

What, Why, and How?

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STYLE:

Simplicity

WHAT IS SIMPLICITY IN WRITING?

“If you can't explain it to a six year old, you don't understand it yourself.” — Albert Einstein

“It is not a daily increase, but a daily decrease. Hack away at the inessentials.” — Bruce Lee

William Zinsser, an expert on writing and author of *On Writing Well*, said: “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 that carries the same meaning that's already in the verb, every passive construction that leaves the reader unsure of who is doing what—these are a thousand and one adulterants that weaken the strength of a sentence.”

Simplicity does not mean writing simple sentences. A series of short simple sentences (He went to the store. The store was far. The day was hot. He was tired.) can sound too simple and unsophisticated in academic writing. You want complexity in your sentences, but that does not mean cramming in smart-sounding words and making long rambling sentences.

Simplicity in writing is trimming the fat which is eliminating the wordiness and saying what you want to say clearly and directly. A reader cannot be convinced of your point if they get lost in the sentences.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Simplicity in writing is beneficial because...

- (1) when you say things with a lot of extra words in them or make sentences long because you think that's what teachers want, then the sentences are not always as easy to follow and can confuse your reader.
- (2) sentences that are clear and easy to follow are then easier for your reader to follow and eventually be convinced by the points that you are trying to make.
- (3) the more that writers can strip down their sentences to the most important parts, they can better control what they want to say and shape the meaning in the writing they are striving to convey.

Let's try that again.

Simplicity in writing is beneficial because...

- (1) direct sentences are clearer.
- (2) direct sentences are more convincing.
- (3) writers can better control and shape meaning.

HOW DO I DO IT?

Take notice of common expressions that are needlessly wordy and trim them:

there is no doubt but that	no doubt (doubtless)
he is a man who	he
in a hasty manner	hastily
this is a subject which	this subject
owing to the fact that	since (because)
in spite of the fact that	though (although)
call your attention to the fact that	remind you (alert you)

A common violation of conciseness is the presentation of a single complex idea, step by step, in a series of sentences which might better be combined into one:

Macbeth was very ambitious. This led him to wish to become king of Scotland. The witches told him that this wish of his would come true. The king of Scotland at this time was Duncan. Encouraged by his wife, Macbeth murdered Duncan. He was thus enabled to succeed Duncan as king. (55 words)	Encouraged by his wife, Macbeth achieved his ambition and realized the prediction of the witches by murdering Duncan and becoming king of Scotland in his place. (26 words)
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The active voice is more concise and vigorous than the passive.

Passive:

The large chunks of debris covering the roof and clogging the drainpipes were removed by city workers.

Active:

City workers removed the large chunks of debris covering the roof and clogging the drainpipes.

The active voice can also strengthen bland expressions and wordy phrasing:

There were a great number of dead leaves lying on the ground.	Dead leaves covered the ground.
The reason that he left college was that his health became impaired.	Failing health compelled him to leave college.
It was not long before he was very sorry that he had said what he had.	He soon repented his words.

PRACTICE

Simplicity

Revise the following passages, avoiding wordiness and undesirable repetition.

A large number of people enjoy reading murder mysteries regularly. As a rule, these people are not themselves murderers, nor would these people really ever enjoy seeing someone commit an actual murder, nor would most of them actually enjoy trying to solve an actual murder. They probably enjoy reading murder mysteries because of this reason: they have found a way to escape from the monotonous, boring routine of dull everyday existence.

To such people the murder mystery is realistic fantasy. It is realistic because the people in the murder mystery are as a general rule believable as people. They are not just made up pasteboard figures. It is also realistic because the character who is the hero, the character who solves the murder mystery, solves it not usually by trial and error and haphazard methods but by exercising a high degree of logic and reason. It is absolutely and totally essential that people who enjoy murder mysteries have an admiration for the human faculty of logic.

But murder mysteries are also fantasies. The people who read such books of fiction play a game. It is a game in which they suspend certain human emotions. One of these human emotions that they suspend is pity. If the reader stops to feel pity and sympathy for each and every victim that is killed or if the reader stops to feel terrible horror that such a thing could happen in our world of today, that person will never enjoy reading murder mysteries. The devoted reader of murder mysteries keeps uppermost in mind at all times the goal of arriving through logic and observation at the final solution to the mystery offered in the book. It is a game with life and death. Whodunits hopefully help the reader to hide from the hideous horrors of actual life and death in the real world.

ANSWERS

POSSIBLE ANSWERS FOR EXERCISE IN SIMPLICITY SECTION

ELIMINATING WORDINESS:

A large number of people enjoy reading murder mysteries regularly. As a rule, these people are not themselves murderers, nor would these people really ever enjoy seeing someone commit an actual murder, nor would most of them actually enjoy trying to solve an actual murder. They probably enjoy reading murder mysteries because of this reason: they have found a way to escape from the monotonous, boring routine of dull everyday existence.

Many people who do not desire to commit, see, or solve a murder still like to read murder mysteries in order to escape the monotony of everyday life.

To such people the murder mystery is realistic fantasy. It is realistic because the people in the murder mystery are as a general rule believable as people. They are not just made up pasteboard figures. It is also realistic because the character who is the hero, the character who solves the murder mystery, solves it not usually by trial and error and haphazard methods but by exercising a high degree of logic and reason. It is absolutely and totally essential that people who enjoy murder mysteries have an admiration for the human faculty of logic.

Murder mysteries are realistic fantasies because the characters are not pasteboard figures but believable, and the hero solves the mystery not haphazardly but with logic and reason. Murder mystery fans must admire logic.

But murder mysteries are also fantasies. The people who read such books of fiction play a game. It is a game in which they suspend certain human emotions. One of these human emotions that they suspend is pity. If the reader stops to feel pity and sympathy for each and every victim that is killed or if the reader stops to feel terrible horror that such a thing could happen in our world of today, that person will never enjoy reading murder mysteries. The devoted reader of murder mysteries keeps uppermost in mind at all times the goal of arriving through logic and observation at the final solution to the mystery offered in the book. It is a game with life and death. Whodunits hopefully help the reader to hide from the hideous horrors of actual life and death in the real world.

But murder mysteries are also fantasies. To enjoy the mystery, readers must suspend pity and play a game and not stop to feel sympathy for every victim or horror for every crime. Devoted readers focus on logic and observation to solve the game of life and death. Whodunits hide from hideous, real life horrors.