Tightening Your Writing

There is a theory that tight writing, on the best of days, is writing that whenever possible says what it means in as few words as possible. Ouch. Try this instead: Tight writing conveys meaning as briefly as possible.

1. Don’t let the fancy stuff get in the way. Clarity!

2. Begin sentences with subjects and verbs, letting subordinate elements branch off the right. Delivering what he said was justice, the judge imposed the sentence Thursday on the convicted murderer. The judge said he delivered justice Thursday as he imposed the sentence on the convicted murderer.

3. Use verbs in their strongest form: simple present or past.

4. Use active rather than passive verbs. The baseball was thrown by the pitcher. The pitcher threw the baseball.

5. Reduce adverb use by strengthening verbs. The boy threw the snowball at his sister very hard. The boy pelted his sister with the snowball.

6. Eliminate “there is” construction. (There is, there are, there will be, etc.) There is an inn called Nirvana where tired mothers may get some rest. Tired mothers may rest at the inn Nirvana.

7. Reduce “—ing” usage. She was racing toward the hospital. She raced toward the hospital.

8. Challenge uses of to be verbs. Is, are, am, was, were, been and being are weak verbs. Sometimes they are the most accurate verbs. You can’t and shouldn’t eliminate all uses of these verbs. But you should always challenge them. See if you can use a stronger verb.
9. Beware of “that”.
This is the cat that pounced on the mouse. This cat pounced on the mouse.


11. Replace phrases with words.
Mean people hardly ever win. Mean people rarely win.

12. Eliminate redundant words, quotes, facts and setups for quotes.

13. Translate the language. No jargon. No $5 words where a nickel word will do.
Why use the word “utilize” when “use” will do?

14. Keep your leads free of clutter. Anything too technical or bureaucratic will scare the reader away.

15. Be careful with numbers. Use the ones necessary and explain them. Don’t pack them all together.


17. Does every word add to the sentence or paragraph? Eliminate those that do not.