



Don't write short texts. Write concise ones.

"Don't write short texts. Write concise ones."

If you are puzzled by this admonition, it is probably because you have been led to believe that "short" and "concise" are synonyms. They aren't.

My dictionary shows two definitions for "concise":

1. **Brief and to the point**
2. **Short and clear**

If "short" is already part of the definition of concise, they cannot be synonyms. There must be a difference. So what is it, and how does it affect your writing?

Over my 40 years as a professional writer, I have developed my own definition of "concise", which makes the difference explicit. Moreover, it is functional. It not only tells you what you are seeking to do, but also how to go about doing it.

Before examining this functional definition, let's agree on what we are trying to achieve by being concise.

It is commonly claimed that people today have shorter spans than in the past, so text must also be shorter. I am unaware of any scientific evidence that supports this contention. However, I am aware of considerable historical and psychological evidence that disputes it.

People pay attention to texts that catch and hold their interest. Once that interest wanes, they stop reading. It's as simple as that. Whatever effect radio, television, films, the Web, etc. may have had on average attention span, individual attention span is governed by self-interest. This has always been true, and remains so.

The objective, therefore, is not to constrain a text to fit some artificial limit, but to be certain that everything it says has purpose and meaning for the reader. This is what makes a text concise, whatever its length.

So back to the functional definition. For a text to be truly concise, it must be:

1. **As long as necessary**
2. **As short as possible**

As with the dictionary, "short" is only part of the definition -- the second part. Before you set about making your text "as short as possible", you must first make it "as long as necessary". In practical terms, this means that before you do anything else, you must first determine the key ideas you want your text to convey. Then identify all the supporting information needed to make them clear and credible.

Whatever minimum text length is required to adequately cover this vital information, this is how long it must be. It makes no sense to look at your text and then start cutting out important information because it seems to be "too long".

Written by
Philip Yaffe,
iCEO #32896

Find us on the Web:
www.ceo-europe.com

+33 (0) 970 448 419



Now, what is meant by "as short as possible"?

Keep in mind that nothing in a text is neutral. Anything beyond the minimum length required to be "as long as necessary" will not simply add a few unnecessary words. Ultimately, it will affect reader comprehension.

Unconsciously, the reader will continually be asking himself why those additional words are there; however, since they are unnecessary, he will never get an answer. The more often these unconscious questions are raised, the more often there will be no answer. The reader will become less and less confident that he understands what he is reading. When he concludes that he doesn't understand it (or considers it boring, which is the same thing in disguise), he will stop reading. And your effort will have been wasted

Remember: The length of a text and how well the reader understands it are intimately linked. The purpose of writing "as short as possible" is not to avoid too many words (whatever that means) -- but to ensure clarity.

I have yet to see any list of writing tips that explicitly states this fundamental principle. So let's state it again. *Conciseness means saying everything that needs to be said in as few words as possible in order to ensure clarity.*

Now that you understand the true purpose of all the various writing tips and suggestions on offer, you are more likely to value them and apply them the rigor they deserve. However, don't be overly concerned about applying them when writing your first draft. Every well-written text must go through at least two distinct drafts.

A. First Draft

This should be dedicated to inputting all the key ideas and supporting information required to make the text "as long as necessary". Write this first draft with minimal concern about style, grammar, conciseness, etc. Concentrate on content.

B. Second Draft

This should be dedicated to applying all the writing tips you know to make the text "as short as possible" to ensure that all the key ideas and supporting information are presented clearly and persuasively.

In short: Write fast, edit slow.

Here are a few examples that show the significance difference that understanding and applying these tips can truly make. This is only a sampling. After reading these examples, go back the various lists to look for other writing tips, which you will read and appreciate more acutely than ever.

Bullet Points and Numbered Lists

Bullet points and numbered lists are excellent ways of shortening a text while making it easier to understand. You may have noticed that I have used this technique several times in this article.

Use bullet points or numbered lists to highlight and explain general statements. Bullet points or numbers that relate to nothing have no value.

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These are the four factors that led us to this decision:

- Economic conditions are
- Technical developments have. . . .
- Government policy will. . . .
- Social conditions are

Displaying Data

Display data directly next to their reference. Data displayed "respectively" requires the reader to stop and confirm the correct order. This can cause confusion.

Poor

The CAC, DAX and AEX all fell during past three months: -1.76%, -0.98% and -2.26% respectively

Better

The three indices that fell during the past three months were: CAC (-1.76%), DAX (-0.98%), and AEX (-2.26%)

The word "respectively" almost always causes confusion. Delete it from your vocabulary!

Shifting Terminology

If you wish to use more than one term to mean the same thing, be certain that you clearly inform your readers.

Poor

Atopic dermatitis is a common disease of infants aged 0-2 years. About half of all infants with infantile eczema will develop asthma before their fourth birthday.

Better

Atopic dermatitis (infantile eczema) is a common disease of infants aged 0-2 years. About half of all infants with infantile eczema will develop asthma before their fourth birthday.

Active vs. Passive Voice

Generally prefer the active voice because it gives a clearer picture of what is being described and is usually shorter. However, don't be afraid to use the passive voice when need. After all, if there were no real need for the passive voice in the language, it wouldn't exist.

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Active voice: Management approved the new product

Passive voice: The new product was approved by Management

Placement for Emphasis

Words at the beginning and at the end of a sentence have stronger emphasis than those in the middle. Therefore, put important information in these key locations to aid reader understanding.

Poor

Astronomers hunting for evidence of life outside of our solar system announced the discovery of a new class of planets yesterday.

Better

Yesterday, astronomers hunting for evidence of life outside of our solar system announced discovery of a new class of planets.

Best

Astronomers hunting for evidence of life outside of our solar system yesterday announced the discovery of a new class of planets.

Poor

The national leaders met to discuss new trade relations between their two countries in the Royal Palace.

Better

In the Royal Palace, the national leaders met to discuss new trade relations between their two countries.

Best

The national leaders met In the Royal Palace to discuss new trade relations between their two countries.

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About the author:

Philip Yaffe is a former reporter/feature writer with The Wall Street Journal and a marketing communication consultant. He currently teaches a course in good writing and good speaking in Brussels, Belgium. His recently published book *In the "I" of the Storm: the Simple Secrets of Writing & Speaking (Almost) like a Professional* is available from Story Publishers in Ghent, Belgium (storypublishers.be) and Amazon (amazon.com).