

Strategies for Curing Paginal Diarrhea

game plans for writing concisely

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Examine Your Work for Paginal Diarrhea

Do your documents suffer from paginal diarrhea—an unpleasant runny mess that contaminates the page, detracting from the main business and turning people off? Not sure? Then let's ask some more specific questions.

Is your writing wordier than necessary? Is it repetitious? Do you take too long to make your point? Do you include content that may not interest your readers? If the answer to any of these questions is yes, your documents have paginal diarrhea.

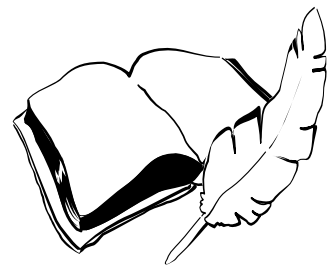
Understand the Importance of Writing Concisely

The cure for paginal diarrhea is writing concisely. But this is easier said than done. For most people, writing concisely takes more time and effort than does being detailed and thorough. And yet it's important for several reasons:

- To clearly convey the message. Your message can easily get lost if obscured by fluff or superfluous text.
- To keep the readers' attention. People today have so many demands on their time that the more concise your message, the greater the likelihood that people will read the entire document. You need to hook readers from the first sentence and keep them hooked throughout. You can't afford to bore them.
- To fit the space available. Space constraints come in many forms. You may be writing a letter that your boss has told you to limit to two pages. You may be creating a flyer or brochure where there's only so much real estate to work with. You may be entering information into a web page dialog box that has a character count limit. Such constraints force you to be more concise than you might otherwise be.

Writing concisely does not mean omitting details for the sake of brevity. Nor does it require writers to sacrifice creativity. However, it does mean using words economically and omitting words that don't add value.

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Arm Yourself with Strategies to Defeat the Enemy

Any good grammar reference book will address tactics for writing concisely—the actual mechanics of making one’s writing tight. But defeating paginal diarrhea requires more than a knowledge of grammar, punctuation, and other rules of writing. It requires strategies to make writing concisely fun. That’s the focus of this newsletter.

Some of the strategies in this newsletter come from the world of fiction, because much of the wisdom taught to fiction writers can benefit nonfiction writers as well. These are tips you might not find in ordinary grammar reference books.

Triage Your Content

When medical personnel are faced with more patients than they can effectively treat at once, they must triage (or prioritize) those patients to do the most good for the greatest number of people. We can apply that same philosophy to the content of our written material. We can triage the content based on how important it is:

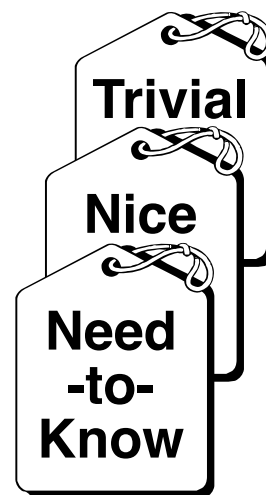
- Need-to-know content. This material must be in the document. It must also be presented in a way that it draws the readers’s attention so that it’s not overlooked. Note: What you believe you need to convey may not be what readers believe they need to know. Make sure you understand the readers’ needs.
- Nice-to-know content. This material enhances the primary message or facilitates the reader’s understanding. It isn’t as important as the need-to-know content, but it’s worth keeping because it adds value.
- Trivial or superfluous content. This material can be omitted without compromising the message. In some cases, it seems to exist more to satisfy the writer than the reader. If kept in the document, it should perhaps be relegated to an appendix or otherwise identified as optional reading.

Make It a Game or a Contest

If you like challenges, challenge yourself to chip away at your text to see how concise you can make it without compromising the message. For example, you might play I game I like to call “Subtract One.” This game involves subtracting one word, sentence, paragraph, or page at a time until you achieve your goal. If someone told you to cut 25% from your document, it would seem daunting. But if someone told you to cut at least one word from every sentence, you could probably do so very easily. If someone told you to make each paragraph one line shorter, you could probably do that easily with most paragraphs. If you had to cut one paragraph from every page, it wouldn’t be too hard.

By chipping away one word, one line, or one paragraph at a time, you can make a lot of progress. It may require several passes to meet your overall goal. But by making it a game or a contest, you may find it fun and challenging versus difficult and burdensome.

Triage your content based on how important it is.



If you find writing concisely hard, approach it as if it’s a game or a challenge. Make chipping away at extraneous text fun.

Try Occupying a Smaller Footprint

If you had to create two documents (one user's manual and one quick reference guide), you would quickly grasp the need to pare down from a comprehensive document to one that is bare bones. The more you trim to fit that smaller footprint, the more you develop that skill of writing concisely.

It's not necessary to write two versions, however, to develop that skill. You can start with a vision of that smaller document and write to fit within its boundaries.

Kill Your Darlings

When authors speak of "killing your darlings," they are referring to deleting material that writers have a hard time letting go of. What are possible darlings? Here are a few:

- Something you are particularly fond of. It may be one of your favorite paragraphs, chapters, characters, scenes, etc. But while you admire it for personal reasons, it may be less interesting to your readers.
- Something you slaved over for far too long. You've invested so much time researching this material, laboring over the text, sweating over the grammar or punctuation, or tweaking the illustration, that you feel you can't sacrifice your investment. But the time spent creating it may not be commensurate with its value.
- Something so cute or clever that it takes a certain type of reader to appreciate it. This is like the inside joke. You know that not everyone will get it, but that doesn't bother you. You want the material in the document for the sake of those readers clever enough to appreciate it. You don't care about the others. That's not a good sign.

You must look at your document critically, the way another reader might. And if something doesn't truly serve the reader or the document, delete it. Kill those darlings.

It's not easy to kill a darling. But you must be ruthless. And you must be willing to take an opposite point of view. For example, you may have invested many hours in creating that darling, and the idea of throwing away that investment will be distasteful. That's when you have to say, "I'm not investing another minute in you" or "Watch how quickly I can dispense with you." Feel empowered by how readily you can cut something that doesn't add value.

If you're not brave enough to "dispose of the body," imprison your darling in a scrap file where you can retrieve it if needed. You certainly don't want to expend more time rewriting something if you later decide you want to use it after all. So cut it and paste it somewhere else for safe keeping just in case.

The best writers are those who aren't afraid to cut stuff ... no matter how much they like what they've written. They are brave and ruthless when it comes to cutting. They make every word count. If a word, sentence, paragraph, or what have you doesn't carry its weight, away it goes.

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Hook the Readers Immediately; Give Them a Reason to Care

Whether you're writing fiction or nonfiction, plunge readers into the heart of the story right away.

Hooking a reader is about catching that reader from the outset: no explanations, no setup or slow windup to your story, but bang—straight into it. It's about going for the jugular, in a literary sense.

—Peter Rubie and Gary Provost
*How to Tell a Story:
The Secrets of Writing Captivating Tales*

You can't hook your readers until you make them care. If you haven't given the readers a reason to care about your topic, your character, your client, or whatever, the details won't matter. Plunge the readers into the heart of the story, and work in the details later.

Raise Questions that Beg to Be Answered

The job of the first sentence is to make readers want to read the second one. The job of the second sentence is to make them want to read the third. Each sentence, paragraph, or page should entice the reader further.

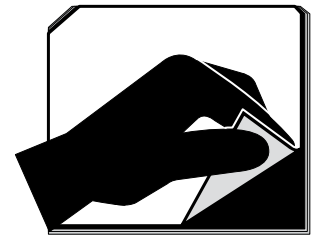
One way in which authors keep their readers hooked is by raising questions that beg to be answered. Imagine going to bed with a good book, thinking that you'll read until you get tired enough to fall asleep. But as you near the end of the chapter, things start heating up. And then the hero discovers the body.

Can you put the book down now? Of course not. The author just posed a question that begs to be answered. Who is this victim? So you're compelled to read further. But even after the author reveals the victim's identity, other questions remain. What happened to the victim? Was his death a murder or an accident? Who is responsible?

You decide you can stay awake for one more chapter, but just as the next chapter comes to a close, the hero uncovers what might be a clue. You turn the page thinking that you can satisfy your curiosity with a peek at the first few paragraphs, but soon you find that you're hooked again. You promise yourself you'll read just one more chapter, then turn out the lights and go to sleep. But then that chapter raises the stakes anew. Soon you're buried in another chapter you'd previously reserved for tomorrow's pleasure. Then, of course, it is tomorrow, and you will have read through the night.

This technique works equally well in literary nonfiction. If you've watched television shows such as *Forensic Files*, *Body of Evidence*, *The Investigators*, and *North Mission Road*, you've probably noticed that just before the commercial, the narrator often poses a question. Will the DNA evidence match their suspect? Have investigators run out of leads? Can the fiber found on the victim lead police to her killer? And viewers know they must stay tuned to find out.

**Give readers a
reason to care.
Until you do,
nothing else
matters.**



**Hook your
readers and
keep them
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What about nonfiction or the typical documents we write in the ordinary course of business? How does this concept apply to that kind of writing?

While I don't claim to an expert at hooking readers, I tried to illustrate the concept in this newsletter by introducing questions that begged to be answered. I began with an intriguing title that begs the question, What is paginal diarrhea? Had I instead titled the newsletter "Writing Concisely," there would be no mystery. Many of the subtitles are also designed to raise questions. For example, "Kill Your Darlings" is full of intrigue that is hard to resist.

You can raise questions that beg to be answered without phrasing them as questions. Let's look at an example from the first page of this newsletter:

Writing concisely does not mean omitting details for the sake of brevity. Nor does it require writers to sacrifice creativity. However, it does mean using words economically and omitting words that don't add value.

The first sentence begs the question, What does writing concisely mean? I don't answer it right away. Instead, I pose another question: How can writers be both creative and concise? Then I give a partial answer that begs questions of its own.

Caution: There's a danger reflected in the last sentence of this example. It leads readers to believe that I'm promising to provide guidance on how to use words economically and omit words that don't add value. Yet that's not what this newsletter is about. So in the next paragraph, I reset readers' expectations. This newsletter isn't about mechanics. Go look at a grammar reference book for that. I'm promising something different.

Recognize When Less Is More

Avoid bombarding readers with trivia and "stuff." People already have so many demands on their time that they often feel overwhelmed. So you're competing with many other things for your readers' time and attention. You're more likely to get it if you're brief and concise.

In a separate newsletter, "The Power of the Shitty First Draft," I address strategies for dealing with writer's block. But writer's block is sometimes a sign of paginal diarrhea. Perhaps you are simply trying to say too much. If you find that fleshing out an idea is difficult, it may be because you need to cut and consolidate instead.



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Jill Meryl Levy
Author and Publisher
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Even as you answer one question, pose another. Each sentence should make the reader want to read the next one.



Avoid bombarding readers with trivia and "stuff." Remember, you are competing for your readers' time and attention.