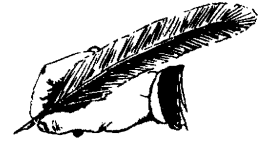


## Use Enough Words

Once I wrote a very brief memo to my boss. I thought he was thoroughly familiar with the subject, but he was not. His response was, "Brevity is a virtue, but you are so virtuous, I have no idea what you're talking about."



Using too many words is a common fault of technical writers, and brevity definitely is a virtue. Nevertheless, there are situations where too few words can lead to ambiguity, difficult reading, incorrect interpretation, or complete lack of understanding.

Every technical report must progress logically, with each new concept supported by what has already been said, or by background knowledge that the reader already has. For example, someone writing about weeds competing with crop plants for light would not need to explain the process of photosynthesis and the vital role of light in plant growth. This is background knowledge of any plant scientist. On the other hand, when writing about the activity of an antidote that protected a plant from a normally lethal herbicide treatment, the author could not reasonably expect that all readers would know the mode of action of the herbicide. This would have to be stated. How much background information needs to be included is a matter of judgment, unique to each situation. Authors sometimes know their subject so well that they assume everyone else does, too. Reviewers are extremely helpful in noticing whether background information is lacking.

Sometimes simply adding one or two words can improve a sentence. A preposition must sometimes be added to eliminate ambiguity when nouns are used as adjectives. "Root extraction" can mean several different things. Adding a preposition can clarify whether it means "extraction by roots," "extraction from roots" or "extraction of roots." An added preposition can also help when nouns serve as adjectives in a long series of modifiers. A report of photoperiodism contained the statement "Relatively large light doses are required." The sentence could have to do with large doses of something that was not heavy. Instead, adding a preposition makes it clear that the intended meaning was "Relatively large doses of light are required."

A verb can have more than one object, predicate adjective, or predicate nominative. Thus, "The workmen mowed brush and weeds" is better than "The workmen mowed brush and mowed weeds." Likewise, "The weeds were old and tough" is better than "The weeds were old and were tough." Similarly, "The cereals were oat, rye, and barley" is better than "The cereals were oat, were rye, and were barley." In like manner, a single preposition can have more than one object. Thus, "Seedlings emerged in March and April" is better than "Seedlings emerged in March and in April."

These sentences are short and simple, and the meaning is clear without repeating the verb or preposition. The longer and more complex the sentences become, the more benefit there is from repeating a word. For example, the second "in" is definitely needed in the following sentence: Seedlings emerged *in* March, when rising temperatures stimulated the first germination of seeds, and *in* April, when conditions remained favorable for germination."

Here is a sentence where the verb should have been repeated: "Other plots that weren't irrigated and grown with only 10 inches of water stored in the soil yielded 45 bushels." This sentence should be written "Other plots that weren't irrigated and *were* grown with only 10 inches of water stored in the soil yielded 45 bushels." Repetition is especially needed, because "were" is first negative and then positive.

Remember:

- Though brevity  
a virtue be,
- Add words if needed  
for clarity.

J. H. Dawson, Weed Scientist, Prosser, WA 99350