

Concision Decisions: 8 Tips to Cut Your Novel's Word Count

By Hannah Charlesworth

The art of writing is beautiful. Authors use detailed characters, exciting plots, and fascinating imagery to pull their readers into different worlds. All of these writing devices, and more, are what makes reading so magical. However, too much of even a good thing can be bad. As wonderful as a manuscript may be, there are usually some things that distract readers from the story. These distractions can bore readers and even cause them to stop reading the book.

How do we fix this? Well, one thing many professional writers suggest is cutting down the novel's word count. Fantasy author Brandon Sanderson says he reserves one of his rounds of editing to cut his novels' word counts by at least 15%. Nonfiction author William Zinsser says he can cut most of his first drafts by 50% (Zinsser 16). Both writers agree that the purpose of cutting that much out of their drafts is not to save on production costs for their publishers, but to make their writing more engaging and easier for readers to understand.

The only problem is figuring out what should stay and what should go. However, reading the following tips will help you know what to cut out and help you shape your manuscript into the beautiful book you want it to be.

1. Dice Unnecessary Words

There are several words and phrases you can cut out of your book. Some of them include *that*, *very*, *really*, *-ly* adverbs, *then*, *start*, *began*, *suddenly*, *almost*, *rather*, and *somewhat*. The key to eliminating some of these words is to use stronger words. Using stronger words will not only make you a better writer, it will make your manuscript more fun to read. For example, compare

“She is **very afraid** of spiders” to “She is **terrified** of spiders.”

Can you feel the difference? Not only is the second sentence shorter but replacing the adjective *afraid* and its modifier *very* with *terrified* makes the sentence stronger and more enticing to read. Here's another example: compare

“She **smiled brightly** at the cashier” to “She **beamed** at the cashier.”

Do you see a pattern? If you are using an adverb like *brightly*, there is usually a stronger verb you can replace it with.

Caution: Sometimes it's OK to, or even necessary to, use the words listed above. You don't have to cut out every adverb you see. Some well-placed adverbs can be really effective. (Did you see what I did there?) Other words, such as *that*, can usually be cut out, but still serve a grammatical function that is necessary to many sentences.

For example, in the sentence “Sarah decided after she finished her homework she would call David,” it is unclear when she decided to call David. Depending on where we insert *that* into the sentence, the meaning changes:

“Sarah decided **that** after she finished her homework she would call David.”

“Sarah decided after she finished her homework **that** she would call David.”

So, make sure to read every sentence carefully before cutting out a word, but don't be too stressed out about it. Remember, as you focus on using stronger language, most of these problems will naturally fix themselves. And if you miss something . . . well, that's why you hire an editor.

2. Eliminate Passive Voice

The difference between passive and active voice is the difference between watching your friends play a game and playing the game yourself. In passive sentences, the subject has something happen to it:

“The ball **was passed by me.**”

But in active sentences, the subject does something:

“**I passed** the ball.”

If you know who the actor is, make passive sentences active. But if you don’t know who the actor is—maybe you don’t know who passed the ball—it’s OK to keep the sentence passive:

“The ball was passed.”

However, if you can choose between making something active and making something passive, choose to make it active.

3. Transform Nominalizations into Verbs

Oftentimes, writers turn verbs into nouns. This practice is called nominalization.

Nominalizations are problematic because the verb the writer ends up using is usually a weak verb, such as a *to be* verb, while the stronger verb stays hidden in the noun phrase. Changing these nominalizations back into verbs is usually the best choice. For example, compare

“**The intention of** that villain is to rule the world” to “That villain **intends** to rule the world” or “**There is no need** to move the couch” to “**We don’t need** to move the couch.”

Nominalizations use a roundabout method to say things (similar to passive voice), whereas verbs are straightforward. That is why verbs pack a punch that nominalizations do not, and they are more engaging for readers.

4. Clean Out the Redundancies

Eliminating redundancies can be difficult, especially since there are many redundant idioms in English. For example, compare

“The student went **above and beyond** the requirements for the assignment” to “The student went **beyond** the requirements for the assignment.”

Do you miss the *above* in the second sentence? My guess is no. Other phrases that can be simplified include “null and void,” “leaps and bounds,” and “rant and rave.” However, small phrases like these aren’t the only redundancies you can cut out.

Sometimes writers will say the same thing in multiple ways. For example, a writer may tell their readers that Ben was cold and proceed to describe him shivering and rubbing his hands together. This redundancy can be fixed simply by cutting out the sentence that tells the reader that Ben was cold. Be wary of these redundancies—they are more common than you think. But cutting them out will lower your word count fast and improve your writing.

5. Cut out Unnecessary Details

Good writers want to take their readers on a journey. In order for the readers to take that journey, they need to see the moss-covered trees, hear the burbling stream, and smell the wet soil. That’s why writers add description: it helps the reader visualize the world. But too much description can bog down your writing and put readers to sleep.

One way to avoid this issue is to not write a play-by-play for every moment of your character’s life. Don’t describe your character waking up in the morning, putting on their slippers, heading to the bathroom, using the bathroom, brushing their teeth, combing their hair, putting on their mascara, walking to their closet, picking an outfit, getting dressed, going downstairs, making breakfast, eating breakfast, heading out the door. . . are you sick of reading this yet? Those details are unnecessary; all we had to say was “She woke up, got ready, and headed to work.”

You should also cut out details that aren't within your character's perspective. For example, if your main character is watching a battle from a nearby hill, he can't see his comrade's eyes flash before she lunges at an enemy. This advice also applies to omniscient narrators: keep the description within a character's perspective when you're focusing on that specific character.

Details are also more effective when they focus on describing things that are new to your characters. If a character steps into a new world, so does your reader, and the reader needs to picture it. But once a character's surroundings are old news to your reader and mundane to your character, there's no need to continue describing them.

6. Cut Description Out of Your Action Sequences

Keeping your action sequences concise goes right along with cutting out unnecessary details, but action sequences deserve their own section.

Action needs to be fast. Too much detail will slow the action until the reader is watching the fight in slow motion. Consider the example below. I took an action scene and cut out some details (along with other things we talked about above). The first paragraph shows what I cut out of the original scene. The second paragraph shows the final product.

~~With a yell, Seth leaped forward, gaining unnatural height and grabbing hold of the troll's curled horns. His sword was flung to the ground with a muffled thud, sharp edge slicing the monster's arm as it fell on its way down. The troll howling and the troll dropped its club to slapped a clawed hand to the wound, effectively dropping its club as it did so. It began shaking its head furiously, Seth being whipped around like a rat in a terrier's mouth. Fingers of air tore at his hair and clothes, exposing his lower stomach and back. I gulped a large breath as but Seth swung in the air like a gymnast, avoiding the reaching grasp of the troll. It reached higher, seeking to catch Seth in its grasp. He twisted to the side, and heaved himself over the horn he held, and landed~~

astride the beast's meaty neck. ~~He~~The troll bellowed ~~in anger~~, trying to reach around its wide horns and gut the pest ~~up there. I saw~~ Seth's face ~~contorted into a soundless~~ snarled as he brought his elbow down ~~hard~~ onto ~~the side of~~ the troll's neck. The troll screamed ~~in pain~~ and fell to its knees.

Seth leaped forward and grabbed the troll's curled horns, his sword slicing the monster's arm as it fell. Howling, the troll dropped its club to slap a clawed hand to the wound. It shook its head furiously, but Seth swung in the air like a gymnast and landed astride the beast's meaty neck. The troll bellowed, trying to reach around its wide horns and gut the pest. Seth snarled as he brought his elbow down onto the troll's neck. The troll screamed and fell to its knees.

Can you feel how stark the difference is? Not only is the final product 102 words shorter, but it pulls the reader into the action and makes it more exciting. Readers don't need to know every detail in an action sequence. If you give them just enough information, you invite them to participate in the story and fill in the empty spaces.

Also, in my example, notice the descriptions I didn't cut out. The troll still has a "clawed hand" and a "meaty neck" and Seth still swings through the air "like a gymnast." Description shouldn't completely disappear from action sequences. Used sparingly, description can enhance these scenes. It just needs to be placed carefully. For example, if there is a pause in a fight—maybe the troll's club and Seth's sword lock during combat—that is a place to add a detail, such as the troll's breath smelling like a mixture of rotten meat and vomit. So, don't nix all the details, but remember to make sure the action itself moves quickly.

7. Get Rid of Unnecessary Scenes

Every scene should push your story forward. As you revise your book, ask yourself, "What is the purpose of this scene? Is it pushing the plot forward? Does it give the reader necessary

information?” If a scene isn’t doing anything for your story, you can delete it. Sometimes you may have to cut out entire chapters or even subplots. I know it’s difficult to “kill your darlings,” but if these scenes are distracting your readers from the narrative, they need to go. If you are *absolutely* determined to hold onto a scene or a subplot, make it an essential part of your story. Otherwise, store your extra scenes in a folder and share them in your monthly newsletter after your book is published. Your fans will love it.

If you are having a difficult time figuring out what to keep and what to cut out, ask your writing group, your editor, your family and friends, or your alpha and beta readers. Getting an outside perspective will help you understand your story from the reader’s perspective and will make it easier for you to cut out some of your favorite but unnecessary scenes.

8. Consider Nixing Some Minor Characters

There may be some characters in your novel that don’t contribute to your story or could be replaced by characters you have already established. Too many characters can be difficult for readers to keep track of and may distract them from your main characters. So that one character from that one scene that you only mention once can go. If you introduced a character for plot convenience, there’s probably a better way to handle that plot point without involving a random character.

If you are having a hard time wiping these characters from your story, remember that you don’t have to wipe them out of existence. I suggest you put them in a separate file on your computer and incorporate them into a different story.

Conclusion: Why You Should be Concise

The purpose of concision isn’t necessarily to lower your word count, though your publisher

might thank you for saving them on production costs. Concision is a revision tool that will force you to become a better writer. As you scrutinize every word, sentence, scene, and character, you will come to know what makes writing good and what makes writing bad. You will understand your writing style and the things you struggle with. You will become more conscientious of good writing principles, and revising will become easier and easier. Most importantly, your novel will be carved into the masterpiece you know it can be.

Bibliography

Carrington, Rachel. "Necessary vs. Unnecessary Action in Fiction." *The Writer*. <https://www.writermag.com/improve-your-writing/fiction/unnecessary-action-in-fiction/>.

Ebbit, Wilma R. and David R. Ebbit. *Index to English*. 8th ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Hill, Beth. "Introduction to Description." The Editor's Blog. Updated September 29, 2014. <https://theeditorsblog.net/2013/08/09/introduction-to-description/>.

Kieffer, Kristen. "8 Things to Cut When You Kill Your Darlings." Well-storied. September 10, 2015. <http://www.well-storied.com/blog/kill-your-darlings>.

Reis, Vivien. "29 Words to Cut From Your Novel." YouTube. November 23, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qhV4lsrvMNI>.

Sanderson, Brandon. "Sanderson 2012.13—Revisions and Other Misc Topics." Zmunk. YouTube. April 30, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zBaocJrMXRU&t=2829s>.

Zinsser, William. *On Writing Well*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1976.



Hello!

Let me introduce myself: I'm Hannah Charlesworth. I like to ski, sing, sew, act, and watch movies. But above all, I love to read, write, and edit.

Because I have always loved English, I declared my English major during my first semester at Brigham Young University. Along with my English major, I decided to minor in editing and creative writing. All of my studies complement each other beautifully and have really prepared me to work in the publishing world.

I fell in love with the publishing industry first as a publicity intern and then as an employee at Future House Publishing. As a publicist, I mainly wrote content for email lists, came up with ways to advertise our books, and communicated with authors. The books I promoted for Future House were middle-grade and young adult fantasy and sci-fi. I loved working in these genres, and I later took a creative writing class that focused on writing for children and young adults.

After I finished my time at Future House, I started working for BYU Studies, a journal that publishes religious, historical, and academic scholarship. I love the things I edit for BYU Studies. I spend most of my time proofreading and source-checking. As a result, I've learned how to research obscure topics with hard-to-find sources.

If you have any questions about my editing services or this article, visit my website or email me. I would love to hear from you!

hannahcharlesworth95@gmail.com.

www.hannahcharlesworth.weebly.com