

Brian Fugere
Chelsea Hardaway
Jon Warshawsky

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Why business people speak like *idiots*

A bullfighter's guide

SIZE MATTERS, BUT NOT HOW YOU THINK

I will be brief. Not nearly so brief as Salvador Dali, who gave the world's shortest speech. He said "I will be so brief I have already finished," and he sat down.

—EDWARD O. WILSON

Back when you were in grade school, your teachers probably gave reading assignments. Sometimes they were long, sometimes they were short, but no one complained about the short ones.

Then on the weekend you went to church, synagogue, or some other place where guilt was administered to you by a professional guilt-administrator while you were dressed up and miserable in your state of extreme cuteness. You heard a sermon. It might have been 55 minutes about why you should do unto others as you would have them do unto you, or maybe it was 10 minutes on the same topic. Why someone needed to do 55 minutes of this stuff unto you is something

you could never figure out, but the 10-minute one got rave reviews. Short and sweet. Everyone got the message.

Length has its advantages, but when it comes to words, sentences, documents, and presentations, shortness is your ally.

A GLORIOUSLY SHORT HISTORY OF SHORTNESS

The Battle of Gettysburg was a bloody victory for the Union and marked the beginning of the end of the Confederacy. More than 45,000 soldiers died. (The U.S. population in 1863 was under 35 million. Imagine a battle where 325,000 U.S. soldiers died today and you start to get the idea.) By any measure, this was a critical time for the country and a time for well-chosen words from the president.

Lincoln, however, wasn't the main speaker at the dedication of the cemetery—noted orator Edward Everett was. Few people thought the president was much of a speaker. Lincoln's address was astoundingly short, 270 words that described perfectly the sentiment of the president and the nation.

Please don't skip this part. It's worth reading. Remember, it's short.

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion; that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom; and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

November 19, 1863; Gettysburg, Pennsylvania

Despite Lincoln's humility, the world noted what was said, and it continues to be remembered as possibly one of the greatest speeches ever made. Most people don't remember that it was so brief, because Lincoln said everything that needed to be said, and with great eloquence. Then he stopped talking.

At the same ceremony Edward Everett delivered a 13,500-word address that took about two hours. We would have reprinted it here, but we figured that you probably remembered it.

DOCUMENT OBESITY

There's a reason we get beat up with hour-long presentations and four-minute voicemails with endings that no one ever lis-



(Source: Library of Congress)

Edward Everett

tens to. Length implies that some work went into the production. It takes time to write 50 pages about something, but if we turn in five pages, it looks as though we haven't put much time into the job.

High school teachers use this technique: A term paper must be 20 pages and have two pages of footnotes, from at least five different sources. In some ways, this is a useful guideline for high school students who might have no way of knowing how many pages it would take to cover topic X. It also weeds out the students who don't want to do any real work, because it's (slightly) easier to crank out five pages of garbage than 15 pages.

But guidelines like these are not so useful in the business world where the objective isn't to spend a minimum of 12 hours in the library. The objective is to connect, convince, and make money.

A lot of high school students go on to grow up, get jobs, and make presentations. We probably forget 90 percent of what we learn in high school, but stupid length requirements for documents are one of those things that stick with us forever. That's not a good thing.

COPY, PASTE, BLOAT

Length is supposed to imply insight, but usually the opposite is true. If you talk to a great editor, she'll tell you that it's much more difficult to write a great short article than a long one. Business idiots don't really edit. That 100-slide PowerPoint travesty inherited its bloat from the six other bloated presentations that were pasted together at the last minute. If someone had put real work into it, most of those slides would have been removed.

One culprit? Our friends Copy and Paste. In the age of the typewriter, you had to read—and hear in your mind—whatever it was you were putting on the page. A long paper really *was* an achievement. No longer. Software makes it easy to recycle paragraphs, documents, and presentations. There ought to be separate commands for “Copy Thoughtful Material” and “Copy Bloated Crap,” but unfortunately there's one command that brings it all together. Business is obsessed with not “reinventing the wheel” and discourages anyone from wasting much time crafting anything from scratch. (So much for creativity.) More than anything, software has made it no more difficult to create long documents than shorter ones.

WE SHALL FIGHT . . .

Beyond shortness in length, the best speakers also seem to get away with a lot shorter words (those of the one- and two-syllable variety).

Winston Churchill was a master of English. He could turn a phrase in a way that made the world sit up and take notice—at a time when it really needed to start paying attention. There's a momentum, in some of Churchill's best known passages, in which the listener finds one resonant thought after another. We are pulled forward irresistibly by his unambiguous language and taut prose:

We shall not flag or fail. We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.

Speech to the House of Commons; June 4, 1940

This is among the most quoted speeches in the history of the twentieth century, and deservedly so, because even today, his words raise the hair on the listener's neck. There's not a four-syllable word anywhere and nothing left to ponder. His words impressed the world, rattled Hitler, and convinced Franklin Delano Roosevelt to create the Lend-Lease program.

None of us may confront a threat of that magnitude. If we do, though, it's good to know that we can always dust off those one-syllable words and send them into action—even at work.

THE DOCTOR IS IN

In 1946, Dr. Rudolf Flesch devised his Flesch Reading Ease Scale. Through research, he created a method to calculate the difficulty of reading a section of text, as measured by the edu-

cation level required of the reader. What he found was that long sentences and long words demanded more education and effort of the reader. Sentences longer than 21 words proved challenging. When the average syllable count of the words approached two, reading ease declined.

This sounds harsh, but remember that most English words are one syllable.

He created a complex formula to tally what he called a document's Readability Score. The scores are plotted on a scale from 0 to 100, with 100 being the easiest to read. Here are some examples Flesch calculated to show his formula in practice:

<i>Comics</i>	92
<i>Sports Illustrated</i>	63
<i>Wall Street Journal</i>	43
<i>IRS tax code</i>	-6

Different scores are appropriate for different audiences. And it's next to impossible to write something that scores a 100 (outside of See Spot run), so we wouldn't recommend shooting for this kind of simplicity. But in general, your writing should score above 35 if you want the average business audience to understand and actually finish reading it.

The real issue with long-windedness is that it prevents you from connecting with your audience. Just as endless sentences filled with jargon frustrate us and cause us to worry about missing the point, a crisp and short phrase makes us feel on top of things. We get it.

This is different from the last two-hour corporate presentation you attended where the idiot speaking had to remind everyone of the outline every half hour or so. Short articles and presentations don't put such a burden on the audience to

figure out how they are organized. Most people won't make the effort to figure it all out anyway.

THE LONG AND SHORT OF IT ALL

Here's the real skinny on size:

- Short presentations pack a punch. (Guys like Lincoln used this technique.)
- Short sentences are more memorable than long ones. (Mix and match, but 21 words starts to become long for most people.)
- One-syllable words build momentum and give the long ones impact. (Churchill knew a lot of long words, but when it mattered most he shelved those in favor of the short ones.) ✓ *yes!*