



CLEAR WRITING: A Sampler Seminar

for the Corporation of
Translators, Terminologists,
and Interpreters of New Brunswick

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presented by

MoonStone Communications
451 Yoho Lake Road
Yoho, New Brunswick
Canada E6K 3C1

506.366.3079
gwenmart@nbnet.nb.ca

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Cover Photograph: *Crooked Creek Valley, Albert County, New Brunswick*

Introduction: The Gentle Art of 'Soft' Editing

'Softly' editing government documents is a lot like having to photograph the interior of someone else's home.

The author is the home owner. A rigorous editor can be the interior designer. But as a soft editor (or as a government translator), you are the photographer. You are expected to reproduce the room as is, and to make the owner look good.

Sometimes this is easy. But what if you are faced with a cluttered, dusty room that will look shabby, no matter how excellent your photography skills? You are not the interior designer. You cannot say "change that wall colour" or "why not switch your bedroom and office?" And you're not the home owner, so you can't throw out the sofa ... even though it doesn't suit your taste.

Similarly, what if a text is so long-winded or garbled that you can't decide whether to edit or quit? A soft editor or a government translator cannot replace words just because they may not match her or his writing style.

Yet those of us who practice soft editing and government translation DO have options. We can scoot around the room (so to speak), tossing garbage, dusting shelves, and polishing doorknobs. The home owner will barely notice the changes but may think: "my, my ... this room does look better!"

The secret to gently decluttering someone else's text is to know what you can and cannot change. **Clear Writing: A Sampler Seminar** highlights four simple steps that let you dust and polish sentences and words. They are:

- Step 1: Shorten sentences
- Step 2: Use simpler words
- Step 3: Replace nouns with verbs
- Step 4: Use the active voice

You may want to use all four steps. Or you might feel more comfortable applying only some of the steps some of the time. No matter what your approach, any decluttering will help the reader, simplify your translation work ... and keep the author's writing voice more or less intact.

~ Gwen Martin

Step 1: Shorten Sentences

Shorten long sentences at natural breaks such as 'and' and 'but' (and sometimes at 'if' and 'because').

- Modern readers struggle to read strings of long sentences. **A long sentence contains more than 20 words and/or covers more than two lines on a standard page** (12 point Times Roman, 1 inch margins).
- Aim for **one main idea per sentence**.
- Save some long sentences in the text. Variety is good. But keep the average length to 20 words.
- When dividing sentences, you may need to change or add a word or two to aid sentence flow.
- *Hint:* search periods (.) and temporarily replace them with (.^p) to check sentence lengths.

Before

Investigations by the Round Table Committee reveal that a Rural Community would result in significant cost savings for the provision of local services and that such an organization would help to address some of the issues the village is facing. The most significant of these issues, according to research and interviews, is taxation, but other factors affect the community such as policing, garbage disposal and emergency response measures. The Committee discovered that many residents and cottage owners are skeptical of the Rural Community concept, because it is a new idea, and they will not vote for such a change unless they are well informed and comfortable. Therefore, the Round Table Committee recommends that the elected officials of the Local Service District should distribute its report to all residents, cottage owners and business owners, as well as establish follow-up information sessions to further inform the public, as it is important to receive their suggestions before any action is taken, or else the concept of a Rural Community will be rejected by a majority of the citizens.

Step 1: After

Investigations by the Round Table Committee reveal that a Rural Community would result in significant cost savings for the provision of local services. Such an organization would help to address some of the issues the village is facing. The most significant of these issues, according to research and interviews, is taxation. Other factors also affect the community such as policing, garbage disposal and emergency response measures. The Committee discovered that many residents and cottage owners are skeptical of the Rural Community concept. It is a new idea, and they will not vote for such a change unless they are well informed and comfortable. Therefore, the Round Table Committee recommends that the elected officials of the Local Service District should distribute its report to all residents, cottage owners and business owners, as well as establish follow-up information sessions to further inform the public. It is important to receive their suggestions before any action is taken. Otherwise, the concept of a Rural Community will be rejected by a majority of the citizens.

Before four sentences – 40, 28, 38, 69 words (175 words)

After nine sentences – 23, 15, 13, 15, 16, 21, 39, 12, 16 words (170 words)

Step 2: Use Simpler Words

- **Replace wordy phrases with single words** (see pages 11 to 13).

How many phrases should you replace? That depends on the client and the rhythm of the prose. It is a judgment call.

- **Replace complex words with simpler words** (see pages 14 to 16).

Again, you will need to make a judgment call. But remember: authors like to see familiar 'key' words in their edited copy. Change too many key words, and you may have a sulky client.

- *Hint:* search 'there is', 'there are', 'that', 'it is', 'in the', 'on the', 'take', 'make', 'give'.

Before

It may be said that a majority of people make the decision that it is too difficult to ask themselves the question about whether it is appropriate to endure in a silent manner the harmful effects that transpire when one person continues to inflict outrageous behaviour upon another. It is evident that this silence is due in large measure to the fact we are taught to hold the opinion that it is noble to attempt to ignore such behaviour. On the other hand, it is possible that it is appropriate to ascertain what can be done to ameliorate the situation. There are some circumstances that demand action. One could state that in some cases – or perhaps in most cases – it is preferable to employ kind but firm verbal statements in order to cause a cessation of, or at least to put parameters on, the outrageous behaviour. Indeed, such a course of action might even be beneficial to all concerned.

Step 2: After (soft edit – retains author’s style and most word choices)

It may be that most people decide it is too difficult to question whether it is right to silently endure the harmful effects that happen when one person continues to inflict outrageous behaviour on another. This silence occurs largely because we are taught to believe it is noble to ignore such behaviour. On the other hand, perhaps it is correct to learn what can be done to ameliorate the situation. Some circumstances demand action. One could say that in some cases – or perhaps in most cases – it is better to use kind but firm words to end or at least to limit the behaviour. Indeed, such action might even benefit all concerned.

Step 2: After (rigorous edit)

Most people tend not to question remaining silent about the harmful effects of accepting repeated outrageous behaviour from others. This silence occurs largely because we believe it is noble to ignore such behaviour. However, one could try to improve the situation. Some circumstances demand action. Sometimes – or perhaps often – one might use kind but firm words to end or at least to limit the behaviour, possibly benefitting all concerned.

Original Version

To be, or not to be: that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And, by opposing, end them?

William Shakespeare – Hamlet, Act 3

Before	159 words
After (soft)	112 words
After (rigorous)	69 words
Shakespeare	39 words

Step 3: Replace Nouns with Verbs

- Inflated nouns appear in many government and university reports. Such nouns typically end in **-ment**, **-ion**, and sometimes **-ness**. See page 17.
- Inflated nouns (such as 'implementation') have a related, shorter verb ('implement').
- Inflated noun = low energy. Shorter verb = high energy. **Replace the noun with the verb**, and feel your text gain energy. Also, by converting the noun to the verb, you can delete one or two other words.
- If editing softly, keep the author's word choices (e.g. 'implementation' becomes 'implement').
- If editing rigorously, you can go one step further and use simpler words (for instance, replace 'implement' with 'carry out' or 'make'). Pages 14 to 16 show suggestions for simpler words.
- *Hint:* search *-ment*, *-ion*, and *-ness* to find the inflated nouns.

Before

The Bhutanese Department in charge of Gross National Happiness (GNH) wishes to help in the development of a policy to ensure that all employees will take part in the implementation of the following actions.

- Make an adjustment in schedules to accommodate hourly tea breaks.
- Give consideration to taking a walk around the building at least twice a day.
- Emphasize the encouragement of playing calm music during lunch hour.
- Practise the limitation of harmful gossip while pursuing the accomplishment of their daily work.

Step 3: After (soft edit – retains the author’s style and most word choices)

The Bhutanese Department in charge of Gross National Happiness (GNH) wishes to develop a policy to ensure that all employees will implement the following actions.

- Adjust schedules to accommodate hourly tea breaks.
- Consider walking around the building at least twice a day.
- Encourage playing calm music during lunch hour.
- Limit harmful gossip while accomplishing work.

After (rigorous edit)

The Bhutanese Department in charge of Gross National Happiness (GNH) seeks a policy to ensure that all employees will

- fix schedules to allow hourly tea breaks
- walk around the building at least twice daily
- play calm music during lunch
- limit gossip while working.

Before 86 words

After (soft) 59 words

After (rigorous) 47 words

Step 4: Use the Active Voice

Where possible, shift words in a sentence so they flow in standard order: subject-verb-object.

- People generally register the subject first, action second, and object last. A natural sentence flows left to right: **subject-verb-object**. We call this the **active voice**.

Jane [= subject] **walks** [= verb] the **dog** [= object].

- People take 20% longer to read sentences that flow **object-verb-subject**. We call this the **passive voice**. Active voice = high energy. Passive voice = low energy.

The **dog** [= object] **is walked** [= verb] by **Jane** [= subject].

- You might also see **object-subject-verb**, which shoves the action (verb) to the end.

The **dog** is a pet that **Jane walks**. [even lower energy]

- How to spot the passive voice? Circle all versions of 'to be' in your text (see list below). Often, the circles mark passive text. Sometimes, they show equating sentences, which are also low-energy. However, we haven't time to cover that step!

is	am	are	was
were	be	been	being

Before

Last year, the concept of teaching and using Clear Writing was investigated by the Kingdom of Caledonia. It had recently been revealed, in a study, that Clear Writing allowed the amount of paper being used to be reduced by nearly 20%. However, the presenting of Clear Writing seminars, to be done by the Minister of Communication, was too difficult to arrange, and so the concept was ignored. Instead, the approach taken by the Department of Saving Trees was to limit the number of pages that were permitted to be printed by employees each month. That this was not a suitable approach was finally admitted by the head of the department. During the final week of each month, important documents were not able to be released by the government. Drivers' licences could not be obtained by the public. Cheques were not being printed by the Minister of Finance. Before long, the country was swamped in confusion.

Step 4: After

Last year, the Kingdom of Caledonia investigated the concept of teaching and using Clear Writing. A recent study revealed that Clear Writing reduced paper usage by nearly 20%. However, the Minister of Communication found it too difficult to arrange Clear Writing seminars, and so the concept was ignored. Instead, the Department of Saving Trees limited the number of pages employees could print each month. The head of that department finally admitted this was not a suitable approach. During the final week of each month, the government could not release important documents. The public could not obtain drivers' licences. The Minister of Finance could not print cheques. Before long, the country was swamped in confusion.

Before 155 words

After 114 words

Note: Step 4 can produce a significant change in the author's style. When translating or soft editing, you needn't – and probably shouldn't – fix every single passive sentence if the original text is passive-heavy.

But fixing even a few sentences will give the text an energy boost.

Of course, you *could* have a chat with your author and explain the passive voice. Many government folks appreciate the tool, once they see how it energizes their words.

Wordy Phrases

- Wordy phrases and their single-word substitutes.
- **Bolded entries** show wordy noun phrases and their related single-word verbs.

INSTEAD OF	USE
a majority of	most
a sufficient amount of	enough
adequate number of	enough
after the conclusion of	after
ascertain the location of	find
at an early date	soon
at such time as	when
at the present time	now
at this point in time	now
is deficient in	lacks
is in a position to	can
by means of	by
carry out an examination of	examine
come to a conclusion about	conclude
conduct an analysis of	analyze
despite the fact that	although
is due to the fact that	because
during such time as	while
during the time that	while
excessive number of	too many
fewer in number	fewer
for the duration	during
for the purpose of	to, for
for the reason that	because
for this reason	thus, therefore
give a description of	describe
give a presentation of	present
give an indication of	indicate
has been proved to be	is

INSTEAD OF	USE
if conditions are such that	if
in a number of	several, many
in all cases	always
in case	if
in close proximity to	near
in connection with	about
in excess of	more than
in large measure	largely
in lieu of	instead of
in many cases	often
in most cases	usually
in no case	never
in order that	so that
in order to	to
in some cases	sometimes, occasionally
in terms of	in
in the absence of	without, lacking
in the amount of	for
in the case of	for
in the event that	if
in the field of	in
in the interest of	for
in the majority of cases	usually
in the near future	soon
in the neighborhood of	near, about
in the vicinity of	near
in this case	here
in view of the fact that	because, since
is authorized to	may
is capable of	can
is found to be	is
is in a position to	can
is unable to	cannot

INSTEAD OF

it has been found that

it has long been known that

it is a fact (*or evident*) that

it is interesting to note that

it is noted that

it is possible that

it is well known that

it may be said that

it would appear that

make a change to

make a decision about

make a promise about

make a recommendation that

make an attempt to

manner in which

notwithstanding the fact that

offer a suggestion

on behalf of

on the basis of

on the order of

on the other hand

on the part of

reach a conclusion about

resulting from

subsequent to

the question as to

there can be little doubt that

until such time as

with a view to

with reference to

with regard to

with the exception that

USE

maybe delete)

(maybe delete)

(maybe delete)

note that

(maybe delete)

perhaps

(maybe delete)

(maybe delete)

apparently

change

decide

promise

recommend

attempt

how

although

suggest

for

from, because, by

about, approximately

however

by

conclude

due to

after, following

whether

probably

until

to

about

for

except that

Complex Words

INSTEAD OF	USE
(to) access	get, reach
accommodate	fit, hold, help, allow
accompany	go with, escort, attend
accomplish	do, achieve, perform
accordingly	therefore, so
accumulate	gather
acquire	get, buy, win, gain, earn
additional	more, added, other, extra
additionally	and, also
adjust	change
advise	tell, suggest
aggregate	total
alter	change
alternative	other
ameliorate	improve
analogous	similar
anticipate	expect
apparent	clear
append	attach, add
apprise	tell, advise, inform
appropriate	proper, right, correct
approximately	about, roughly, almost, around, nearly
ascertain	check, find out, discover, learn
assist	help, aid, back, relieve
attain	reach, succeed, meet, gain, get, win
(to) attempt	try, take on
augment	increase, make larger
basically	<i>omit or</i> mainly, chiefly, largely
category	group
cease	end, stop

INSTEAD OF	USE
commence	begin, start, open
commencement	beginning, start
communicate	write, talk
compensation	pay, payment
complete	finish
component	part, unit
comprise	consist of, contain
conceal	hide
concept	idea
concerning	about, on, for, as for
consequence	result, effect
consequently	so, thus
consolidate	combine, join
constitute	make up, be, form
construct	build, make, erect, compose
co-operate	help
currently	<i>omit or</i> now, today
customary	usual, ordinary, normal
delete	cut, drop
demise	death
demonstrate	show, prove, display, teach, explain
denote	show, say, mean
depart	leave, go
designate	appoint, name, choose
desire	wish, want
desist	stop, end, give up
detain	hold
determine	learn, find out, decide
diminutive	small, tiny, little
discontinue	stop
disseminate	send out, spread, scatter
donate	give, grant
(to) duplicate	copy, double, repeat

INSTEAD OF	USE
effectuate	cause, achieve, realize
eliminate	cut, end, remove, cancel
elucidate	explain
(to) employ	use
(to) encounter	meet, face
(to) endeavor	try, carry out
enumerate	list, name, count, number
excessive	too many
expedite	hasten, hurry
expend	spend
expenditure	expense, cost, charge
expiration	end, close, finish
facilitate	help, ease, promote
feasible	possible, probable, likely
feedback	comments, response, opinions
finalize	finish, end, complete
following	after
formulate	develop, form, make, draft, create
(to) forward	send
frequently	often
fundamental	basic
furnish	give, send, provide, supply
go forward	proceed, continue, advance
(to) impact	affect, influence
(to) implement	carry out, achieve, follow, make, produce, complete
inception	beginning, start
indicate	say, show, suggest
indication	sign, signal, hint
inform	tell
initial	first
initiate	begin, open, start, cause, launch, introduce

INSTEAD OF	USE
inquire (about)	ask
(to) institute	begin, start, set up, introduce, create
location	area, district, locale, place, site
locate	find
magnitude	size, extent, importance
manner	way
materialize	appear, develop, happen, occur
maximum	most, largest, greatest
methodology	methods, procedure
minuscule	tiny
mitigate	moderate, ease
modify	change, vary, adapt, adjust
moreover	besides, also
necessitate	require, demand, need
notification	notice
numerous	many, countless, endless, several
objective	aim, goal
obligated	bound, compelled
observe	see, watch, note, view
obtain	get, earn, gain, buy, hold
obviate	avoid
ongoing	continuing, active, constant
operate	use, run, act, go, manage
operational	active, running, working
optimum	best
orientate	orient
overall	total, complete, general
paradigm	pattern, model
parameter	limit, boundary
per annum	a year
permit	let, allow

INSTEAD OF	USE
personnel	people, staff
peruse	review, examine, inspect
(to) place	put
portion	part
possess	have, own, control, hold
possibility	chance
(to) present	give, introduce, show
preferable	better
presently	soon
preserve	keep
previous	earlier
previously	before, earlier
principal	main, chief
prior	earlier
prioritize	list, order, rank, rate
proceed	start, continue, advance
procure	get, buy, find
provide (with)	give
(to) purchase	buy
regarding	about
(to) relate	say, show, tell
remain	stay
remainder	rest, surplus, balance
remunerate	pay
render	make, give
represents	is
reproduce	copy
(to) request	ask, seek
reside	live
respecting	about
retain	keep
secure	get
select	choose, pick
semiannually	twice a year
solely	only

INSTEAD OF	USE
state	say
strategize	plan
subsequent	next
subsequently	later, then, after, since
substantiate	confirm, prove, support
sufficient	enough
summon	send for, call
supplement	add to
terminate	end, stop, cancel, finish, close
therefore	so, then, thus
thus	so
transmit	send
transpire	happen, occur, take place
ultimate	last, final, perfect
upon	on
use up	use
utilize	use
virtually	almost
whether	if

Inflated Nouns

Inflated Noun	Shortened Version (the related verb)	Simpler Word (to use if possible)
accomplishment	accomplish	do
amplification	amplify	expand
application	apply	[you can fill in the others!]
certification	certify	
declination	decline	
development	develop	
encouragement	encourage	
establishment	establish	
imagination	imagine	
implementation	implement	
management	manage	
notification	notify	
preparation	prepare	
production	produce	
promotion	promote	
rationalization	rationalize	
re-allocation	re-allocate	
substantiation	substantiate	
termination	terminate	
utilization	utilize	
<i>etcetera</i>	<i>etcetera</i>	