Keep It Brief!

Often when students are learning to write, they learn to use as many words as possible. This may be because they are told that they must fill five pages, or that they must write 2,500 words. Such instructions may be well-intentioned, but they lead to bad writing habits. Beyond school, in university or just out in the “real world”, brevity is often the rule of the day. Learn to use the fewest words to say what you need to, and you will seldom go wrong. Pretend that you have a lot to say when you don’t, and you will seldom go right.

Why is it good to be brief? Brief is often much easier to understand. Long words, overloaded adjectives and convoluted constructions put a heavy strain on the reader. Brief keeps the pace of the text moving briskly along. Choose your words carefully: is that really the word you mean? Brief is usually – not always, but usually! – better English. Many professional and academic people write longwindedly simply because they never learned to write well.

1. In Britain, you will see road signs that say “This road is unsuitable for heavy goods vehicles.” In America you will see a similar sign, but it’s much shorter. What do you think it says?

2. The *New York Times* used to insist on writing that a person was “under intoxication.” What’s a shorter and simpler way of saying this?

One common mistake students make is using too many adjectives or adverbs. Remember that an adjective modifies a noun, while an adverb modifies an adjective, another adverb, or a verb. Adjectives and adverbs are like salt: they are best when used sparingly! It is rarely desirable to use two or more adjectives together. People often do this because they don’t know which adjective to use, so they use both.

Rewrite the following sentences to remove all of the unnecessary adjectives and adverbs. Your sentences may not look exactly like ours – good writing is as much art as science! But they should be similar.

3. The happy, joyous occasion was excitedly and gladly marked by festive fireworks.

4. A tricky, difficult and troublesome puzzle may take you very, very many hours of puzzled concentration to solve!

5. All of the evil and diabolical mad scientists competed to see who could be the most cunningly evil of all.

6. Try the sweet, creamy and delectable chocolates that come with the soft, creamy centers!

7. The frighteningly and scarily terrifying nightmare left me shaking in my warm, cozy, soft bed for hours.

8. The green, red, purple, blue, orange, pink and yellow balloons rose fast and quickly into the bright, blue, clear sky.

9. The intelligent and clever spy knew many ways to enter and leave the well-protected, high-security building undetected.

10. A steaming hot, freshly brewed, straight-from-the-stove cup of coffee is just what I needed.
Another mistake is to use big words when smaller words would do as well or better. Replace all the big words that you can in the following sentences.

11. The adolescent was incarcerated for the infraction of stealing a confectionary.
12. The author’s monumental tome was published posthumously.
13. The anthropomorphic extraterrestrial examined the peculiar protuberance that was the man’s nose.
14. A paucity of publicity turned out to be serendipitous for the septuagenarian.
15. The tintinnabulation of the gargantuan brass bells could be heard far across the metropolis.
16. The spurious allegations were made by the illustrious prevaricator.
17. The utilization of contaminated aqueous liquid in food preparation leads to the foment of pestilence.
18. Without a mandible, you would find it difficult to masticate.

Many beginning writers repeat themselves, often without realizing it. Repetition can be a powerful writing technique, but only when you know what you are doing and only when you use it sparingly. Then there are words that rarely add anything, but mimic our conversational style: words like “now”, “really” and “well”… or “then” for that matter!

Remove all of the repetition from the following paragraphs along with anything else that does not add to the flow of the text. Shorten them any way you can. Go back and read through them again. Do they sound better? (Again, your answers won’t be exactly like ours. But use ours as a guideline.)

19. I like to bake cookies. I really enjoy baking, because it’s a lot of fun. Now there are three main steps to baking cookies.

   The first step is I get all of the ingredients onto the counter and measure them. Well, you don’t want to get started and then realize that you have no flour! Then the first step is done.

   The second step is the mixing phase. You mix the sugar, butter and eggs together. Well, you really want an electric mixer for this, because it takes forever by hand! Next you add the flour and baking soda. Make sure everything is mixed together well. Then the second step is done.

   Now that the first and second steps are done, there is the third step. The third step is the baking phase. You need to bake the cookies in the oven. To do this, you need to preheat the oven. Then you need to put the cookie batter onto cookie sheets. Pay close attention to the recipe and how long you are to bake the cookies. Burnt cookies taste really awful! Now the third step is done.

   I like to bake cookies because there are many different recipes for cookies. When the cookies are finished baking I can say that I made them. The first cookies I ever made were raisin-faced cookies. They were a hit!
ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

1. No trucks.
2. drunk
3. “The happy occasion was marked by fireworks.” (Fireworks are usually festive; and anyway, “happy”, “joyous”, “excited”, “glad” and “festive” all mean similar things.)
4. “A difficult puzzle may take you many hours of concentration to solve!” (“Very” is an adverb that rarely, if ever, adds anything to a sentence. Never, though, use two of them in a row!)
5. “All of the mad scientists competed to see who could be the most evil of all.” (Mad scientists are, by definition, evil.)
6. “Try the chocolates that come with the creamy centers!” (Chocolates are by definition sweet, and most people find them delectable.)
7. “The nightmare left me shaking in my bed for hours.” (Nightmares are scary. Whether the bed is comfortable or not is not important, and it takes away from the nightmare.)
8. “The multicolored balloons rose quickly into the clear sky.” (You could use “blue” instead of “clear”; but blue skies are usually clear, and clear skies are usually blue!)
9. “The clever spy knew many ways to enter and leave the high-security building undetected.” (You could even get rid of the “clever”, because the spy must be clever if he knows all these things!)
10. A steaming hot cup of coffee is just what I needed.
11. The child was jailed for the crime of stealing candy.
12. The author’s large book was published after his death.
13. The human-like alien examined the odd bulge that was the man’s nose.
14. A lack of publicity turned out to be a fortunate accident for the elderly person.
15. The ringing of the huge brass bells could be heard far across the city.
16. The false claims were made by the famous liar.
17. The use of unclean water in cooking leads to the spread of disease.
18. Without a jaw, you would find it difficult to chew.
19. There are three main steps to making cookies.

   First get all of the ingredients onto the counter and measure them. You don’t want to get started and then realize that you have no flour!
Mix the sugar, butter and eggs together. You want an electric mixer for this, because it takes forever by hand! Add the flour and baking soda. Make sure everything is mixed together well.

Preheat the oven. Put the cookie batter onto cookie sheets. Pay close attention to the recipe and how long you are to bake the cookies. Burnt cookies taste awful!

I like to bake cookies because when the cookies are finished baking, I can say that I made them. The first cookies I ever made were raisin-faced cookies. They were a hit!

(Notice that instead of saying that “I like baking cookies” over and over again in slightly different ways, we’ve said it only once, at the end of our essay.)