"Of" With Their Heads: Concision

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EMPLOYERS’ OBLIGATIONS TO WORKERS IN MILITARY

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I hope this question is not off of the wall, but did you ever see the TV soap “All of My Children”? If you did, you are the only one. The show is All My Children. Of is one word writers can cut. To be concise is to use only necessary words. To be succinct is to use only necessary content. The goal of concision and succinctness is to get the most thoughts in the shortest space—to make every word tell. Write as if you will be paid more if you use fewer words. Do not write “2/8” when you can write “1/4.” Brevity is not simply about the number of pages. Brevity is about everything, down to the size of the word and the number of syllables. Lengthy, thick briefs always lend authority.” Get right to the point in an instanter, er, instantly.

Which words can be cut? Lots of them: “A discussion of some words that don’t belong in briefs could probably be condensed into this concise statement: about fifty percent of them.”

Of is a big part of the wordiness problem. Deleting of is a big part of the solution. Here are some ways to get out of.

Play with possessives. “The foregoing constitutes the order and decision of the court” becomes “This (or the above) is the court’s order and decision.”

Invert or rearrange. “I am a fan of the Beatles” becomes “I am a Beatles fan.” “Because of Judge B’s status as a judge” becomes “Because Judge B is a judge.” “You’re not the boss of me” becomes “You’re not my boss.” “Joint Committee to Preserve the Independence of the Judiciary” becomes “Joint Committee to Preserve Judicial Independence [or an Independent Judiciary].” “The Supreme Court of the State of New York” becomes “The New York State Supreme Court.”

Normalize nominalizations. Good writers prefer verbs to nouns. Nominalizations turn verbs into nouns. “Criminal possession of stolen property” becomes “Criminally possessing stolen property.” “The forensic expert carried out an analysis of the blood sample” becomes “The forensic expert analyzed the blood sample.” “The solution was the result of the paralegal’s careful inspection of the papers” becomes “The paralegal solved the problem by inspecting the papers carefully.” “He committed forgery by the writing of a bad check” becomes “He committed forgery by writing a bad check.”

All, both. Delete of after all (“All New York loves baseball”) and both except when a pronoun follows (“all of us studied legal writing”; “both of us studied legal writing”).

What of it? Delete of after alongside, inside (unless you mean “in less than”), off, and outside. Use except for to replace outside of. “Except for Judge X, who was appointed, all the judges in the county were elected.”

Delete “as of.” “The attorney has not filed the motion as of yet” becomes “The attorney has not filed the motion yet. Or “The attorney has not filed the motion.”

Off “of.” “With the exception of” becomes “without.”

Eliminate “of” abstractions. Abstractions include type of, kind of, matter of, state of, factor of, system of, sort of, nature of. “He is the kind of [sort of, type of] person who would . . . .” becomes “He would . . . .”

Negative “of.” A negative phrase that uses an of, becomes, with a prefix, a dis-
Writing should be economical, not clipped, casual, or abrupt. Sometimes length enhances readability, exposes meaning, and increases persuasion. President Abraham Lincoln could have cut a few words at Gettysburg by saying, “We cannot dedicate, consecrate, or hallow this ground.” But he said it better by expanding his parallel structure: “We cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground.” President George W. Bush could have let it go with “We will not tire, falter, or fail.” Instead, he stressed America’s resolve following September 11, 2001, by saying, “We will not tire, we will not falter, and we will not fail.”

The best writing is not always the shortest writing. The best writing, however, is always fat-free. Trimming fat is hard. A waist is a terrible thing to watch while they relax in front of the TV. Your readers will not tire, we will not falter, and we will not fail. Instead, he stressed America’s resolve following September 11, 2001, by saying, “We will not tire, we will not falter, and we will not fail.”


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