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Take the Gild Off the Lily and Save Words in Bunches

Extra words don't add punch; they just add weight

By Kenneth F. Oettle

To gild refined gold, to paint the lily,

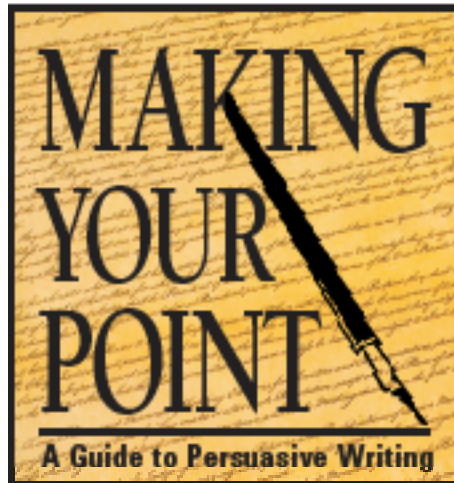
To throw a perfume on the violet,

To smooth the ice, or add another hue

Unto the rainbow, or with taper-light

To seek the beauteous eye of heaven to garnish,

Is wasteful and ridiculous excess. (Shakespeare's "King John," Act IV. Sc. 2).



This column reduces an 82-word paragraph to 33 words without sacrificing meaning or emphasis. You may wish to try the reduction before reading further. Here is the paragraph:

It is an indisputable truism of corporate suffrage that to exercise their right to a fair vote, shareholders are entitled to be fully informed about the issues on which they vote at shareholder meetings. To produce a fair election with a fully informed electorate, the voting

process must therefore permit shareholders to receive, review and digest information from the proponents and opponents of the issues on which they are to vote with sufficient time in advance of the vote to permit deliberation. [82 words; 84 by Word count]

I will make three guesses about your experience in reading the foregoing paragraph: (1) you understood it; (2) you didn't see anything particularly wrong with it; and (3) you didn't zip through it. With long sentences, big words, and lots of repetition, the paragraph was a slow read.

In my book, a slow read is a negative, tolerable only if the extra words add more value than they subtract. Do the extra words do that here? Let's see.

The paragraph begins ponderously if not pompously with, "It is an indisputable truism of corporate suffrage," which is comprised of a string of three marginally comprehensible phrases: "It is" (what is?), "indisputable truism" (what is a truism?), and "corporate suffrage" (who is suffering?). I see little value in the opening and much to question.

When referring to well-established legal principles, brief writers often pontificate with phrases like "It has long been held" or "It is black letter law." I don't begrudge that indulgence — the phrases are relatively inoffensive — but let's face it: If a principle has long been held or is black letter law, the court probably doesn't need to be reminded of it. Thus, the citation will suffice without the editorial.

Novice writers use such phrases because they sound important. To invoke tradition is seductive for an advocate who, because of inexperience, is unsure of what persuades and even more unsure of how to begin persuading. Such phrases tend to

The author is senior counsel and co-chair of the writing and mentor programs at Sills Cummis & Gross. Making Your Point, a Practical Guide to Persuasive Legal Writing, a compilation of these columns published in 2007 by ALM Publishing, is available at LawCatalog.com. He invites questions and suggestions for future columns to koettle@sillscummis.com. "Making Your Point" appears every month.

mark you as a novice because novices use them.

“It is an indisputable truism of corporate suffrage” is of the same ilk. It tries to elevate the point by purporting a pedigree (“indisputable truism”), but the clause may be even less effective than “It has long been held” or “It is black letter law” because it characterizes the point as merely a “truism” (a truth too obvious to mention). Terming something a “truism” generally minimizes or demeans it.

The opening sentence has the additional flaw of ending with a concept (“corporate suffrage”) rather than a concrete noun (e.g., “shareholders” or “vote”). Unlike concrete nouns and verbs, concepts don’t create mental images. As a consequence, they tend to be less effective in engaging the reader.

Two phrases built around “fair” are unnecessary: “to exercise their right to a fair vote” in the first sentence and “[t]o produce a fair election” in the second sentence. “Entitled” in the first sentence conveys the same thought as “right to a fair vote,” and “fully informed” in the second sentence implies fairness. True, fairness is a staple in the well-stocked rhetorical cupboard, but in this instance, “fair vote” and “fair election” gild the lily (over-embellish).

“Fully informed electorate” in the second sentence also gilds the lily. “Fully informed” already appeared in the first sentence, and “electorate” is a bit florid for describing shareholders. It connotes a large body of citizenry.

“Voting process” in the second sentence is another instance of a writer substituting concept for detail. You don’t visualize a process until it is described to you. Besides, the existence of a process is

implicit. The reader knows that transmittal of information to shareholders is part of a voting process.

If you do refer to a voting process, say that it requires contestants to provide information, not that it permits shareholders to receive it. You aren’t concerned with what shareholders are permitted to do. You are concerned with what proponents and opponents of issues are required to do.

The second appearance of the phrase “issues on which they [are to] vote” can be dropped as implicit. A reader will assume that information sent by proponents and opponents will be relevant to issues on which the shareholders will vote.

Finally, reduce “with sufficient time in advance of the vote” to “sufficiently before the vote,” and drop the phrase “shareholder meetings” because it is implicit.

Here is how a revised paragraph might look:

Shareholders are entitled to be fully informed about issues on which they will vote. Therefore, they should receive information from proponents and opponents of issues sufficiently before the vote to permit due deliberation. [33 words]

That’s basically it — for a shareholder vote to be meaningful, the shareholders need information about the issues on which they will vote and time to digest it. I added “due” in front of deliberation to complement “sufficiently” and to create alliteration.

I would not object to including the concept of a fair election, but I would not

say, “To ensure a fair election, shareholders should receive . . .” That would create a “dangling modifier” because the shareholders aren’t doing the ensuring. (“Ensure” is more precise than “produce.”) I would say, “To ensure a fair election, the law requires proponents and opponents to send shareholders information on the issues sufficiently before the vote.” That way, the actor that is ensuring a fair election (the law) and the actor that is requiring the distribution of information (again, the law) are the same.

Whether one can comfortably split the infinitive “to be informed” by inserting the adverb “fully” is for another day. I have no problem with it.

Puzzler

How would you improve the second clause in the following sentence?

Even if the boundary dispute were resolved, there are other concerns a potential buyer may have.

The flaw in the second clause is the famous “there are,” a phrase that has almost no defensible uses in legal briefs and memos. “There is” and “there are” merely delay the point.

You can begin the concluding clause with the buyer or with the issues that may concern the buyer. Either works.

Revised version: Even if the boundary dispute were resolved, a potential buyer may have other concerns.

Alternate version: Even if the boundary dispute were resolved, other issues may concern a potential buyer. ■