

Concise is Nice!

By Michael J. Dowling

Want your writing to be more forceful? Then be concise.

As Strunk and White say in their excellent book, *The Elements of Style*, "When a sentence is made stronger, it usually becomes shorter. Thus, brevity is a by-product of vigor."

How can you be write more vigorously and concisely? I'll illustrate by using an actual passage from a book I was asked to edit. Here's a passage from the original unedited text:

One of the fatal errors committed by many top executive officers is to create the vision by themselves and then hand it down with the expectation that others will execute it. While this is a common occurrence, it is a mistake.

How can we make these two sentences more concise and forceful? Let's start by ...

1. Getting rid of the clumsy phrase, "One of the..."
2. Strengthening the text by changing the passive phrase "committed by" to the active verb "commit."
3. Eliminating the second sentence because it's redundant. (It's also bland because it uses the intransitive verb "to be" not just once, but twice.)

With the above observations in mind, here's how we might rewrite this passage:

Many executives commit a fatal error when they create the vision by themselves and hand it down with the expectation that others will execute it.

Presto! We've reduced the number of words by 40% and significantly increased the impact of the writing, without compromising the original intent.

But we're not done yet. A second round of editing almost always yields additional benefits. In our case, we can make the sentence even stronger by -

- Cutting out wordy phrases, such as "hand it down" and "with the expectation that."
- Replacing the prepositional phrase "by themselves" with the adverb "unilaterally."
- Replacing the phrase "commit a fatal error" with the precise, strong verb "err."

Here's how our second revision might read:

Many executives fatally err when they unilaterally create the vision and expect others to execute it.

Congratulations! We've eliminated 25 of the original 41 words. That's a reduction of 61%! And I think you'll agree that we've increased the clarity and vigor of the writing.

For effective writing, concise is nice. But to be concise, you can't be nice. **You must edit ruthlessly!**

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