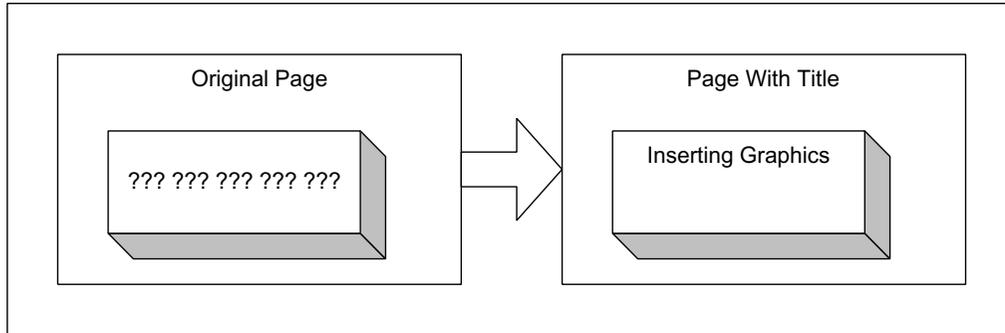# Cut Any Paper-Based Text by 50%

BACKGROUND |

Don't make me read!

The computer builds each letter out of big fat dots on the screen, and these jagged-edged characters become so fuzzy that they challenge the eye, making the job of reading much harder than on paper. Jakob Nielsen's research, for instance, suggests that people read 25% slower from a computer screen than from paper.

Struggling to see the text on a blurry screen, people are also uncertain where they are within the site, doubtful whether your page really has the info they want, and distracted by ads. In such circumstances, people resent text. They resist reading in many clever ways. They cry out, "Don't make me read!" Nielsen's remedy: "Write 50% less text."

Cutting half the words in your text works. The point is not the number. Fewer words mean less reading. When you get close to half the words you would ordinarily use on paper, you're finally writing for people who see any extra words as "verbiage."

People use text, to put off reading

To figure out what topics to look at, people use the text that you create in menus, headings, and search results. To navigate through the site, people use the text in buttons and links. To decide whether or not to go ahead and read what you write on a particular

page, people use the text in the page title, headings, and introductory sentence. Using text is like using signs, not what we usually think of as reading. Only when a guest has successfully used your text to identify a topic as worthwhile will he or she actually slow down and read.

The way you write all the text that people must use just to find the right topic determines how much brainpower they have left to consider your actual ideas. Now they face the near illegibility of the actual characters, and the tempting art and ads around your article. And reading means they must also give attention to the many simultaneous tasks involved in figuring out and understanding the text. Reading is a tougher job than using text, and their attention is always being drawn away. If you want to be sure someone will read what you write on the web, write less.

Less text means less strain on a visitor's ability to concentrate, less material to juggle in short-term memory, and a faster rush to meaning.

Cut on-screen and off

When we cut text that we originally wrote for a paper magazine, we do it on-screen so we can see the characters blur just the way they will for our users. That near illegibility encourages trimming.

Sure, you can use a paper copy to slash away, but you may not go far enough. Paper pleads for more text. Coming from a background of books, magazines, and the Sunday New York *Times*, paper carries a tradition of long documents, thick paragraphs, and elaborate sentences. As experienced readers, we are used to lots of text—on paper.

If you insist on editing on paper, you'll know you have cut far enough when the printout begins to look quirky, abrupt, telegraphic. On-screen, that text will go down fast and smooth.

Take several whacks

We cut everything we can and then stop. When we look at the text again, we see it is too verbose.

We cut again and again and again. Sometimes, we have to make five passes to get rid of the last ounce of fat.

Don't expect to make all the cuts at once. Keep at it.

Pithy sentences are like sharp nails driving truth into our memory.

—Diderot

It is my ambition to say in ten sentences what others say in a whole book.

—Nietzsche

Save the meaning, cut away the rest

When looking for text to delete, cross out:

- Words that have been included just to emphasize your sincerity, like *really* and *truly*
- Words that don't add anything to what you have already said
- Unnecessary details
- Phrases that unnecessarily repeat words you have already used, when a pronoun would do
- Phrases that tell the readers something they already learned earlier
- Pompous b.s.
- Corporate speak (phrases only a committee could love)

Unfortunately, to edit in this way requires thought. You can't do it mechanically. In his admirable book of lessons on style, Joseph Williams points out that, "The only reliable way you can identify and remedy wordiness is to slog through every sentence, word by word. That's hard work."

*The more you say,
the less people remember.*

—Fénelon

EXAMPLES

Before

Using various technologies we intend to study, identify, or otherwise characterize changes in the physicochemical state of a myriad of plutonium compounds found in various residues, destined to be stored as interim waste over decades. Uncertainties about the practical effects of possible changes, such as gas generation and corrosion and other possibly deleterious transformations that might lead to unsafe storage conditions, adversely affecting the waste form, result from inadequate previous studies of these complicated residues, as opposed to the more straightforward metal and pure oxides, which we will not study. The chemical behavior of this material, especially the material intimately in contact with the plutonium,

After

The problem: The lab intends to store some waste materials containing plutonium compounds for decades, but we do not know how these plutonium-containing materials will behave, chemically, over this long a time. We fear they may rust or give off gases, damaging the waste, or its environment.

This project: Excluding metal and pure oxides, the residues will be studied to identify potentially dangerous changes in the local chemical environment of the plutonium metal center.

Next step: Countermeasures.
77 words

needs to be studied over time to identify any chemical changes due to aging, corrosion, or gas generation of the problem residues. Once we can identify these possible changes, we can proceed to the next phase of our project, which is to suggest countermeasures.

149 words

Before

How do I check out when I am all done with my shopping at the stores within the Jumbo portal?

Whether you are buying one item, a dozen, or maybe a hundred, you can just simply click on the Shopping Cart icon, which appears at the top of every JumboShop page. Once you are in the shopping cart, you can do several things, if you want. Optionally, you can confirm that everything you wanted to buy has shown up in the order, enter billing and shipping information, and then click the Check Me Out button, to move the order along. At the moment you click the Check Me Out button, we send your order to the individual store. At that point, the transaction is between you and the store, and if there are any problems, you need to talk to the store. If you call us, we will only be able to help you with our part of the transaction, that is, before we actually send the order to the store.

171 words

After

How do I check out?

1. Click the Shopping Cart, at the top of the page.
2. Look over your order. (You can delete items if you want).
3. Enter billing and shipping info.
4. Click Check Me Out.

At that time, we send your order to the individual store.

50 words

Before

I am a little uncomfortable with some of the things you have been saying in the last few messages on this discussion group, and I know you don't intend to make people upset, but I have to share with you that I am feeling a little hurt at what you said about me, if you know what I mean. I hope you take this the right way. I am trying to reach out and clarify our relationship.

77 words

After

I'm hurt and angry at what you've been saying about me.

11 words

AUDIENCE FIT

If visitors want this...	How well does this guideline apply?
TO HAVE FUN	Once people decide they want to be entertained, they may choose to read and read and read, online. High tech researchers evidently never met a girl who wanted to have fun, so their usability studies have focused on techies looking for techie info—not personal insight, rants, or rambles. If you're writing a column for a webzine, you can take a few breaths, and write, well, as long as 500 words at a shot.
TO LEARN	Definitely relevant. Spike the lectures.
TO ACT	Ditto. Tell me what to do, and let me do it!
TO BE AWARE	Lao Tse showed that you can say a lot in a little space. How about those short stories Jesus used to tell?
TO GET CLOSE TO PEOPLE	Rambling is usually bad form in a discussion group. In an e-mail, too much text drives me to the Delete button.

See: Baker & Goldstein (1966), Bork (1983), Glass (1989), Horton (1990), Krug (2000), Levine (1997), Morkes & Nielsen (1997, 1998), Nielsen (1997a, 1997b, 1999f), Spyridakis (2000), Sullivan (1998), Williams (1994).

For your review only.

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