

## Cut The Verbal Fat

In a letter to a 12-year-old boy, Mark Twain wrote, “I notice you use plain, simple language, short words, and brief sentences. That is the way to write English—it is the modern way and the best way. Stick to it; don’t let fluff and flowers and verbosity creep in.”

Alas, with most of us, as we grow older, fluff and flowers and verbosity do creep in. Writing today often has too much fat, too little muscle—bulk without strength. Much of what we read these days ranges from slightly flabby to grossly obese. As children, we wrote sentences like “See Dick run.” As adults, we are more likely to write, “It is imperative that we assiduously observe Richard as he traverses the terrain at an accelerated rate of speed.” We gain girth and lose mirth—and so does our prose.

What happens to people’s writing in the years between childhood and maturity? For one thing, their reasons for writing change. The child writes for the best of reasons—to tell somebody something that is worth telling. Little Janie Jones wants her friends to know about her dog, Spot. Her only concern is to share her joy that “Spot is the bestest dog in the whole wide world.”

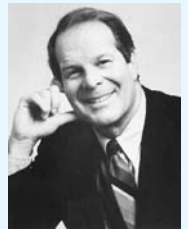
Mr. Jones, Janie’s dad, also has something worthwhile to write about—his company’s new marketing plan, which may or may not be the “bestest” marketing plan in the industry. But his real reason for writing a long memo about the plan is that he wants to be perceived as having had “input” into the plan’s development. As he writes, he worries about the impression his writing might make on his colleagues, especially his boss. He chooses his words carefully—the more and the longer, the better. Even if his instinct tells him to write simply, he’s afraid to, lest his memo not be taken seriously.

Janie has no such fear. While she uses a simple, clear, unaffected second-grade vocabulary, her dad draws on marketing terms he learned while earning his MBA. Relying heavily on the jargon of his business, he throws in a couple of *viable alternatives*, a new set of *parameters*, and a plan for *prioritization* that should be *implemented at this point in time*—the bureaucrat’s 17-letter phrase for *now*. When it’s done, he has produced a bloated, tedious, pompous piece of writing full of sound and fury signifying very little.

Far from contributing to the reader’s enlightenment, wordiness enshrouds meaning in a fog of confusion. “Writing improves in direct ratio to the things we can keep out of it that shouldn’t be there,” advises writing guru William Zinsser. Cutting the fat is probably the quickest and surest way to improve. No matter how solid is your grasp of grammar, punctuation, spelling, and other fundamentals, you cannot write well unless you train yourself to write with fewer words.

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