

CUTTING AWAY THE VERBAL FAT ADDS MUSCLE TO YOUR WRITING

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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, as most of us grow older, fluff and flowers and verbosity do creep in. Writing today often has too much fat, too little muscle — bulk without strength. 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 stammer for now. When it’s done, he has produced a bloated, tedious, pompous piece of writing full of sound and fury signifying very little.

As Janie grows older, her writing gradually becomes more like her dad’s — drained of warmth, sincerity and directness. She begins to worry about impressing her classmates and teachers, or even Dad, just as Dad worries about impressing his boss. In junior high, her teacher assigns the class a theme about summer vacation and insists that the composition be at least 800 words. So what might have been an interesting, tightly written 500-word piece about a trip to Disneyland turns out to be just another example of flabby, padded, pallid prose, wheezing away as it lurches uphill.

In addition, Janie and Mr. Jones read so much bloated writing that they start to emulate the style that seems to be the norm. Even if they have received good writing instruction in school, they allow hard-learned skills to rust. They lose confidence in their ability to write clearly and convincingly. They underestimate the power and grace of the simple, declarative sentence. To get their points across, they resort to the theory that if one word is good, two words must be twice as good.

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. No matter how solid is your grasp of grammar, and other fundamentals, cutting verbal fat is the surest way to improve. You cannot communicate well unless you train yourself to write concisely.

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