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Simplifying Writing

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Simplicity Lesson

Abstract: This lesson uses William Zinsser’s essay “Simplicity” to teach the importance of simplifying one’s own writing. Students will work to “de-clutter” a sample student paragraph, then will attempt to “simplify” one another’s work.

Common Core Standards: W.9-10.5 and W.9-10.10

Procedure:

1. Read William Zinsser’s essay “Simplicity.” This can be done in class or assigned the night before for homework.
2. Look at Hemingway and Steven King’s advice to writers (see attached—these can be read in class on the day of the lesson)
3. As a class, discuss similarities between Hemingway and King’s advice lists and Zinsser’s essay “Simplicity?”
4. In pairs, simplify a sample student-written paragraph from a previous year (attached—I used an American Dream essay).
5. As a class, discuss ways in which the pairs simplified the student paragraph.
6. With the same partner, exchange essays and “simplify” your partner’s essay. Slash away at all that is unnecessary and redundant. Add a word or two if needed for clarity, but don’t revise the paper for them.
7. Return the “simplified” essay back to the author. Read over your own for homework.
8. Next day: Discussion on how it felt to have essay slashed, if they realized anything about their own writing, etc.

Materials:

3 articles (Zinsser’s “Simplicity, King’s Advice, Hemingway’s advice)

One sample student introduction in need of simplification

Simplicity

by William Zinsser

Clutter is the disease of American writing. We are a society strangling in unnecessary words, circular constructions, pompous frills and meaningless jargon.

Who can understand the viscous language of everyday American commerce and enterprise: the business letter, the interoffice memo, the corporation report, the notice from the bank explaining its latest "simplified" statement? What member of an insurance or medical plan can decipher the brochure that tells him what his costs and benefits are? What father or mother can put together a child's toy on Christmas Eve or any other eve from the instructions on the box? Our national tendency is to inflate and thereby sound important. The airline pilot who wakes us to announce that he is presently anticipating experiencing considerable weather wouldn't dream of saying that there's a storm ahead and it may get bumpy. The sentence is too simple—there must be something wrong with it.

But the secret of good writing is to strip every sentence to its cleanest components. Every word that serves no function, every long word that could be a short word, every adverb which carries the same meaning that is already in the verb, every passive construction that leaves the reader unsure of who is doing what—these are the thousand and one adulterants that weaken the strength of a sentence. And they usually occur, ironically, in proportion to education and rank.

During the late 1960s the president of a major university wrote a letter to mollify the alumni after a spell of campus unrest. "You are probably aware," he began, "that we have been experiencing very considerable potentially explosive expressions of dissatisfaction on issues only partially related." He meant that the students had been hassling them about different things. I was far more upset by the president's English than by the students' potentially explosive expressions of dissatisfaction. I would have preferred the presidential approach taken by Franklin D. Roosevelt when he tried to convert into English his own government's memos, such as this blackout order of 1942:

"Such preparations shall be made as will completely obscure all Federal buildings and non-Federal buildings occupied by the Federal government during an air raid for any period of time from visibility by reason of internal or external illumination."

"Tell them," Roosevelt said, "that in buildings where they have to keep the work going to put something across the windows."

Simplify, simplify. Thoreau said it, as we are so often reminded, and no American writer more consistently practiced what he preached. Open *Walden* to any page and you will find a man saying in a plain and orderly way what is on his mind:

"I love to be alone. I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude. We are for the most part more lonely when we go abroad among men than when we stay in our chambers. A man thinking or working always alone, let him be where he will. Solitude is not measured by the miles of space that intervene between a man and his fellows. The really diligent student in one of the crowded hives of Cambridge College is as solitary as a dervish in the desert."

How can the rest of us achieve such enviable freedom from clutter? The answer is to clear our heads of clutter. Clear thinking becomes clear writing: one can't exist without the other. It is impossible for a muddy thinker to write good English. He may get away with it for a paragraph or two, but soon the reader will be lost, and there is no sin so grave, for he will not easily be lured back.

Who is this elusive creature the reader? He is a person with an attention span of about twenty seconds. He is assailed on every side by forces competing for his time: by newspapers and magazines, by television and radio and stereo, by his wife and children and pets, by his house and his yard and all the gadgets that he has bought to keep them spruce, and by that most potent of competitors, sleep. The man snoozing in his chair with an unfinished magazine open on his lap is a man who was being given too much unnecessary trouble by the writer.

It won't do to say that the snoozing reader is too dumb or too lazy to keep pace with the train of thought. My sympathies are with him. If the reader is lost, it is generally because the writer has not been careful enough to keep him on the path.

This carelessness can take any number of forms. Perhaps a sentence is so excessively cluttered that the reader, hacking his way through the verbiage, simply doesn't know what it means. Perhaps a sentence has been so shoddily constructed that the reader could read it in any of several ways. Perhaps the writer has switched pronouns in mid-sentence, or has switched tenses, so the reader loses track of who is talking or when the action took place. Perhaps Sentence B is not a logical sequel to Sentence A--the writer, in whose head the connection is clear, has not bothered to provide the missing link. Perhaps the writer has used an important word incorrectly by not taking the trouble to look it up. He may think that "sanguine" and "sanguinary" mean the same thing, but the difference is a bloody big one. The reader can only infer (speaking of big differences) what the writer is trying to imply.

Faced with these obstacles, the reader is at first a remarkably tenacious bird. He blames himself--he obviously missed something, and he goes back over the mystifying sentence, or over the whole paragraph, piecing it out like an ancient riddle, making guesses and moving on. But he won't do this for long. The writer is making him work too hard, and the reader will look for one who is better at his craft.

The writer must therefore constantly ask himself: What am I trying to say? Surprisingly often, he doesn't know. Then he must look at what he has written and ask: Have I said it? Is it clear to someone encountering the subject for the first time? If it's not, it is because some fuzz has worked its way into the machinery. The clear writer is a person clear-headed enough to see this stuff for what it is: fuzz.

I don't mean that some people are born clear-headed and are therefore natural writers, whereas others are naturally fuzzy and will never write well. Thinking clearly is a conscious act that the writer must force upon himself, just as if he were embarking on any other project that requires logic: adding up a laundry list or doing an algebra problem. Good writing doesn't come naturally, though most people obviously think it does. The professional writer is forever being hounded by strangers who say that they'd like to "try a little writing sometime" when they retire from their real profession. Good writing takes self-discipline and, very often, self-knowledge.

Many writers, for instance, can't stand to throw anything away. Their sentences are littered with words that mean essentially the same thing and with phrases which make a point that is implicit in what they have already said. When students give me these littered sentences I beg them to select from the surfeit of words the few that most precisely fit what they want to say. Choose one, I plead, from among the three almost identical adjectives. Get rid of the unnecessary adverbs. Eliminate "in a funny sort of way" and other such qualifiers they do no useful work.

The students look stricken--I am taking all their wonderful words away. I am only taking their superfluous words away, leaving what is organic and strong

"But," one of my worst offenders confessed, "I never can get rid of anything--you should see my room." (I didn't take him up on the offer.) "I have two lamps where I only need one, but I can't decide which one I like better, so I keep them both." He went on to enumerate his duplicated or unnecessary objects, and over the weeks ahead I went on throwing away his duplicated and unnecessary words. By the end of the term--a term that he found acutely painful -- his sentences were clean.

"I've had to change my whole approach to writing," he told me. "Now I have to think before I start every sentence and I have to think about every word." The very idea amazed him. Whether his room also looked better I never found out.

Writing is hard work. A clear sentence is no accident. Very few sentences come out right the first time. Or the third. Keep thinking and rewriting until you say what you want to say.

From: Zinsser, W. 1980. Simplicity. In *On writing well: An informal guide to writing nonfiction*. New York: Harper & Row. Copyright 1980 by William K. Zinsser. Reprinted by permission of the author.

In: Miles, Thomas H. *Critical Thinking and Writing for Science and Technology*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990, 290-294.

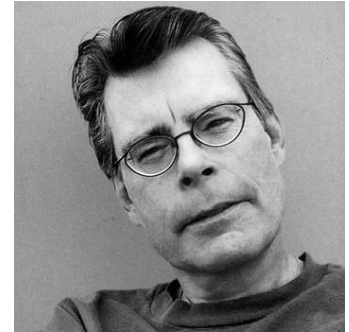
Taken from: <http://www.as.wvu.edu/~tmiles/zinsser.html>

What Stephen King Can Teach You About Writing Essays

Stephen King wrote an autobiography called *On Writing* back in 2000.

In the book, King recounts his various experiences as a writer along with his strategies for creative writing and plot development.

Anyway, we found a great list of writing tips taken directly from the book. Even though this advice applies more toward creative writing, many of these suggestions also apply toward writing/editing an essay for a class.



Here are some of the most practical writing tips:

Get to the point.

Don't waste your reader's time with too much back-story, long intros or longer anecdotes about your life. Reduce the noise. Reduce the babbling.

Write a draft. Then let it rest.

King recommends that you crank out a first draft and then put it in your drawer to let it rest. This enables you to get out of the mindset you had when you wrote the draft and get a more detached and clear perspective on the text. It then becomes easier to edit.

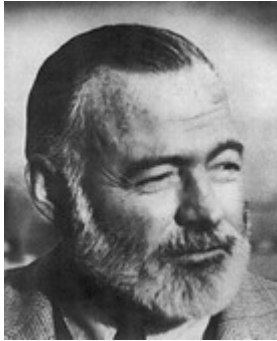
Cut down your text.

Remove all the superfluous words and sentences. Removing will de-clutter your text and often get your message through with more clarity and a bigger emotional punch.

Read a lot.

If you want to be a better writer you need to read a lot to get fresh input, broaden your horizons and deepen your knowledge.

Ernest Hemingway's Top 5 Tips for Writing Well



Who better?

Many business people faced with the task of writing for marketing purposes are quick to say:

Hey, I'm no Hemingway!

But really, *who better* than Hemingway to emulate? Rather than embracing the flowery prose of the literati, he chose to eschew obfuscation at every turn and write simply and clearly.

So let's see what Ernest can teach us about effective writing.

1. Use short sentences.

Hemingway was famous for a terse minimalist style of writing that dispensed with flowery adjectives and got straight to the point. In short, Hemingway wrote with simple genius.

Perhaps his finest demonstration of short sentence prowess was when he was challenged to tell an entire story in only 6 words:

For sale: baby shoes, never used.

2. Use short first paragraphs.

See opening.

3. Use vigorous English.

Here's [David Garfinkel's](#) take on this one:

It's muscular, forceful. Vigorous English comes from passion, focus and intention. It's the difference between putting in a good effort and TRYING to move a boulder... and actually sweating, grunting, straining your muscles to the point of exhaustion... and MOVING the freaking thing!

4. Be positive, not negative.

Since Hemingway wasn't the cheeriest guy in the world, what does he mean by *be positive*? Basically, you should say what something *is* rather than what it *isn't*.

This is what [Michel Fortin](#) calls using *up words*:

By stating what something isn't can be counterproductive since it is still directing the mind, albeit in the opposite way. If I told you that dental work is painless for example, you'll still focus on the word "pain" in "painless."

- *Instead of saying "inexpensive," say "economical,"*
- *Instead of saying "this procedure is painless," say "there's little discomfort" or "it's relatively comfortable,"*
- *And instead of saying "this software is error-free" or "foolproof," say "this software is consistent" or "stable."*

5. Never have only 4 rules.

Actually, Hemingway *did* only have 4 rules for writing, and they were those he was given as a cub reporter at the *Kansas City Star* in 1917. But, as any web writer knows, having only 4 rules will never do.

So, in order to have 5, I had to dig a little deeper to get the most important of Hemingway's writing tips of all:

"I write one page of masterpiece to ninety-one pages of shit," Hemingway confided to F. Scott Fitzgerald in 1934. "I try to put the shit in the wastebasket."

Found here: <http://www.copyblogger.com/ernest-hemingway-top-5-tips-for-writing-well/>

SAMPLE STUDENT PARAGRAPH TO "SIMPLIFY":

The United States is a country like no other, set apart and differentiated by the founding ideals of equality, justice and liberty. The American people are a one-of-a-kind, diverse group that believes in American ideals. We are not only very different from one another, but as a people we are unlike any other nation around the world. This uniqueness brings about the "American Dream," a dream that has unique ideals in this country. However, because all Americans have differing backgrounds, lifestyles, and perspectives, the "American Dream" is

not defined by a specific set of aspirations. The American Dream is having the freedom and opportunity to work towards one's aspirations, whatever they may be. The right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" granted to us in the Declaration of Independence provides us the freedom to choose our own personal goals and dreams and grants us the opportunities to seek them out. This unparalleled American liberty continues to make the American Dream of working toward one's aspirations achievable for anyone, as it has been throughout history, in literature and in reality.