

## WORDINESS: TRIMMING THE FAT

Read the following paragraph:

Personally, I believe that schools that are small are better than schools that are large. I hold this opinion for the simple reason that the student who is somewhat below average gets more attention at a small school than he does at a large school. To be sure, a student who has done a great deal of reading will, more likely than not, survive in either type of situation. And I am ready to grant the fact that in the larger types of school they have more equipment and can offer more courses in the field of science. But it remains true, however, that if a person is just an average or below average student, he is likely to find the friendly environment of the small school is of great benefit to him personally. This is especially true if he is the shy type of person. As the homeroom teacher that I had last year used to say, and I quote, “The bigger the school, the bigger the problems.” 169 words

Now, this isn't the worst writing imaginable. The grammar is adequate, and the message does get through (though somewhat tired from its trip). The main trouble is that the writer seems to believe that the more words he uses, the better his writing will be. This is never the case.

Here is the Revised Version of the same paragraph.

I like small schools because they offer the below-average student more attention than large ones do. Admittedly, a well-read student will probably survive in either situation. And I grant that large schools have more equipment and can offer more courses in science. Still, the average or below-average student will probably benefit from the friendliness of a small school, especially if he's shy. As my homeroom teacher last year used to say, “The bigger the school, the bigger the problems.” 81 words

With no loss of meaning, 169 words have been reduced to 81 words. A lot of fat has been trimmed away, leaving only the lean meat of the writer's meaning.

The writer of the original version has a problem with **wordiness**. Where one word will do, he uses two. When a phrase will do, he uses a sentence. He does not seem to know that, compared with spoken English, written English usually uses fewer words to carry the same message. Let's examine some bad habits:

## **Error Analysis**

1. **PERSONALLY.** A word that can usually be dropped, especially in phrases like “Personally, I think...” The word “I” is enough. Who else is he writing about?
2. **SCHOOLS THAT ARE SMALL.** Aren’t these “small schools”? Watch phrases like “boys who are good” or “apples that are fresh.” Half the words in such phrases can be left out.
3. **I HOLD THIS OPINION.** This is unnecessary since the writer has already said that his belief was an opinion.
4. **FOR THE SIMPLE REASON THAT.** All this simply means “because.” Use the shorter form.
5. **TO BE SURE.** This is a good phrase, but “granted” or “admittedly” means the same thing. Use the shorter form.
6. **A STUDENT WHO HAS DONE A GREAT DEAL OF READING.** Doesn’t this mean a “well-read student?” This phrase is similar to “schools that are small.”
7. **MORE LIKELY THAN NOT.** What does this mean that the single words “likely” or “probably” don’t mean?
8. **TYPE OF.** The term “type of” usually adds nothing. A “type of situation” is a “situation.” Also watch “kind of” and “sort of.” Avoid them!
9. **WE SHOULDN’T FORGET THE FACT THAT.** If it’s important, the reader won’t forget it. Also, if it’s a fact, the reader will probably realize this for himself. For “the fact that” simply use “that.”
10. **IN THE LARGER TYPE OF SCHOOL, THEY HAVE.** Here we have “type of” again. Also, whom does the “they” refer to, and why does the writer have to bring them in? “Large schools have” is much simpler.
11. **THE FIELD OF.** This phrase is seldom needed. The “field of science” is “science.”
12. **BUT IT REMAINS TRUE, HOWEVER, THAT.** Nothing is really wrong with this, but it remains true, however, that “still” and “but” carry the same meaning as these six words.
13. **TO HIM PERSONALLY.** To whom else?
14. **THE SHY TYPE OF PERSON.** We already know he’s a person, and the word “shy” itself shows him to be a type.
15. **AND I QUOTE.** The reader has just been told that someone said the words following this expression. Should he have missed this information? “And I quote” is unnecessary in written English.

Please guard against wordiness in your writing. Search for unnecessary words as you proofread and revise. Trim the fat and leave the meat.