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Many a poem is marred by a superfluous verse.

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Elegiac Verse*

The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter—'tis the difference between the lightning-bug and the lightning.

—Mark Twain in *The Art of Authorship*, edited by

George Bainton

3 The Craft

Journalism often is called a profession. And so it is, I suppose, sometimes. It's a profession when we talk about journalism in the context of the society in which it is practiced, the Constitution that governs its practice and the academic atmosphere in which it is taught.

When it is applied in newspapers, magazines, newsletters, and radio and television newscasts and documentaries, however, journalism is much more a trade, a craft, than a profession. The best crafters of English are those who make the most economic use of language elements, especially words. That means eliminating many of them.

For journalistic writers, craft means pare, pare, pare. Getting rid of even a two-letter word if it doesn't carry its weight should represent a tiny triumph. By not paring, writers stand the risk of inflicting sentences like this on their audiences.

At the end of the alley, there were two construction workers surrounded by orange cones wearing brown overalls and gloves drilling a hole from the end of the alley to the middle of the street.

Let's think about this 35-word sentence for a moment. We can't fault the writer for poor observational skills, but the sentence is wordy. It's needlessly complex. It portrays cones wearing overalls and gloves drilling a hole.

Let's try it again.

Orange cones surround two construction workers wearing brown overalls and gloves. The workers are drilling a hole from the end of an alley to the street.

There. Twenty-six words split into two sentences. No meaning lost or changed. Nothing of value left out.

Avoid Wordiness—the Glory of Plain English

The often brutal emphasis on brevity and word economy that characterizes much journalistic writing originated not so much from a desire to improve communication as it did to save money, time, ink and trees.

In the United States, the Civil War is credited with inspiring much of today's sparseness of copy. Americans on both sides used the world's first successful wire service, *Agence France Presse*, as a model to cover the war for dozens of newspapers—association members—on both sides. The only link the reporter had to its members was an expensive telegraph wire, and the only language the wire recognized was the Morse code.

To get the story out about, say, the Battle of Gettysburg required that the reporter find an authorized telegrapher and wait impatiently while his deathless prose was translated into dots and dashes. The fewer words, the less wait.

The tradition continued through at least six more wars, with publishers devoting much of the time in between worrying about the price of newsprint, which comes from expensive trees in faraway places like northern Canada. Regardless of their motives, there is little question that in the process they enhanced the communication ability of the English language. Avoiding wordiness and using plain English has become an art form as well as a mechanical writing and editing function.

Sometimes getting rid of an unneeded word is a simple matter of changing an adverb into an adjective, in this case, the word "not."

Police have not found any witnesses.

Police have found no witnesses.

Following are some more examples in *italics*, followed by edited versions.

People are sitting in the restaurant, eating and conversing.
People sit in the restaurant eating and talking.

-or-

In the restaurant, people eat and talk.

Our footsteps fall lifeless, and void of synchronosity.
Our footsteps fall lifeless, out of step with each other.

She sees journalism as being a demanding career.
She says journalism is demanding.

The budget plan will stem the skyrocketing deficit by \$496 billion through raising taxes on individual and corporate incomes.
Raising individual and corporate income taxes will reduce the deficit by \$496 billion.

I find myself zipping up my leather jacket and struggling with cold hands to fasten the metal snap at its neckline.
I zip up my leather jacket and struggle with cold hands to fasten the metal snap at its neckline.

When high school coaches encourage this atmosphere of free agency, they are endorsing the sense of randomness in teenagers that leads some of our city's youth to drop out of high school to join gangs instead of remaining committed to their schoolwork.
By encouraging free agency, high school coaches contribute to a sense of randomness in teenagers. This lack of direction can lead them to drop out of school, even to join gangs.

Neither of them saw it as a permanent move, they said.
Neither saw it as a permanent move, they said.

With the patents, inventions and discoveries she has developed for the pharmaceutical business, it seems that the ideas and planning have been great, however the rewards have not been equivalent to the effort. She says she wants to find a way of improving her job or remuneration both financially and personally.

She appears proud of the patents, inventions and discoveries she has developed for the pharmaceutical business. She says she wants to improve her job financially and personally.

One way to avoid wordiness is to get one word, a noun or a verb, to take the place of a string of adjectives or adverbs. For example, the writer can look up into a summer sky and describe a *big, black and gray, anvil-shaped* cloud, or the writer can define it with a single noun—*thunderhead*.

The journalist can write that police believe the suspect *beat the victim repeatedly over the head with a blunt object*. Or the journalist can write that police believe the suspect *bludgeoned the victim*. (I'm taking some liberty here by assuming bludgeoning always involves the head. It doesn't; at least, the dictionary definition makes no mention of the head. But it's difficult to imagine bludgeoning taking place if the head isn't involved.)

As we mentioned in Chapter 1, English is, at its base, Anglo-Saxon. The Anglo-Saxon gifts to the language usually are shorter and punchier than their latinized equivalents. In his wonderfully written *On Writing Well*, William Zinsser points out that paring often means working on the size of a word as well as the number of words. He asks why people insist on using *assistance* when *help* will do quite nicely. The same for *facilitate* instead of *ease*, *numerous* instead of *many*, *individual* instead of *man* or *woman*, *remainder* instead of *rest*, *initial* instead of *first*, *implement* instead of *do*, *sufficient* instead of *enough*, *attempt* instead of *try* and *referred to as* instead of *called*.

"Beware of all the slippery new fad words for which the language already has equivalents," Zinsser writes. He includes "overview and quantify, paradigm and parameter, optimize and maximize, prioritize and potentialize. They are all weeds that will smother what you write. Don't dialogue with someone you can talk to. Don't interface with anybody."

From the Bureau of Redundancy Agency

Redundancy is a wonderful thing to have in a space vehicle. One computer system goes down, another takes its place; the mission lives, and so do its astronauts. Redundancy might keep a space vehicle aloft, but it can sink a sentence.

Redundancies in English do serve a couple of purposes. They provide fodder for a chapter in a book that addresses how to write better. And often, they provide comic relief.

I see a slight hint of light.
(How slight can a hint get?)

The beating victim can now dress himself and brush his own teeth.
(Before he was the victim of a beating, he must have been able to brush other people's teeth as well.)

He continued on in the tradition of DePaul University, where he has obtained both a BS as well as an MBA from the School of Commerce.
(This sentence isn't big enough for both "both" and "as well." And when did DePaul University get a patent on this tradition?)

Bond was set at \$900,000 Wednesday for an 18-year-old man charged with killing two men dead and wounding another.
(How dead can they get?)

Police said drug paraphernalia was found on the body. They said they believe the shooting was drug-related.
(“Gosh, I never would have thought of that,” the reader says. This sentence falls under the heading of telling the reader what to think. See Chapter 5.)

In addition, he also edits. ...
(A very busy guy.)

He is an avid traveler who has, in the past, written a number of travel stories.
(Guess he didn't have time in the future.)

Not only had she competed in Chicago, but also around the nation.
(“Also” simply takes up space.)

Compounding the Sentence with Complexity

A quick grammar review: A compound sentence is two sentences joined by a conjunction (and, but, for, or, nor). A complex sentence contains a clause. Clauses aren't supposed to stand by themselves.

There is nothing particularly wrong with compound or complex sen-