

Writer's Edge

Keeping it short

By Ingrid Sapon*

Though I've written about editing your own writing before, a book called, *How to Write Short*, by Roy Peter Clark, has inspired me to re-visit the topic.¹ Given my tendency toward wordiness, I'm always interested in insights and ideas about editing one's own writing.

I was a bit concerned that a 21st century book on effective short-form writing might be limited to Tweets and blog posts. While Clark does take inspiration from these specialized kinds of writing, the variety of other types of short-form writing he uses as examples is amazing. But, more importantly, Clark's practical advice and suggestions are applicable to all writing.

In one of the most interesting discussions in the book, Clark dissects William Strunk Jr.'s² famous advice: "Omit needless words." In this discussion, Clark talks about writers as typically being "putter-inners" or "taker-outers". Putter-inners (the category I fall into) are those who, when assigned to write 300 words, end up writing 350 and then go back and delete the least helpful information. Taker-outers, according to Clark, are those who edit mentally as they draft, making decisions as soon as they can about what's unnecessary.

Regardless of what type of writer you are, Clark simply believes the key is to be a disciplined cutter, not just of clutter, but also of language that would be useful if the writer did not worry about length. "How, what, and when to cut in the interest of brevity, focus, and precision must pre-occupy the mind of every good short writer," Clark says.³

When assessing whether a word is needless, Clark advises: "Writers should scrutinize each word through drafting and revision. "Do I really need you?" is the question that will apply standards and help writers make good choices about what to include."⁴

And finally, Clark considers Strunk's focus on cutting at the word level. Clark describes cutting words here and there as mere nickeling-and-diming. Instead, he believes in trying to cut big pieces — twenty-dollar bills, as he calls them — rather than nickels and dimes. Or, as he wrote in an earlier textbook on writing, begin by pruning the big limbs before you shake out the dead leaves.⁵ And, in terms of getting rid of those dead leaves, he suggests you first identify and preserve the "strong elements":

- concrete nouns — typically the subject of the sentence, and
- active transitive verbs — verbs that reveal the action performed by the subject and that need an object.

Once you've identified these, you get a clear sense of who did what. After that, Clark says weaker elements (the dead leaves) reveal themselves as targets for cutting. Here are examples of the dead leaves you'll be left with:⁶

- Adverbs
- Adjectives
- Strings of prepositional phrases (used as adjectives or adverbs)
- Intensifiers (*very, quite, incredibly*)
- Qualifiers (*seems, kind of, sort of, mostly*)

1 Little, Brown and Company (2013) [hereafter Clark].

2 The original author of "Elements of Style", which you probably know by the title of a later version: *Strunk and White's The Elements of Style*.

3 Clark at p. 122.

4 Id. at p. 123.

5 Id.

6 Id. at p.124.

- Jargon (*instructional units* rather than *lessons*)
- Latinate flab (*adjudicate* rather than *judge*)⁷

Conclusion

Perhaps one of the reasons I found Clark's book inspiring is that his examples and explanations of others' techniques confirm my belief that being clear and concise takes a lot of effort. And, I take comfort in a comment Clark attributes to writer/editor George Plimpton, that "... no matter how famous the writer, the challenge remains the same: what to include and what to cut."⁸

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Ingrid welcomes your feedback, questions, and suggestions for topics you'd be interested in reading about. Drop Ingrid a line at: ingrid@goodwithwords.com, or call 416-259-3399.

7 I thought Clark's example of Latinate flab was interesting, not to mention unobvious. (I didn't even realize that *adjudicate* has a Latin origin.) I'd have argued in favour of replacing *adjudicate* with *judge* simply on the grounds that *judge* is plainer — not because it is Latinate. And, if asked for examples of Latinate flab, I'd have offered phrases like: *per annum*, *pro forma*, and *et cetera* (or *etc.*)

8 Clark at p. 125.