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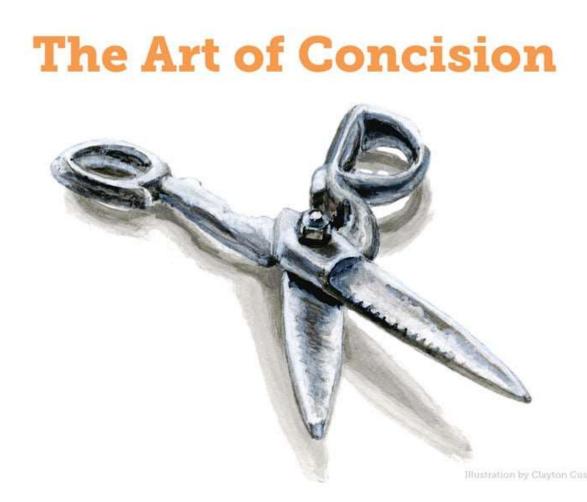
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The Art of Concision: How to Effectively Make Your Point in Fewer Words

The Art of Concision

Illustration by Clayton Cusak

You and your readers are being bombarded with information. Too often that's in the shape of long-winded emails, blog posts, and reports that say very little or assume that because digital space is (virtually) free and unlimited, so is your time.

But time and attention *are* valuable. If you learn to practice concision in all your writing (from emails and reports to blog posts, whitepapers, and product copy), you'll not only get your point across, you might also earn your readers' trust, gratitude, and repeat traffic. Plus, concise copy converts better.

Quick advice on writing concisely

The best advice I ever received about writing concisely came from former newspaperman (and current Moz associate) Ronell Smith. He said that in order to clearly get your point across in the fewest possible words it's essential to:

- Write a one-sentence description of the post you wish to write (this is basically the headline)

- Think of the number one thing you'd like readers to take away from the post

- Highlight at least three facts (authoritative, supportive evidence) that support this main point

- Jot down notes that help you tell the story using these facts

- Spend a few days letting the elements "breathe"

Now if I were writing the most concise blog post ever, I'd stop right there, because Ronell already said the most important things. But sometimes it's helpful to see how someone else puts advice into action. So here's how I'm putting Ronell's advice to work to write a post about concision.

Write a one-sentence description of the post

Learning how to make your point in as few words as possible will help you capture your audience's attention.

I could (and should) stop there. But I want to make a couple of points about *why* this is important:

- Your brain does a lot of work as it's trying to condense that amazing idea in your head down into one sentence—as much work as creating a whole first draft.

- Once you have a one-sentence description of where you're going, it's easy to toss aside all those other exciting ideas that try to plant themselves on the page and focus on what you wanted to say in the first place.

Think of the number one thing you'd like readers to take away from the post

Fewer words often makes for clearer, more impactful communication. Once I know exactly what it is that I want you to take away from this post, I can make a promise that everything will contribute to that number one goal. This is good because:

- **It helps you focus on one audience.** When you're writing amazing tips on keyword research, it can be really easy to want to also remind readers why keyword research is important. That's the moment when you lose the interest of people who get the whys of keyword research. They are now bored and done with you (even though you were just about to blow their minds with really revolutionary information).

- **You know what to lead with.** Even if you're writing a crucial email, you can bet not everyone will read every word (or paragraph). By leading with the most important part, your message is more likely to be understood.

Highlight at least three facts that support this main point

Technically, I've been cheating so far and adding in facts along the way. This step will help you:

- **Build an outline of what you want to say.** It's easier to write to outlines and you'll be sure to include all the points you wanted to see.

- **Preview the quality of your argument.** If you're writing an article about how content is king and your first fact is "because everyone says so" and the second is "readers share stuff" and you're struggling for a third fact, go back and find a stronger argument.

- **Stay on topic.**

Jot down notes that help you tell the story using those three facts

Hooray! You finally get to elaborate. I'll start my elaboration by telling you that I've deleted about 500 words from this post already just because I was thinking so hard about concision. Do I miss a little of my standard whimsy and storytelling style? Yes (although I'm making up for it in this paragraph).

Because you've already honed in tight on your subject, you can let your creative self a little loose now. Enjoy embellishing your evidence with relevant examples and case studies. Relish the chance to make your points more memorable and engage your audience by sharing pertinent stories.

Spend a few days letting the elements "breathe"

Once you've pulled together your main point with supporting facts and illustrated those with stories, you need to step away from your writing. If you're writing an email, you might not have a few days, but at least go to lunch or grab a coffee. Giving your writing room to breathe allows you to:

- **Spot gaps.** Everything makes perfect sense in your head, but a breath of fresh air might help you see where you forgot to actually write down a crucial piece of your argument.

- **See redundancies.** Sometimes you're so passionate about something you say it twice (although usually in slightly different ways). A second, later read can show you where you're repeating yourself.

- **Be rational.** Speaking of passion, sometimes we write things we'd never actually want to see out in the world. Allowing your writing to rest can help you make your point without saying anything you wouldn't want repeated. This makes you easier to listen to as well.

The rest of the story

Now that we've seen Ronell's points in action, there are a few more things I want to add.

Concision usually happens in editing

If you've been following Ronell's advice, your writing is going to be a lot clearer, shorter, and more impactful. But don't count on your first draft to be the best draft. You can usually clean up a lot of extra words (and random errors) with a second draft.

Why concision?

You're busy. Your boss is busy. Your reader is busy. We're all reading less and less of the information presented to us. But reading is still a critical way that we share information. By learning to say more with fewer words, you'll get your point across and come out on top.

Concision ain't easy

In fact, you might spend more time crafting your message. Making your point makes that time and effort worth the extra work. Take the Moz Top 10 for example: over the last six editions, the ones with the fewest number of words have had the highest click-through rates.

Concise Copy Converts

20.75% CTR

Moz Top 10

Don't you just love tools that make your job easier? This week we have two fantastic ones, an opportunity to prove your local SEO prowess, and everything you ever needed to know about creating the best emails to send at every stage in the customer lifecycle. So much knowledge... just waiting for you to click through.

1 Map the Customer Journey to Online Purchase
Ever wish you had a window into where in the funnel you should be using which marketing channels? Think with Google does, and they've built a couple nifty widgets to help you understand your customers' journeys (and how best to reach them when).

2 Introducing The Meta and Rich Snippet Tester
Speaking of sweet little tools that make your job easier, check out the latest from Sean Malseed. Bill Sebald walks you through a demo.

3 Local Search Expert Quiz: How Much Do You Know about Local SEO?
Ready to challenge your local SEO knowledge? Cyrus Shepard introduces a quiz by Miriam Ellis that will allow you to do just that. Not satisfied with your score? Or just can't get enough of local SEO? Sign up for the Local 7 Pack, a new monthly newsletter for the local SEO enthusiast.

30.86% CTR

Moz Top 10

Changes are coming to the web and it all starts with HTTP/2. Stay ahead of the competition with the latest and greatest info on new and improved marketing techniques to help you get noticed and get traffic.

1 Is Google Making the Web Stupid?
C'mon, you know you've thought about how spending all this energy chasing traffic is really affecting your site. Seth Godin offers a fresh perspective.

2 HTTP/2 Finished, Coming to Browsers Within Weeks
HTTP/2 is coming. Find out what that means for the web, which browsers are ready, and what's next for Google's SPDY protocol in this article by Peter Bright.

3 How Hashtags Work on Twitter, Instagram, Google Plus, Pinterest, Facebook, Tumblr, and Flickr
Get your content noticed using hashtags on social. Ann Smarty walks you through the ins and outs of hashtaggery for all the major platforms.

4 How To Write Content Strategically: The Guide To Getting Traffic, Subscribers & Sales With Your Articles

Shortening the Moz Top 10 often takes me an extra draft, but that kind of increase in CTR is worth one more pass.

How this works at Moz

I was **shocked** when Trevor and I found that the most popular Moz blog posts (usually) come in at 1,200-1,800 words. That seemed long to me (especially for the Internet), but then I realized how much advice and education are usually packed into one post.

Compare that with what we sometimes see in YouMoz, which are initial drafts of 4,000-8,000 words. I am certain that a few of those authors have that much valuable information to share about one topic. But my guess is that most of those articles are trying to do too much in one post or are repeating themselves unnecessarily. I'd also be really surprised if most readers manage to reach the end of a post that long. **That's the real tragedy of overly wordy writing: No matter how brilliant you are, unless you are the most engaging writer ever, no one is reading what you're writing**. And according to one study, visitors only read 18% of content beyond the 1,250 word mark.

Do you have tips for stripping the bloat from your writing? Or do you truly love (and actually read) long-form writing on the web? Write me a novel in the comments ☺

The author's views are entirely their own (excluding the unlikely event of hypnosis) and may not always reflect the views of Moz.

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Isla uses her MFA in creative writing to organize words into forms that resonate with an audience and incite action. She co-authored Clear Out the Static in Your Attic: A Writer's Guide for Turning Artifacts into Art. Connect with her on Twitter.