

## THE LONG AND SHORT OF BREVITY: FACT AND SPECULATION

Because “Dr. Eisiminger” is a six-syllable mouthful, I have long encouraged students to call me “Dr. E” to lessen the anxiety attached to speaking in class. It seems I am not alone: in 2000 according to the files of the Social Security Administration, there were 221 Americans with single-letter surnames and at least one for each letter of the alphabet. “A” is the most popular with twenty-four of us carrying that surname at the top of phone book listings and class rolls. “N,” “Q,” and “X,” are the least popular, there being only two people for each of these. However, in Myanmar, hundreds of families are named “U”; while in Korea, there are thousands who answer to “O” once the transliterations are completed. A German proverb states, “In brevity is the spice,” yet Germans have no apparent compunction compounding words like *Oberdonaudampfschiffahrtsgesellschaftskapitän* for a river-boat captain employed by the Upper-Danube Steam Boat Company—nine English morsels crammed into one fat *Wurst*. In fact, a syllable count of the Gospel of Mark made by Walter Kirkconnell reveals that German uses 32,650 syllables to express what English conveys in a mere 29,000. (Incidentally, according to Robert MacNeil, English has a vocabulary of about half a million words while German limps along on 185,000.) French needs 36,000 syllables to express Mark’s Greek, Russian 36,500, Italian 40,500, and Bengali 43,100. Of all the great modern languages, English with arguably the largest vocabulary is surely the most economical though comparisons with ideographic languages like Chinese are admittedly difficult. But the economy of English, may be part of what makes its speakers impatient with our more prolix neighbors. It may also account for the way we rush through lunch and sex. Could the American “working vacation” be a reflection of our no-nonsense language? Just a thought.

As a native-born speaker of English, I come by my preference for brevity naturally. Nearly fifty of my English teachers over two decades beat the drum of language economy as steadily as any other. The poet and novelist James Dickey once told a class that I was part of to go home and write a thousand heroic couplets. A professor had given him the same advice years earlier along with “Don’t fall” and “Get up,” which Dickey claimed had done him a world of good. He said he had no interest in reading our “millenary couplets,” as he put it, but we’d be better human beings if we did. Instructions to begin, as I trust our current President now realizes, should always include an exit strategy: with close to three thousand couplets under my belt and Dickey dead for nearly a decade, I don’t know how to stop! In fact as I sit here wondering where this essay is going, I have doodled in the margin:

Detouring around Robin Hood’s barn  
makes for a very tedious yarn.  
The circumlocutionary route  
may lead you places you can’t get out.

Although a few syllables shy of the heroic, these couplets are meant to imply that windy locutions are the written and oral equivalents of manure.

It is often observed that this nation’s most cherished prose is succinct without being ungracious. We declared our independence from England in 1322 words; Moses gave us

an account of creation in 794 words and spelled out the Ten Commandments in 297; Lincoln dedicated the Gettysburg Cemetery in 268 words, and in reciting the Lord's Prayer, we utter only fifty-six. Indeed, the very brevity of these timeless expressions is what has made them such fertile soil for our allusions. "To be brief," said Santayana, "is almost a condition of being inspired."

Nevertheless, a great many of us, especially English teachers, have a tendency to reward length over concision, cogency, and content. For over twenty years, I served as a reader and table leader for the Educational Testing Service on SAT II and AP essay examinations. It quickly became obvious to me and most other readers that "development," as the ETS likes to call length, is a virtue. One reader admitted that he read the first and last sentence of a paper to see if any red flags were unfurled, appraised the readability of the handwriting, checked the length, and placed a grade on the paper. He claimed that in ten years of reading, he was never off by more than one grade.

One place, however, where concision usually wins is in comedy, which follows a variation of the Law of Parsimony, for brevity, as various writers have told us, is the soul of wit, wisdom, and lingerie. "Punch it up," to a comedy writer usually means using the rasp and file on some wooden prose to give it a sharper comic "edge." Minimalist architects like to say "less is more; more's a bore," and generally the same advice applies to comedy. Indeed, some of the very best *New Yorker* cartoons have no caption at all. One of my favorite Saul Steinberg drawings shows a "J. Alfred Prufrock-style" social gathering with four abstractions intent on one another ("talking of Michelangelo") while the dark coil of a solitary guest sits daydreaming about "swelling a progress" and frolicking with mermaids.

For several months now in 2006, I have joined tens of thousands of *New Yorker* readers in submitting a caption for an uncaptioned drawing in a weekly contest. Each week, the editors publish the three best captions submitted, after which readers are asked to go on-line to vote for their favorite. In a very unscientific survey, it seems that the *New Yorker's* readers, while they may have read tens of thousands of words about ketchup, truck driving, and oranges over the years, prefer their cartoons with a rapier's point. One recent cartoon showed a job applicant being interviewed in the foreground as three office workers armed with ax, baseball bat, and pistol chase a hapless co-worker down a corridor. Though it could be argued that the drawing needed no caption, the contest's challenge was to put some words into the job interviewer's mouth. I submitted, "We don't have anything right now, but if you could wait a second..." The winner, submitted by John Maynard of Berkeley, California, was, "How soon can you start?" I was on the right track, but I have to concede that the edge honed by my file is duller than Mr. Maynard's.

In another contest, a priest, a minister, and a rabbi walk into a bar as the bartender is using the phone. I toyed with Rainbow Coalitions, Olympic committees, and global paradigms, but finally my barkeep says, "Hold on, the Ecumenical Council just walked in." However, my thirteen syllables lost to the following seven submitted by Kelly Younger of Los Angeles, "Stop me if you've heard this one." No contest, I concede, spare is fair.

A former colleague of mine used to assign students in his advanced composition classes a thousand-word essay. Once graded, he returned the essays with instructions to rewrite them in five hundred words. Finally they were reduced to a hundred words or less. He claimed this reductive exercise taught a valuable lesson. Probably so, but if I condensed this essay of mine to "Be brief," assuming any editor would accept it, most readers would

want their money back. The flamboyant pianist Liberace could perform Chopin's "Minute Waltz" in thirty-seven seconds, but few, I suspect, want to dance much less listen to such a tempo. I suppose it's a lot like lace: if the lace maker fills in all the holes, where's the charm and delicacy?

One of the best light verse writers today is Edmund Conti, author of "Potholes." The poem in its entirety reads, "A void." I tell students that the space between Conti's "A" and his "void" is analogous to a carefully crafted opening, not a tear, in a lace curtain; fill the white space and the filigree beauty of the lace disappears as does the poem if some editor foolishly decides to close that calculated gap.

When I preach the virtues of concision to students, I often use a sentence from one of their peers: "My mother has about two cats." Most students see the problem right away, but then at least one practitioner of instant messaging will submit an ugly paper using "4" for "for" and "w/o" for "without," etc. Once after lecturing on Zipf's Law, the tendency in English to shorten the words we use the most or lengthen those we use the least, one student apologized for something he'd written saying, "My b."

"My b?" I inquired, "what are you saying, son?"

"It's Zip's Law, sir,—'my apologies' became 'my bad,' which has become 'my b.' Do you want me to wordy it up for you?"

Precisely where to draw the line between the tedious and the trenchant is a tough call. In a sentence written by a former student, however, the call was easy: "Brevity occurs when everything is short, concise, and to the point." But if there are two havens, as I like to tell students, like Boston and Plymouth, I don't think there's any question that the former offers a deeper and more sheltered harbor. And if there are three havens (add the Cape Cod Marina in the mix), Boston surely is the safest. But if there is a single haven, please resist the temptation to call it a "safe haven" because any haven or harbor by definition especially for boats and small ships is safer than the open sea. Why that is so hard for the grizzled talking heads of our media to grasp is a mystery, but my best guess is that public speakers are insecure and nervous. I know the first time I used "inchoate" in spoken conversation, I unconsciously followed it by mumbling "in the early stages." I suspect I was reassuring myself as well as my listeners.

As I said, though, the line between too much and too little is difficult to draw. In a *B.C.* strip drawn by Johnny Hart in 2004, one caveman approaches another who has recently entered the business of selling "live bait." Suspecting a tautology in the proprietor's signage, the customer asks, "Do you sell dead bait?"

"Of course not," replies the owner.

Turning to leave, the customer confidently but mysteriously concludes, "The sign is redundant."

Now I've shown this strip to a couple of English teaching colleagues, and the three of us agree that the sign is not redundant. While "edible bait" or "alluring bait" may be tautologies, "live bait" is acceptable as anyone who's ever fished with a plastic worm knows. The not-so-funny joke, therefore, has to be on the customer whose ignorance has been unmasked, and if that's not the point, either all three of us missed the subtlety, or Mr. Hart doesn't fish much.

"Grocery store" is another difficult call, but I prefer to call the store a "grocery" and what is sold there "groceries." However, if you wish to refer to several groceries ("There are

three groceries in our small town”), are you speaking of the food stores or the food they sell? It does get sticky.

“When I struggle to be terse,” the classical poet Horace wrote, “I end by being obscure.” E-mail and IM have only thickened the fog in the last twenty years. At the start of a recent academic year, I sent out an e-mail memorandum asking colleagues for any upper-level humanities proposals they might have in mind for the next year. A recently hired lecturer wrote right back asking if a part-time person such as himself would be eligible to teach one of these plums. Not sure of his status in the hierarchy of personnel, I wrote the department head and asked if he had any objections.

“No way!” he responded *in toto*.

His economy and speed of reply were admirable, but I had no idea what he meant. So I wrote back asking, “Is there ‘no way’ that you have an objection or ‘no way’ that Mr. X will teach a 300-level class? Just want to be sure.”

Replied my laconic boss, “No objection.”

The new poet laureate Donald Hall once wrote that his prose ethic was clarity, and this has guided me for over thirty years whether I’m writing an essay or a couplet. First, I must be understood; second, I must be economical. One has to admire a language where “*El Pueblo de Nuestra Senora la Reina de los Angeles de Porciuncula*” has evolved into “LA”; “Send me some electronic mail” has morphed into “E me,” and “OK” has shrunken to “K.” No mistaking those clipped masterpieces as long as there’s plenty of context!



John Chancellor was once asked if the three-hundred-word limit imposed by NBC on the anchorman’s nightly editorials didn’t chafe. “Not at all,” replied Chancellor. “In Genesis, that gets you into the fourth day.” And if one compresses the New Testament as some anonymous wag has done to, “He was born. He lived. He died. He’s coming back, and he’s not going to be happy,” three hundred words places you well into the Apocrypha. Matthew warns us that on the Day of Judgment we’ll all be required to justify a lifetime of “idle” words. I take this as a roundabout way of restating Nietzsche’s slightly updated observation that the well-turned sound bite is a form of immortality. Few recall any more than that.