

Lesson Plan: Achieving Concision

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Lesson: Achieving Concision

Timeframe: approximately 50 minutes

Target Audience: Upper-division college or university students enrolled in 100W: Writing for the Humanities, an advanced reading and composition course intended to enhance college-level writing skills, among which is the use of concrete, concise language. In addition to Humanities majors, this lesson would be useful for students preparing to become teachers, as its interactive exercises for achieving concision could be tailored to teach writing at various grade levels.

Materials needed: blackboard or dry erase board, chalk or markers, eraser, 5 x 8 note cards, short samples of concision in poetry and prose (instructor's choice)

Objectives: After the lesson, students will be able to

- employ concrete writing.
- construct concise, sophisticated sentences.
- revise vague and/or extraneous words and phrases.
- compose clear, expressive writing.

Background: Students of the Humanities are consistently required to display their knowledge through various forms of writing. A clear, concise writing style showcases their abilities to articulate ideas effectively and efficiently. Effective, efficient writing is a transferable skill valued both within and beyond academia.

Introduction to Lesson [2 minutes]:

The instructor will write the agenda on the board:

- Definition of concision
- Example, observations, and discussion
- Composition: microtheme
- Sentence building (concrete language)
- Composition: self-description in six words (concision exercise)
- Group-editing activity
- Microtheme editing (*if time permits or assigned as homework*)

Instructor: “This lesson is designed to expand upon our last lesson on avoiding the use of vague and generalized language. It will prepare you to write a one-page abstract essay in which you will summarize a novella and fully describe one of its main themes.”

Procedure [48 minutes]:

Step 1: Defining concision and discussing examples in poetry and prose [5 minutes]

Instructor: “Concise writing conveys a substantial amount of information in the fewest words possible. It is *efficient, economical* writing that results in *clear, specific* writing. Observe how this clarity is accomplished in two of Carl Sandburg’s short poems.”

Note to instructors: It may be helpful to supply copies of the poems for use during activities that follow the oral readings.

Step 1A: The instructor reads “Fog” aloud twice.

FOG

The fog comes
on little cat feet.

It sits looking
over harbor and city
on silent haunches
and then moves on.

The instructor begins the discussion outlined below with the comment: “Notice how much this poem conveys with a total of twenty-one words.” Conduct a brief interactive discussion that begins with reading the poem aloud and asking the following questions:

- How does Sandburg’s image of the cat convey the sensation of fog?
- Using so few words, how much does he manage to convey?
- What do you think this poem is about on the figurative level?

Step 1B: The instructor reads “Happiness” aloud slowly.

HAPPINESS

I asked professors who teach the meaning of life to tell me
what is happiness.

And I went to famous executives who boss the work of thou-
sands of men.

They all shook their heads and gave me a smile as though I
was trying to fool with them.

And then one Sunday afternoon I wandered out along the Des-
plains river

And I saw a crowd of Hungarians under the trees with their
women and children and a keg of beer and an accordion.

Instructor: “Sandburg communicates his definition of happiness, a complex concept, with a single image, using language that is simple and sparse. Listen to the final line once more. [The instructor reads the last stanza of the poem.] What do the words ‘crowd,’ ‘trees,’ ‘women,’ ‘children,’ ‘beer,’ and ‘accordion’ convey about the nature of happiness?” The instructor will encourage students to draw associations between the words and images of the poem and the concept of happiness. For example, trees suggest that experiencing nature is an important source of happiness. “Women” and “children” point to the significance of family, and “crowd” suggests that belonging to an extended community creates happiness.

Instructor: “Using our brief discussion of Sandburg’s definition of happiness as a model, what images come to mind when you are asked to define happiness? Think about this question as I distribute note cards for the next exercise.”

Step 2: Composing a microtheme [5 minutes]

The instructor will distribute 5 x 8 note cards and invite students to write a microtheme on one side of their note card offering their own answers to the question: *What is happiness?* The instructor will define a microtheme as a brief essay (about the length of a paragraph) on a single subject written on a five-by-eight inch notecard to encourage specificity and concision. The microtheme may be written in a formal, informal, or stream-of-consciousness style, according to the student’s preference. Tell the students that the microtheme will be used later in the lesson.

Step 3: Describing concrete writing [5 minutes]

Instructor: “To achieve concrete writing, use specific words that appeal to the five senses—sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch.” Introduce Ernest Hemingway as a master of concrete writing.

Write on the board the opening sentence from Hemingway’s essay, “Pamplona in July”:

“In Pamplona, a white-walled, sun-baked town high up in the hills of Navarre, is held in the first two weeks of July each year the World’s Series of bull fighting.”

Ask students to call out words and phrases from Hemingway’s sentence that are directed at the senses. Ask them to call out words that convey specific information about Pamplona and the event being held there. Reiterate that each word is *precise* and *descriptive* and invite students to notice how much descriptive information is conveyed in a single sentence.

Note to instructors: If there is more than one board in the classroom, consider leaving the Hemingway sentence up and performing step four on another board.

Step 4: Building a concrete sentence: group exercise [3-5 minutes]

The instructor will write a short general sentence on the board such as *I made a pie*. Invite students to work together to expand the sentence into a specific description of making a pie that appeals to the five senses. Ask a student to come to the board and record class suggestions while the instructor guides the exercise with questions such as “Did you bake, fry, or toast the pie?” “What kind of pie?” “How does it look?” “How does it smell? Taste? Feel? Sound?”

Step 5: Practicing concision with six-word self-descriptions [8 minutes]

Instructor: “Concise, concrete language conveys specific information in the fewest words possible. To achieve it, *never use two words when one will do*. Here are some humorous examples of redundancy: “That’s the honest truth!” “Her death was fatal.”

Instructor: “To continue practicing concision, I’d like you to compose a description of yourself in six words — no more and no less.” The instructor will then read the following examples:

Red hair. People expect me feisty.
Half Jewish. Half Italian. Totally Stuffed.
Miss being blond. People expect less.
Yesterday wounded. Today healing. Tomorrow peace.

Note to instructors: Google “six-word descriptions” for numerous examples to read to the students to prepare them for writing their own.

Give the students time to write. When they are done writing, invite a few students to voluntarily share their self-descriptions.

Step 6: Editing exercise in a group [10 minutes]

Write the following sentence on the board and ask students as a group to revise the sentence to achieve concrete expression and concision. Appoint a student to be the “board editor” as the group calls out its suggestions for revisions.

In my opinion, the poem “Fog” by Carl Sandburg is basically about how people feel and the very depressing realities that creep up over things that happen in their lives and that they feel they have no control over whatsoever.

After the students are finished, the instructor will say, “Describe the types of words you consistently eliminated.” Ask the following questions:

- What were some of the extraneous adjectives and adverbs you discarded from the original sentence?
- Why is the phrase *in my opinion* generally unnecessary?
- What advice would you give others engaged in editing a wordy sentence?
- How would you describe your experience of reading the edited sentence as opposed to the original?

Step 7: Editing activity for the microtheme [5-7 minutes]

Note: If time is short, assign this exercise for homework and move it to the closure section of the lesson plan.

- Ask students to revise their microthemes on happiness. Tell them to incorporate concrete language and demonstrate concision. Invite them to work individually first and then to exchange microthemes with an editing partner for further assessment and revision.
- Invite one or two students to read their microthemes voluntarily.

Closure [3-5 minutes]:

Instructors may conclude the lesson with a self-selected sample of writing that encourages or exhibits concision. I relate the following anecdote to reinforce the lesson and to demonstrate the value of concision in the “real world” beyond academia.

Personal anecdote: “My mother-in-law was a published author of juvenile literature. One of her publishers customarily enclosed a poem to all prospective authors along with their first contracts. I’d like to end the class with an excerpt from the poem, which is titled ‘Boil It Down.’”

BOIL IT DOWN

If you've got a thought that's happy,
Boil it down.
Make it short and crisp and snappy,
Boil it down....

Take out every surplus letter,
Boil it down.
Fewer syllables the better,
Boil it down.

Make your meaning plain. Express it,
So we'll know, not merely guess it,
Then my friend, ere you address it,
Boil it down.

Cut out all the extra trimmings,
Boil it down.
Skim it well, then skim the skimmings,
Boil it down.

When you're sure 'twould be a sin to
Cut another sentence into,
Send it on, and we'll begin to,
BOIL IT DOWN!

Lesson Analysis:*Strengths*

- Concision is a difficult writing skill, arguably one that writers will continue to develop for years. Repetitive exercises as practiced in class underscore the importance of continuous editing.
- Reading quality literature to identify characteristics of concise, concrete writing reinforces the importance of reading in developing skillful writing.

- Interactive writing activities generate interest and enthusiasm when the students are working with words, which permits writing teachers to convey the creative aspect of writing.
- Ending a lesson with material that represents a “bridge” between the classroom and the work world beyond reminds students that school exercises build useful skills that will be valuable in future career endeavors.

Potential Weaknesses

- The number of activities in the lesson plan requires accurate time estimates and a close watch on the clock. If class time is running out, instructors may want to cut down the number of activities or flag one such as microtheme editing to assign as homework.
- To avoid confusing students, the instructor must define terminology such as microtheme, describe unfamiliar exercises such as the six-word self-description, and explain instructions for all exercises clearly.

Applications

- Instructors may replace Sandburg poems, Hemingway prose sentence, and “Boil It Down” with preferred literary selections.
- Board exercises may be done with a laptop (Word application) and projector if the instructor is comfortable using computer technology.

Sources:

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Hemingway, Ernest. “Pamplona in July.” *The Best American Essays of the Century*. Ed. Joyce

Carol Oates and Robert Atwan. Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000. 98-106.

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“Boil It Down” *Treasure Trove*. London: 1924. 115. Web. 3 Mar. 2013.