

TELL IT WELL 0.10

Trim the Fat and Kill Your Darlings

GOOD WRITING IS CONCISE WRITING

“If I’d had more time, I would have written you a shorter letter,” Mark Twain purportedly wrote to a friend. Unless it wasn’t Twain but Winston Churchill, Bill Clinton, Pliny the Elder, Woodrow Wilson or any one of a busload of other luminaries. But while the actual source of the quote remains in question, its meaning is clear: In written communications, brevity trumps verbosity. And it’s much harder to achieve—no more so than in financial marketing content.

Here are some tips for keeping your writing crisp and concise:

- 1. Lay the groundwork.** It’s almost always a good idea to create an outline before you put pen to paper (metaphorically speaking, of course). An outline serves as your road map and guardrails, as well as start and end points for whatever it is you’re writing. Working from an outline doesn’t preclude tweaking or diverting from it as you move forward in the writing—but it can keep you from going off on wild tangents or getting lost in the weeds.
- 2. Mark your coordinates.** Length matters. Whether you’re writing for the eye or the ear, you’ll risk losing your audience if you’re overly verbose—or treat your topic superficially. If you’re creating a PowerPoint presentation or pitch deck, for example, know at the outset approximately how many slides you’ll need to tell your story and the purpose of each. If it’s a brochure, paper or social post, establish the length at the outset in terms of wordcount, pages or panels.
- 3. Go with the flow** This may seem counterintuitive, but while there are ways to keep your writing razor sharp and to the point, don’t let them slow you down as you write. Keep your fingers on the keyboard and let the words and ideas come freely, without over-editing yourself. Leave the fine-tuning and cutting till later.

4. Trim the fat. Once you have a draft, scour it for “empty-calorie” words. “Period of time” can be pared back to “period;” “every” means the same as “each and every.” (And notice that we said “scour it,” not “scour it clean.”) The sentence, “We can tailor an individualized investment plan meticulously customized to your specific needs” can be shortened to “We can tailor an investment plan to your specific needs” without impairing the meaning.

5. Kill your darlings. You’ve trimmed the fat, sanded down the rough spots and polished your prose till it shines. Now comes the hard part: Cutting your favorite phrases, sentences, even entire paragraphs if they add nothing of value, exquisitely wrought though they may be.

“Whenever you feel an impulse to perpetrate a piece of exceptionally fine writing,” British novelist Arthur Quiller-Couch counseled, “obey it—whole-heartedly—and delete it before sending your manuscript to press. Murder your darlings.”

In short, prioritize clarity over aesthetics, precision over preciousness. It may be painful, but your audience will thank you.

Contact us to learn how we can take your financial marketing strategies and activities to the next level.

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