exactly.*
- Prepositional phrases that repeat the obvious: *in the story, in the article, in the movie, in the city.*
- Phrases that grow on verbs: *seems to, tends to, should have to, tries to.*
- Abstract nouns that hide active verbs: *consideration becomes considers; judgment becomes judges; observation becomes observes.*
- Restatements: *a sultry, humid afternoon.*

The previous draft of this essay contained 850 words (see below). This version contains 678, a savings of 20 percent.

TOOL 10: PREVIOUS DRAFT

When writers fall in love with their words, it is a good ~~and power-~~
~~ful~~ feeling that can lead to a bad ~~and dangerous~~ effect. ~~Jacqui~~
~~Banaszynski reaches a point where she feels so immersed in her~~
~~work that every reflection, conversation, observation seems con-~~
~~nected to her writing passion. She calls this "being in full story."~~
When we fall in love with all our quotes, ~~all our~~ characters, ~~all our~~
anecdotes, ~~all our~~ ^{and} metaphors, ~~it seems impossible for us~~ we can
not bear to kill any of them. But kill we must. In 1914 British au-
thor Arthur Quiller ^{Couch} ~~put it more~~ wrote it bluntly: "Murder
your darlings."

Such ruthlessness is best applied at the end of the process,
where ~~the free flow of~~ creativity can be ~~replaced~~ moderated by
cold ^{he} ~~hearted~~ judgment. ~~To become a card carrying member of~~
~~Chip Scanlan's Word Cutting Club, A fierce discipline and~~
~~cleared-eyed evaluation~~ must make every word count.

"Vigorous writing is concise," wrote William Strunk ~~when~~ ^{in the first}
~~E.B. White was still his student.~~ ^{edition}
^{of The Elements}
^{of Style}

^e A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph
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parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences
short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in out-
line, but that he make every word tell. ^e

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comes from selection, not compression, ^e a lesson that requires
lifting ~~whole parts~~ blocks from the work. When Maxwell Perkins
edited ~~the work of~~ Thomas Wolfe, he ~~often~~ ^e confronted manu-
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Perkins reduced

sentence by sentence." One four-page passage about Wolfe's uncle ~~was reduced~~ to six words: "Henry, the oldest, was now thirty."

If your goal is to achieve ~~concision and precision~~ precision and concision, begin by pruning the big limbs. You can shake out the dead leaves later.

- Cut ~~out~~ any passage that does not support ~~the focus or central theme of the story~~ your focus.
- If you have a number of Cut the weakest quotations, anecdotes, ~~and~~ scenes ~~that sharpen the point of the story, cut the weakest of these, which will~~ to give greater power to the strongest.
- Cut ~~out~~ any passage you have written ~~to avoid prosecutorial editing or to satisfy what you think will be a teacher's requirements~~ to satisfy a tough teacher or editor, rather than the common reader.
- Don't invite others to cut ~~based on their judgment~~. You know the work better. Mark "optional trims." ~~Now ask yourself whether these options should they become actual cuts.~~ *Then decide whether*

~~Even if you don't have time for much revision~~ Always leave time for revision, but if you are pressed, shoot for a "draft and a half." That means cutting phrases, words, even syllables in a hurry. The ~~greatest model for this kind of revision~~ paradigm for such word editing is the work of William Zinsser. ~~Take a look at~~ In the second chapter of *On Writing Well*, he demonstrates how he cut the clutter ~~out of manuscript pages~~ from final drafts of his own book. "Although they look like a first draft, they had already been rewritten and retyped ~~four or five times~~ four or five times. With each rewrite I try to make what I have written tighter, stronger and more precise, eliminating every element that is not doing useful work."

In his draft, Zinsser writes of the struggling reader: "My sympathies are entirely with him. He's not so dumb. If the reader is lost, it is generally because the writer of the article has not been

careful enough to keep him on the proper path." That passage seems lean enough ~~to me~~, so it's instructive to watch the author ~~zero in on the weakest words~~ ^{cut} the fat. In his revision "entirely" gets the knife. So does "He's not so dumb." So does "of the article." And so does "proper." (I confess that I would keep "proper path," just for the alliteration. ~~Keeping you on the~~ But "path" contains the meaning of "proper.")

The revised passage: "My sympathies are with him. If the reader is lost, it is generally because the writer has not been careful enough to keep him on the path." Twenty-seven words out-work the original ~~66~~ a savings of 25 percent.

~~Here are some targets for cuts. Look for:~~ Targets for cuts include:

- ~~Look for~~ Adverbs that intensify rather than modify ~~the~~ ² meaning: just, certainly, entirely, extremely, completely, exactly.
- ~~Look for~~ Prepositional phrases that repeat the obvious: in the story, in the article, in the movie, in the city.
- ~~Look for~~ Phrases that grow on verbs: seems to, tends to, should have to, tries to.
- ~~Look for~~ Abstract nouns that hide active verbs: consideration becomes considers; judgment becomes judges; observation becomes observes.
- Restatements: a sultry, humid afternoon.

WORKSHOP

1. Compare and contrast my longer draft with my shorter one. Which revisions make the essay better? Have I cut something you would have retained? State your case for keeping it.

2. Get a copy of *On Writing Well*. Study the cuts Zinsser makes on pages 10 and 11. See if any patterns emerge. Hint: notice what he does with adverbs.

3. Watch a DVD version of a movie, and pay attention to the feature called *extra scenes*. Discuss with friends the director's decisions. Why was a particular scene left on the cutting room floor?

4. Now review your own work. Cut without mercy. Begin with big cuts, then small ones. Count how many words you've saved. Calculate the percentage of the whole. Can you cut 15 percent?

5. Flip open to a page of this book at random. Search for clutter. Cut words that do no work.