**Pruning Your Prose: Strategies and Examples**

Most people want to believe they are concise, straight-shooters, but the ability to be truly concise, not just brief, is rare. Here are some principles that will help you achieve this essential skill.

**Prune excess verbiage**

* Prune unnecessarily wordy phrases (Due to the fact that = because; in a timely fashion= quickly; keep in mind = remember; with all due respect = respectfully; in a swift and silent manner = swiftly and silently; the one at the end of the line = the last one)
* Prune to eliminate repetition (I asked him what his favorite part of his job is, and he told me that the best part of his job is that he is always learning things that are new to him = He said the best part of his job is that he is continually learning.)
* Prune unnecessary details (My dog, a female border collie-greyhound mix that I adopted from your shelter last month when your organization had that adoption fair at the Almaden shopping center in front of Pet Smart, seems old enough for spaying, now that she’s 9 months, so I was wondering what clinic you would recommend I take her to for that. = My dog is nine months old. Where would you recommend that I go to get her spayed?)
* Prune unnecessary modifiers (*unexpected* surprise, *terrible* tragedy, *completely* flabbergasted)
* Prune the “there is/there are” construction (There are three things that must be kept in mind by all contestants = All contestants should remember three things = Remember three things.)

**Prune Judiciously and Rhetorically**:

Don’t get carried away with this. Sometimes the wordier phrasing is rhetorically justifiable, whether to provide emphasis, to clarify, to avoid harshness, or to produce an effective cadence. Below are some examples.

* “These are the times that try men’s souls” sounds better than “These times try men’s souls.”
* “Four score and seven years ago, our forefathers brought forth on this continent a new nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal” is stronger than “Eighty-seven years ago, our forefathers founded a free nation.”
* “To be or not to be, that is the question” is more powerful than “Is it better to be dead?”
* Wouldn’t you rather receive a letter that said, “We regret that, due to an unexpected abundance of excellent candidates for the position, we cannot hire you at this time,” rather than one that said, “You didn’t get the job”?

**Sample Sentences, wordy and revised**

**Wordy version**: There is currently a lively, ongoing controversy among many sociologists and other professionals who study human nature : theories are being spun and arguments are being conducted among them about what it means that so many young people—and older people, for that matter—who live in our society today are so very interested in stories about zombies. (58 words)

**Revised**: A lively controversy currently rages among sociologists about why so many young people—and older people, for that matter—are so interested in stories about zombies. (26 words)

**Pruning at the Paragraph Level**

The strategies for pruning sentences apply also to paragraphs, but further considerations are needed.

**Points to note with sample #1:**

* You can reduce wordiness by breaking up ridiculously long sentences into shorter ones.
* Using the passive voice is sometimes justified, as when you want to shift emphasis away from the doer to the action, and it can reduce wordiness by omitting needless actors (e.g. Many workmen built Chartres Cathedral in the Middle Ages = Chartres Cathedral was built in the Middle Ages.)
* Choosing which details to omit will depend on what you want to emphasize. Because the theme is *unconventional* methods of waging peace, I didn’t include details about Wangari Maathai’s work as an activist using nonviolent protests to defy a ruling dictator, Daniel Arap Moi. That is the sort of work we *expect* from peace-makers, not tree-planting.

**Sample #1 Wordy version**:

It has been noted by many observers of world events that the Nobel Peace Prize nominations in recent years have been a demonstration that peace can be achieved in unexpected ways and by people who aren’t even diplomats or heads of state. To take just one example, in 2004 the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Wangari Maathai, a very impressive woman from Kenya who earned her Ph. D. in vet medicine and became a professor at a university and later chair of her department but then went on later to become the founder of the Greenbelt Movement, which trained African women who were uneducated and impoverished and generally undervalued by their society—rather than depending on professional foresters--to grow trees and then plant them by the millions to fight desertification, control erosion, protect the people’s access to parkland in cities, and to provide a source of food for all to share, all of which helps prevent conflicts and even wars over resources. (164 words)

**Sample #1 Pruned version**:

Recent Nobel Peace Prize nominations have demonstrated that peace can be achieved by unexpected people using unconventional methods. For example, Dr. Wangari Maathai, a Kenyan woman, won in 2004 for founding the Greenbelt Movement, which trained women who lacked education and resources to grow trees and plant them by the millions to provide food and fight desertification, erosion, and loss of parkland. The Nobel Committee judged that this movement helps prevent conflicts over resources. (74 words)

**Points to note with sample #2:**

* You can reduce wordiness by combining short, choppy sentences.
* Adding too many transitional words and phrases can create wordiness, but using too few produces choppiness and often reduces clarity.
* Sometimes quoting directly can be more concise than paraphrasing.

**Sample #2 Wordy Version:**

Similarly, Muhammad Yunus won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006. Dr. Yunus is another professor who achieved great things outside the classroom. He was originally a professor of Economics in Bangladesh. Yunus was nominated for this prize because he founded Grameen Bank. This bank revolutionized banking by offering loans to the poorest of the poor. Regular banks would not offer loans to them. Regular banks want to make as much profit as possible. Therefore, they prefer to loan money to people who are already wealthy. This is because wealthy people are believed to be more likely to pay back their loans. But the Grameen Bank is very different. It was not set up to make big profits. It was set up to give very poor people the resources they need to climb out of poverty. Ironically, the very poor people—mostly women--who borrowed from the Grameen Bank proved to be *more* reliable than “regular” borrowers at for-profit banks. Grameen Bank had an average of 96% repayment. Furthermore, its borrowers started businesses that made them self-sufficient. The Nobel Committee gave the peace prize to Yunus because they believed that we will never have world peace until the masses of poor people at the bottom of society can rise to be self-supporting. The Committee decided that, Grameen Bank showed that even the very poorest segment of society can, if given access to resources, work themselves out of poverty so they aren’t a burden on society anymore. (246 words)

**Sample #2 Pruned version**

Similarly, Dr. Muhammad Yunus, originally a professor of economics in Bangladesh, won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006 for founding Grameen Bank, which revolutionized banking by offering small loans to the desperately poor. Regular for-profit banks would not help these people because they seemed like poor risks. But Grameen Bank aimed not to make big profits but to give poor people the resources they need to climb out of poverty. Ironically, Yunus found them to be *more* reliable, with an average of 96% repayment, than “regular” borrowers at for-profit banks. Furthermore, these women started micro-businesses that made them self-sufficient. The Nobel Committee recognized Yunus because, they declared, "lasting peace cannot be achieved unless large population groups find ways . . . to break out of poverty," and because Grameen Bank showed that “even the poorest of the poor can work to bring about their own development." (146 words)