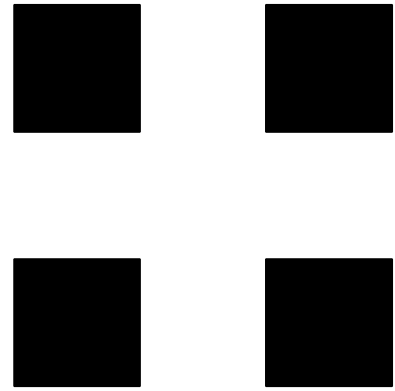
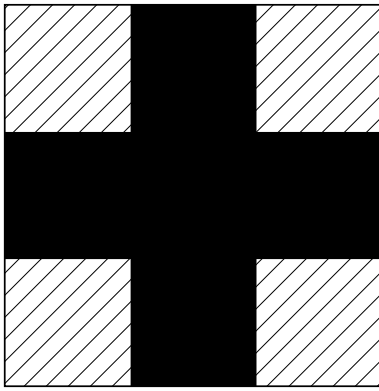


Beware of Cutting So Far That You Make the Text Ambiguous



BACKGROUND |

Preserve *that* and *which*

If you cut out connective tissue such as *that* and *which*—particularly in a long sentence—you may make it hard for people to understand the connection between the parts of your sentence. For instance, you may make readers think a sentence is headed in one direction, only to startle them later with a reversal or change of meaning at the end. In these circumstances, people wonder: what is the main subject? Is this the verb that goes with that subject? But what is this other verb over here?

Their mind reconsiders the sentence, taking it one way and then the other. Judith Ramey calls this confusion an Escher effect, after the artist whose birds turn out to be holes in a pattern, as our eye flips them from foreground to background. “Escher effects force users to consider the context in which information appears, rather than simply taking in the information offered. They force users to analyze particular phrases and sentences.” This dissonance slows the readers down, reducing their confidence in you.

When Calvin Coolidge, asked by his wife what the preacher had preached on, replied “Sin,” and, asked what the preacher had said, replied, “He was against it,” he was brief enough. But one hardly envies Mrs. Coolidge.

—F. L. Lucas

So cut everything else, but leave *that* and *which*.

Also, leave those little articles, *a* and *the*, that sometimes indicate whether you are talking about the same thing as before, or a generic object of that type.

Leave the guts

When cutting your text, preserve the meaning. If you drop a key fact or a supporting idea, you have gone too far. Being concise does not mean saying less—just using fewer words.

Punctuation that won’t be missed

At first you might think the way to condense your text would be to replace a verb phrase with a colon, to shorten a phrase like “of New Mexico” into “New Mexico’s” or to glue two sentences together with a semicolon. No. Those changes rely too heavily on little punctuation marks the reader can miss.

Because the text is so hard to read on-screen, you cannot count on people spotting those little dots that make up a colon, semicolon, or apostrophe.

- Missing a colon, people barrel into a list or definition without realizing they have shifted from the first part of the sentence to the second.
- Missing a semicolon, people continue the meaning of one sentence right on into the subject and verb of the next sentence—the one that began after the semicolon.
- Missing the apostrophe, people turn a possessive into a plural, and then get confused.

Result: your users get puzzled, and, if they care, they must re-read to straighten out the difference between the two possible interpretations. Oh, so this is one sentence, and that is another!

Attention has shifted from your point to the challenge of parsing your syntax. And for many people, that loss of attention tells them it’s time to click on—away from your annoying prose.

To keep people focused on your meaning:

- Instead of the strange condensed abbreviation, spell the term out.
- Instead of “it’s” write “it is.”

- Instead of a colon introducing a list or a definition, use a dash (—) or ellipsis (...). We can see that.
- And get rid of a semicolon connecting two main clauses. Create two distinct sentences.

EXAMPLES

Before

The pyrochemical team expected a surge in gaseous emissions, and their associated environmental impacts, when released, would not occur.

After

The pyrochemical team did not expect a surge in gaseous emissions and their associated environmental impacts.

Before

As entered, the program reformats data.

After

The program reformats the data as you enter it.

Before

As core technology activities mature, they will be terminated, as one might expect, following carefully designed implementation schedules, by transfer to the applied projects areas: the radiation area, the pulsar area, or the quantum information area.

After

As core technology activities mature, they will be transferred to the applied projects areas. Each transfer follows a carefully designed implementation schedule. The applied projects areas focus on radiation, pulsars, or quantum information.

Before

No reformat now; reformat when in report.

After

I'm sorry, but you cannot reformat now. To reformat, you must enter report mode.

AUDIENCE FIT

If visitors want this... TO HAVE FUN	How well does this guideline apply? Even the fun-lovers hate to be confused. You can entertain without a lot of apostrophes, colons, and semicolons. Of course, you can't give up the exclamation point!
TO LEARN	Simplifying does not ruin your dignity.
TO ACT	Avoiding these ambiguities makes your instructions easier to follow.
TO BE AWARE	Why not? If you cut too far, you just shift attention away from your deeper meaning, turning the reader's mind to grammatical exegesis.
TO GET CLOSE TO PEOPLE	In the heat of a rant, any punctuation goes, because people type so badly when responding to a discussion or e-mail. But don't tighten up too far. Let yourself ramble, and you'll avoid the worst problems we describe here.

See: Bricklin (1998), Galitz (1985), Horton (1990), Ramey (1989), Waite (1982).

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