

LANGUAGE

When you say in five words what you could say just as well in two, you risk boring-and losing-your readers. You also invite rejection slips, especially if editorial space is limited-and isn't that just about always? Let's look at some causes of wordiness and infer some ways to avoid it.

One cause is redundancy: saying things twice or thrice. Did you ever write "free gratis for nothing"? Probably not. Nor, I suspect were you ever guilty of "roast beef with aujus." But you may have written "consensus of opinion." Forgetting that consensus is an agreement "of opinion," is redundant. There is no other kind of consensus. Did you ever write "excessive wordiness"? A student of mine once wrote of an "adequate sufficiency" and an "overplethora" and described two items as "closely juxtaposed." Delete *experienced* in "experienced veterans," as there is no other kind. Leave out *Jewish* in "Jewish rabbi"; *true* in "true facts"; *family* in "family genealogies."

Another cause of wordiness is periphrasis or circumlocution (literally, "talking around"), which seems to me a much more common problem. Periphrastics-or shall we say *circumlocutors*?-say they "provide help" when they mean they "help." They "bring to a conclusion" instead of "conclude." They never "apologize," nor do they "explain": instead they "offer apologies" and "present explanation."

To break yourself of habitual periphrases, scan your prose for colorless verbs accompanied by strong nouns, and replace them with vivid verbs. Change "is a good singer" to "sings well"; change "gave his story a rewriting" to "rewrote his story." And be wary of habitually identifying categories into which particulars fall: Change "This is the sort of book that will probably bore most people" to "This book will probably bore most people." Now mind you: periphrasis is not "wrong" to the extent that redundancy is. Periphrasis can make for easier reading if one's train of thought is complex. And its tone may be pleasant, leisurely and considerate. Sometimes-I don't say always--it is better to write "if you should ever find yourself in need of any sort of help" than "If you need help." But such caution can seem stuffy, even absurd.

The problem for editors is not that periphrasis exists but that it is so routinely employed by so many writers. Therefore, search your prose for roundabout locutions and substitute direct ones. You will reap incidental benefits: Strength, drive and vividness. And please disabuse yourself of any notion that periphrasis is inherently genteel-that it is somehow better to *take a trip to* wherever-than simply *to go* there.

Another major cause of wordiness is overuse of props: words that add no content but instead point, emphasize or apologize. Look at *actually, also, both, certainly, indeed, in fact of course, quite, really, surely, truly, and very*: all these are "good" words (I started to write "very good" but thought: "Why very?"). Props clarify and reinforce, but don't overuse them, as many of us do. Encourage your "content" words to function unaided. *Then* and *next* and *finally*-and *first, second, etc*-can clarify; but they are often used when sequence is perfectly obvious. "First he laid the table for breakfast, then he fried eggs, and finally he made toast"--omit *first, then* and *finally*. Similarly overworked are *now, in the past* and *in the future*. Use such words for contrast-to point out that someone *was* a Methodist but is *now* a Baptist. Other props, often appropriate but very must overused, include "I think that," "in my opinion" and "as I have observed." They are polite. As a boy I was encouraged to say, "oh I really must disagree: you know. It seems to me, judging from what I have read, that...." Instead of "You're wrong!" "This book is poorly written" makes it point: but it is severe. So we soften blows. Great! But

must you always add qualifying locutions--as in "This house is, *to my way of thinking*, poorly designed." Do you habitually write like this?

Although your observations have, I grant, much to be said for them, we would I think, do well to consider a point which strikes me as being not without merit. My point is, in short, simply that it is an apparent fact that Bill has for a long time found his employment situation very distasteful indeed--and that Janet has also for a long time--and surely there can be no doubt of this!--found her work far from satisfying, to say the least. If so, force yourself to write like this:

Bill and Janet hate their jobs.

With practice, you can achieve a happy compromise--less hesitant than the original, less blunt than the revision. Perhaps this:

You may be right: but remember that Bill and Janet have for a long time disliked their jobs. Tactful, smooth--but not as wordy as the original.

QUASI-WORDINESS

People who sense that your discourse is simply too long will sometimes accuse you, wrongly, of wordiness. I prefer to reserve *wordy* for problems within sentences; but because larger units are often perceived as too spun out--and are therefore described as wordy, even if each and every sentence is concise--let's look at some things besides redundancy, periphrasis and excessive propping that can give rise to charges of wordiness:

Too much restatement. Watch for such danger signals as "in other words," "that is" and "as so-and-so says." Keep these to a minimum. Obey the old rule "one idea, one statement." If you have made a point twice, look to see whether your second version is the one you should have offered in the first place.

Too much predicting and summarizing. "I hope to prove that," "I should now like to state," "As we have seen," "in short" and "to summarize"--these are all "good English," but constantly using those phrases--and what they can lead up to--can make your readers impatient. If your discourse is long and/or its content "tough," such effects help; but do you use them when you don't need to? In writing stories, do you overdo foreshadowing and recollection?

Too many examples. Yes, you will often want to use examples: they clarify generalizations; they make prose vivid. But too many can cause negative reactions. Your readers, having "got the point." May resent your parade of instances. If you have used several examples, choose the best, drop the others, trim the one you saved, and then maybe--just maybe!--drop it.

Too much detail. Do you ever offer more facts than people need to, or care to, deal with?--or more than they can absorb? The cure is to understand how you want to affect your readers, and what you should say to do so. Perhaps you are doing what you once did on essay tests--telling all you know, regardless of your reader's needs or interest. Here's a good exercise: Take some subject you know fairly well and write about it in 1,000 words or less for several readerships--a) elementary-school children, b) older children, c) adults who have no background data, d) adults who do have background data, e) adults who are poor readers of English. This exercise will help you realize--in an experimental, not just an intellectual way--that your job is to affect readers in particular ways, not to tell all there is to be told.

ROOTS OF WORDINESS

If you are often wordy--or if people say you are, which comes to the same things--ask yourself these questions:

Do I understand who my readers are and what they need and want? Did you write easily for your old audience?" Now, that you have a new audience, one you're less sure of, do you fire barrages of words, hoping that at least a few will hit targets?

Do I understand my role vis-à-vis my readers? Not until you have worked this out- are you a teacher, a reporter, a boss, and friend?--can you be sure whether to write "Send a memo" or "I would surely appreciate your sending me a memo" or "I wonder whether you might find the time to write up something which would help me understand."

Did I--maybe in childhood, maybe on some job-form the habit of apologizing, anticipating, obfuscating and hedging? If so, your problem may be what some psychologists call "binding" you have allowed yourself to be bound to a past that is irrelevant.

Does my writing seem wordy because it is unfocused? "Seem" is the key you may not have written too much, but what you have written may lack emphasis, so that it is perceived as a blur of words. Bear down hard on main points; ease up on the rest. Chances are that the result--not shortened one bit and maybe even lengthened--will seem less wordy.

Do I often write mainly to clarify my ideas for myself? Some great writing-Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale"--gives just such an impression. But in most cases, people want to learn what your ideas are, what the facts are, etc. not to follow every twist and turn in your thinking. Keep a diary, yes; but when you write for others, concentrate on how you come across to them.

Do I sometimes forget that as a writer I have an attention span likely to be greater than those of my readers? The person who is performing--writing, speaking, singing--is caught up in creative activity; the audience is relatively passive and nearly always less "involved" so whenever something is running long, ask yourself whether, if you were reading it, you would find it as interesting as you do while writing it.

Do I have a habit of playing with words, to the point that I sometimes forget that my purpose is to communicate? Yes, we do enjoy words: if we did not, would we be writing? If your style is magical, you may be able to communicate without trying to; but such success is rare. Most of us need to make conscious efforts to communicate.

All of which goes to show that problems that we think of as "language arts" problems, to be solved by studying dictionaries and usage manuals, may really-or also-be "social psychology" problems, to be solved by understanding who we are, what we are to do, who other people are, what they expect of us, and how they may react to what we do. Yes, success in writing depends on command of language; but does it not also depend on success in personal relations?

IS WORDINESS EVER GOOD?

Sometimes, yes. First, in line with what I have said in previous columns, you can have wordy characters, including wordy characters-as-narrators. Just be sure they are not *all* wordy.

Second, remember that periphrasis and props can clarify difficult material and can defuse painful and/or controversial situations. Your problem may not be wordiness: *your* problem may be that you are so concise as to be hard to follow--or so blunt as to offend. Telegrams-remember them?--were not always clear and tactful.

In the pursuit of brevity there is, moreover, a danger that goes far beyond matters of style. Have you ever read instructions (for baking a quiche, or assembling a toy) that were brief and seemed clear--and therefore seemed "well written"--but did not tell you what you needed to know in order to perform a task? **Remember:** Your order of priorities should be truth/clarity/brevity, not the other way around.