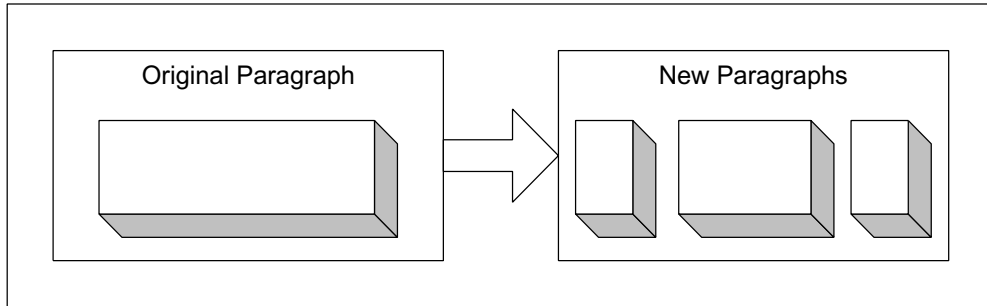# Make Each Paragraph Short

Original Paragraph	New Paragraphs

Let your guests skip and skim

Long paragraphs fill up the screen, demanding to be read or skipped. Like a barricade in the road, a thick paragraph slows you down. If you are really interested, you may condescend to read through one of these monsters. But if you are still trying to figure out whether or not to bother to read, this kind of text acts more like a roadblock, requiring that you stop to read, scroll past, or back out of there. However, if you scroll past one of these big blocks of text, you may not be able to pick up its point (or the point of the article) as you go on.

Dan Bricklin, who invented the first electronic spreadsheet and now sells a Web page editor, argues that short paragraphs help people dip and dive, taking a quick look, and, if that does not arouse their interest, skipping forward to the next paragraph. He says, "Short paragraphs help skimming."

The ideal: 2 or 3 lines

How long should a paragraph be? Two or three lines—that's the best. Sure, you're going to need to write longer paragraphs once you get rolling. But keep in mind that on the Web one sentence is a great paragraph.

Figure you have short line lengths like a newspaper. In that situation, half a dozen lines begin to seem long; nine or more lines

There is no artifice as good and desirable as simplicity.

—St. Francis de Sales

go over the top. Crawford Kilian argues that if you have more than six or eight lines, you should break the paragraph up "into two shorter paragraphs."

I'll take the shortcut

If you give users a choice, they pick the shorter paragraph. In its Web guidelines, Apple admits that reading on-screen text is "more difficult and time-consuming" than reading hard copy, so people are "even less likely to thoroughly read long sections of text on a computer." When Jonathan worked at Apple, he tested text taken directly from books, and bored the hell out of Help users, so he threw out introductions and reduced the hand-holding explanations to a sentence or two. Users started giving the online text thumbs up.

America Online, the most popular portal to the Internet, urges its content providers to make every paragraph short. "Users are not inclined to read long paragraphs." These folks ought to know.

Use short words we all know

People understand some words faster and more accurately than others. Interestingly, if you pick short words that refer to concrete, physical objects, words most people can easily pronounce, and words that are used a lot, people will understand you. The fewer syllables, the higher the impact.

Choosing words like these turns out to be easier than it sounds because, in English, "these word features often correlate," says Jan Spyridakis. A word like *vehicle* sounds elegant, but *car* means more to more people. Replacing *hiatus* with the simpler *gap* makes sense.

Making these edits makes your text more comprehensible. But you get another benefit. Your paragraphs end up shorter and easier to understand as units of content, and easier to skip.

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Whenever you feel an impulse to perpetrate a piece of exceptionally fine writing, obey it—wholeheartedly—and delete it before sending your manuscript to press. Murder your darlings.

—Arthur Quiller-Couch

Everything that is needless gives Offense.

—Benjamin Franklin

EXAMPLES

Before

Under what circumstances will you charge me sales tax?

Generally, such taxes must be levied with respect to the ship-to address, rather than the bill-to address, on the assumption that the ship-to address is receiving the substantial benefit of the purchase. The tax is triggered if we have a physical store in the ship-to state. Currently, those states for which we must charge sales tax (when we ship to addresses in these states) are Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont. We regret any inconvenience.
87 words

After

When do you charge sales tax?

We have to charge sales tax on any orders we ship to states where we have physical stores—Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont. Sorry about that.
36 words

Before

Practice moving your awareness up each leg, starting with your toes, then going on to extend your consciousness to the entire foot, gradually moving up to the ankle, and, over time, up the leg. Concentrate for a moment on the knee, and then go up the rest of the leg, being aware of your entire thigh.
56 words

After

Sense your toes, feet, ankles, calves, knees, and thighs.
9 words

Before

Bitmaps go back to the earliest days of computer graphics. Until bitmaps, people thought making a Christmas tree out of x's and v's was pretty artistic. But with the innovations of machines like Apple's Macintosh and the Xerox Star, the engineers conceived of the screen image not as a bunch of characters, but as a set of dots, in a grid. At the time, each dot, or picture element could either be on

After

Originally, a bitmap image stored your picture by making a map, or grid. Each square of the grid represented a tiny portion of your screen—the amount displayed by one pixel, or picture element.

In those days, a pixel could either be on or off, that is, black or white—so it only took one bit of information to record its state. Hence, the file

(black) or off (white). So by recording the exact coordinates of every pixel, and its state (on or off), engineers could capture your picture. Thus, a bitmap image stored your picture by making a map or grid and populating it with bits. Each square of the grid represented a tiny portion of your screen—the amount displayed by one pixel or picture element. And each pixel was represented, electronically, by a single bit. That's how the file came to be known as a bitmap.

But then along came grayscale—mixtures of black and white, from 0%, or white, to 100%, or black. That meant that each pixel had, somehow, to record more information than before (not just on or off, but a percentage of gray), and that took up more bits. Then came colors. When you just had 256 colors, you didn't have to use a lot of bits to record the number of the color of a particular pixel. But then we began to see millions of colors. Just to record, say, "Color Number One Million Two Hundred Thousand One Hundred and Fifty Two" took up even more bits. That's why you hear people talking about "8-bit color," "16-bit color," and so on. Each pixel in the map required a lot of bits.
287 words

became known as a bitmap.

Now, of course, each pixel can record many levels of gray or one of millions of colors, so we have to use more bits per pixel to record all that information — hence, terms such as "8-bit color," or "16-bit color."
110 words

Before

I found out how to sort my messages, something you were wondering about last week, and I thought you might like to know. I noticed that at the top of the message list there are words like New, and From, and Date, and Subject, and so on, and if I click one of those, the whole list gets reorganized that way. You know what I mean?
66 words

After

To reorganize the message list, click a column title such as New, From, Date, Subject,or Size.

Presto! The list is sorted that way.
24 words

AUDIENCE FIT

If visitors want this...	How well does this guideline apply?
TO HAVE FUN	Amusing, intriguing, erudite or aberrant prose can go on forever, like a Faulkner paragraph, and we don't object. In fact, we jump in. So if you're planning to entertain your readers, you might start with a short paragraph, and throw a few more in, but you can certainly take a long breath and expound, too.
TO LEARN	Definitely relevant. What looked fine in the lab handout looks intimidating online. Keep every fact, save every idea, but put them into distinct paragraphs.
TO ACT	To guide action, keep your paragraphs as short as you can, without making them cryptic.
TO BE AWARE	Compress the overtones by choosing words that resonate, rather than rambling on.
TO GET CLOSE TO PEOPLE	Long paragraphs make me scroll forward, whether I am reading e-mail, a discussion, or a Web site.

See: Abeleto (1999), America Online (2001), Apple (1997), Bricklin (1998), Gee et al (1999), Henderson & Bradford (1984), Holcomb et al (1999), Horton (1990), Hudson & Berman (1985), Kaiser (2000), Kilian (1999), Lynch (1997), Marschark & Paivio (1977), NCSA (1996), Spyridakis (2000), Sullivan (1998), Williams (1994), Zipf (1949).

For your review only.

Excerpt from *Hot Text: Web Writing that Works*.
(New Riders).