Conciseness

Jay L. Halio

The ideal is crispness: lucid, concise exposition of what it is the writer has to say. And that is all. No padding, no beating around the bush, no unnecessary circumlocutions. Straight to the point, the point made, then end.

What is it that we usually get? "It is interesting to note that the situation desiderated, as outlined above, as often as not fails for reasons that can only be explained after serious and thorough studies have been undertaken by experts in the field, about whom more will be said hereinafter." Abominations like these must be rooted out, but how? How can we help students and ourselves achieve the ideal, or a closer approximation to it?

For several years I have found considerable success in using an adaption of the old "Harvard Daily Theme." Taking the basic format of the single page essay and its strict limitations, I assign a series of such papers in all of my undergraduate classes. Regardless of the topic, or whether students type or write out their papers, they are allowed only one page (double-spaced if typed) for these essays. After their initial groaning and complaining, students find that the one-page paper is not as difficult as they first thought, although it clearly requires them to sharpen both their thinking and their prose. This is all to the good. It also permits their instructor to assign more than one or two papers during the term in addition to regular examinations.

The more writing, the better, as we all realize. But the writing does not all have to come at the same time; indeed, it is better when it

comes in smaller amounts and more frequently. Every word counts in the one-page essay, and besides the distinct virtue of economy of style, students learn the related virtues of precision, point, and relevance. To help students in this effort, instructors may use the blue pencil unsparingly. In the process, they too will find ways to economize on verbiage, find the point that needs to be made, and make it.

Recommended text: Strunk and White, The Elements of Style.