In 500 Words or Less …

For me, nothing's more challenging than an assignment for an article that's "just 500 words". Why? Because I often feel I can't say hello in less than 10 words! Yes, being wordy is one of the toughest writing habits to break. Trust me, I know. Fortunately, with written communication you can edit to be concise.

In working with professionals to help them improve their writing, I've come up with some tips for curbing wordiness that I thought I'd share. Before starting, however, it's instructive to step back and consider the definition of verbose and concise — two words that often come up when talking about wordiness. Merriam-Webster.com defines verbose as "containing more words than necessary". It defines concise — the goal for most business writing — as "free from elaboration and superfluous detail".

My first tip comes directly from these definitions: scrupulously edit your document to eliminate unnecessary elaboration and detail. Besides resulting in a significant reduction in word count, doing this profoundly improves the flow and reader comprehension.

Unfortunately, professionals seem to have a particularly difficult time eliminating unnecessary elaboration and detail. Sometimes this is so because they're just lazy. Other times it's because of a sincere, if misguided, belief that the details always matter in their line of work. To this I say: of course the details matter in terms of your work, but not every detail matters to your reader. It's the writer's duty to assess what the reader really needs and to include only that.

Other Tips

In addition to putting effort into eliminating unnecessary detail, here are a few other simple techniques that will help you streamline your writing:

- Eliminate unnecessary phrases – Here are a few examples:
  - Instead of: "if this becomes necessary", write: "if necessary"
  - Instead of: "The question as to whether", write: "Whether"

- Eliminate unnecessary words – For example:
  - Instead of: "more narrowly", write: "narrower"
  - Instead of: "arbitration process" , write: "arbitration"

Though both of these techniques are obvious, it's surprising how many unnecessary phrases and words creep into business writing, bogging it down. Most writers have a handful of phrases or words they use repeatedly that they can easily excise. I'm sure you know which ones haunt your writing. Keep a personal list and consult it as you edit your work.

One Last Tip

My final strategy for controlling wordiness is to use precise words. When you use specific nouns and verbs you don't need to pile on adjectives and adverbs to help make the meaning clear. For example:

- Instead of: "The secretary took notes of the meeting", write: "The secretary took the minutes"

- Instead of: "She was an expert at the art of paper folding", write: "She was an expert at origami".

Conclusion

Even if you're not naturally concise, there's no excuse for flabby writing. If you diligently edit to eliminate the unnecessary and use precise words, your clients and colleagues will thank you and think more of you.