

Intermission: Cutting Down

TIME TO FOCUS ON THE ART OF REDUCTION. You've finished your story, which weighs in at 526 words, 26 too many for the M. M. Memorial Flash Fiction Contest. Or maybe your flash fiction about an archery match seems perfect—until your friend and best reader tells you that all those *thwocks* grow monotonous. Maybe you've done what so many authors in command of powerful effects do: registered the slap and the reaction but then described them as well. No need to show him blush *and* say he's really embarrassed. Or you just use too many words in too many phrases in various paragraphs composed of too many sentences like this.

No author wants to be accused of padding, but a flash fiction writer really has to make every word count, especially when there's a word count. Consider TMI, Too Much Information, as it applies to how your character gets ready for work. Claiming you included some of that “for the rhythm” isn't a good excuse.

Go ahead, start paring down—but how? You can approach the task in several ways:

- ▶ Slashing, in which a whole paragraph may go if it's just unnecessary background. Who really needs to know that Roy wears a hairpiece,

that he puts it on a stand when he goes to bed, that it's his third in three years . . . though these seemed like fun facts at the time you wrote them. In a story that may be no more than a page, that may translate into cutting a sentence here and another there. No need even to let us know that Roy is balding, unless the plot hinges on it.

► Microsurgery, in which you cut individual words.

Delete “the fact that.” “He couldn’t stand the fact that she smoked” becomes “He couldn’t stand that she smoked” or, even better, “He couldn’t stand her smoking.”

Cut expletives. No, not swear words; rather, weak constructions like “it is” and “there are,” which begin far too many sentences. Who needs “There was a cat on the table” when “A cat was on the table” serves the purpose better, and “A large cat covered the table” replaces the weak “to be” verb with something more active? Cutting out the expletive in your sentence means that you get directly to the subject and may even force you to rephrase more actively: “It was not a happy time for her” becomes “She hadn’t been happy all of April.”

Cut dialogue tags. Do you really need that ping-pong game of “he said, she said”? How many replacement verbs have you cooked up for “said”? “Fumed,” “sighed,” “stated,” “pronounced,” “averred” . . . Cut “he said” and, in its place, put a short action-verb sentence. That will identify the speaker and build some action. Not

“I don’t like you,” she said.

but

“I don’t like you.” She yawned.

That way, you can cut the next two sentences, which were all about how boring she found him.

Cut “very.” Not “very bright,” but “brilliant.” Not “very hungry,” but “starving.”

Cut adjectives and adverbs whenever possible. Not “brilliant woman,” but “genius.” Not “yelled angrily,” but simply “yelled.”

Cut creeping A & B-ism. “I am sick and tired of your constant and never-ending fits and tantrums.” Nah. “I’m tired of your tantrums.”

Note that cutting away usually strengthens a line of prose rather than weakening it because the emphasis doesn't have to be shared among so many words: the difference between "Go to your room" and "Go!"

Some writers have even developed an entire aesthetic philosophy of cutting. Below are the first two rules from "Imagisme," published in a 1913 issue of the magazine *Poetry*, supposedly by a writer named F. S. Flint, but really cooked up by Ezra Pound and a couple of friends.

1. Direct treatment of the "thing," whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.

Pound intended these rules to apply to poetry, but they apply just as well to flash fiction, where a concentrated essence is crucial. Cut the abstractions, such as your two lines about unfair due process, and give us instead a phrase to evoke that concept, a crooked lawyer. Instead of truth, justice, and the American way, give us Superman. William Carlos Williams, a contemporary of Pound's, put it this way in his poem *Pater-son*: "no ideas but in things."

Get rid of words that are there for padding or rhythm or just for the hell of it. If a word doesn't help the story along in plot or characterization or imagery, lose it. Be brutal. Sometimes the loveliest cluster of words you've got doesn't help in advancing the narrative. Hemingway famously said to find the one sentence in the story you're most proud of, and cut it, on the assumption that it's too showy.

Some additional tips:

Read your work out loud to hear where it can be condensed. You can often catch errors that way, too.

What you might consider a space constraint might also spur resourcefulness. Necessity is the mother of all sorts of ingenuity.

When deciding what to cut and what to save, decide what your story's about, then proceed along that theme. If your piece is about the indignity of growing old, you can omit that scene when your character was nineteen or reduce it to a one-sentence memory.