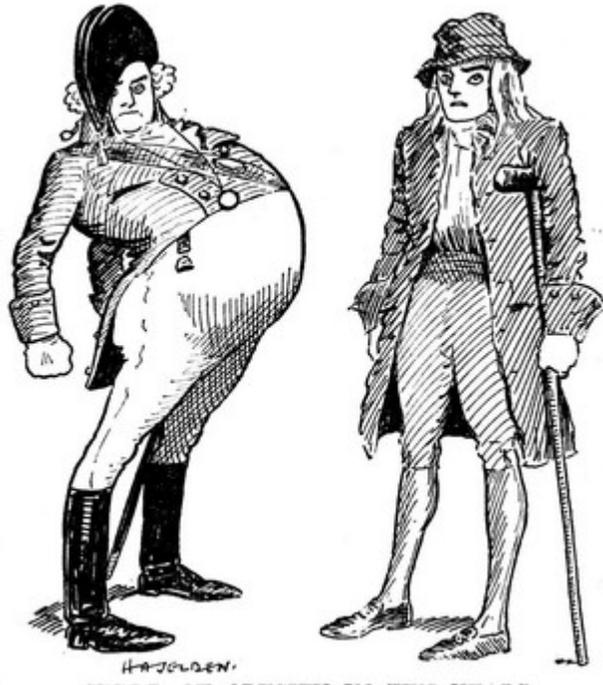


What If?

WRITING TECHNIQUES

Cutting the Fat and Making Every Word Count



Too much fat in our diet isn't good for us. Too much fat in our writing isn't good for our readers.

Like a good dietician will limit the fat in your diet, a good editor will cut the fat out of your story. The problem is if you have too much fat an editor won't take the time. Here's how to recognize fat in your writing and trim it before your editor has to.

By the same token, if your conversation is unrealistic, your reader is going to get bored or put off. Either way, your story loses. Here are some things to avoid.

MISS THE MODIFIERS

One of the primary fat contributors to a beginning writer's work is the modifier. A modifier, as indicated by its name, modifies a word or phrase. The usual intention of a modifier is to make the phrase stronger but most modifiers are so over-used that they actually weaken your writing. Here are a couple of examples:

There were advantages to being a very tall man but Frank found it really irritating when people commented on his height.

Although she was certainly dog-tired, Alicia wasn't exactly thrilled about leaving the party early.

Your statements actually become stronger by eliminating the underlined modifiers even though they were intended to strengthen your writing. Watch for these words and cut them wherever you can: **very, such, anyway, exactly, certainly, so, just, really, even, at all, definitely, some.**

HEDGING YOUR BETS

Another source of fat in your literary diet is 'hedging' words. They give the appearance that the writer is hesitant to commit to his/her statements.

Example

Amy was fairly easily distracted and her teacher almost always had to remind her to keep working.

Jack was somewhat of a clown so his friends usually ignored him.

If Jack is a clown, make him a clown. If Amy's teacher had to remind her to work, don't have her do it 'almost' always. Be bold and definite in your writing. There's no need to be overly dramatic unless the storyline calls for it but by the same token, say what you mean. Here's another list of words to watch out for and trim: **generally, usually, sometimes, a little, slightly, somewhat, quite, probably, maybe, kind of, sort of, almost, rather, fairly, perhaps, seem, often.**

PURPLE PROSE

Although it is considered a 'beginner's mistake', some writers never get over their love of purple prose. It's a case of wanting to sound like a professional and exercise your considerable vocabulary. The problem is that it casts your writing in an amateur light as well as making it difficult for your reader to follow. Here's an example of 'too much' along with a tighter version.

The river roared tumultuously through the dense, arboreal forest, thundering towards its final destination. The dizzying racket and aromatic scents assaulted assailed my senses causing an auditory disconnect in my cerebrum which had been acclimatized to a metropolitan setting.

Wow! That's some writing. Now let's trim the fat and see what happens.

The river thundered through the dense forest tumbling to the sea. The sounds and smells of this natural wonder put my city-raised brain on sensory overload.

This version is much tighter and still leaves the reader with a sense of awe at the scene.

TIME ZONES

Readers assume that your story starts at the beginning and ends at the end. Things proceed in chronological order and if they don't, it's up to the writer to make that clear. Words such as first, then, and after that, are unnecessary.

Example

First Kayla went to Eric's house to meet him. Then they grabbed the camping gear and a few minutes later jammed it into Eric's pick-up truck. When they were done Eric jumped in behind the wheel and they were off to the lake. One hour later they pulled into their campsite and after that pitched their tents. Finally Kayla and Eric were ready to party.

Read it with the underlined words then without. Which one is tighter writing? Leave out the 'time zone' words for shorter, clearer writing.

JUMP RIGHT IN

Be direct in your statements. Like 'hedging' words, there are some sentence starters that should be made to disappear. Things such as 'come to think of it', 'needless to say', 'as a matter of fact', 'in fact' and others are fat that can be trimmed. Watch out for 'there was' and 'there are' too.

Example

*There was a winding trail that led through the forest to a beautiful scenic lookout.
A winding trail led through the forest to a beautiful scenic lookout.*

*Come to think of it Johnny never enjoyed going to hockey games.
Johnny never enjoyed going to hockey games.*

There are many different species of fish living in the ocean.

Many different species of fish live in the ocean.

In each pair the second statement is more direct and less wordy.

EXERCISE YOUR WRITING

If you gain a few pounds your doctor will tell you to get back in shape. If your writing is too wordy your editor will tell you to edit. Exercise can be repetitive but editing should be repetitive.

The best way to find the fat is to read, read again and then read some more. Read out loud, to the mirror, to your dog, to your family or to yourself. Listen for areas that your tongue trips over. Look for ways to shorten your sentences.

Example

The drama club decided that they would perform Romeo and Juliet.

The drama club decided to perform Romeo and Juliet.

Only two fewer words but much tighter.

Kerry put a lot of money in the bank over the summer from her job cutting grass, trimming bushes and weeding gardens.

Kerry banked a lot of money from her summer yard work job.

In this case ten words were removed and the sentence says the same thing.

There are endless ways to trim the fat. If you're serious about sending your best writing out to an editor you have to look at your writing with an editor's eye. Make sure every word counts and every sentence says what you want it to with the fewest possible words.

