

Advice from Howard Weaver, former editorial page editor of The Sacramento Bee

Across 40 years in news, I talked to a lot of people who wanted to publish letters to the editor. “I can’t possibly make it shorter,” they’d say, no matter what the requirement was. I asked, do you want your letter published, or do you want people to read it?

Readers generally skip long articles, so even if the newspaper had unlimited space, publishing long letters wouldn’t help. Hemingway said, “Easy writing makes hard reading.” Nowhere is that truer than the opinion section.

My colleague said his favorite letter was 14 words long: “I smoke pot. So what? Put me in jail. I can get it there.” It’s hard to imagine a more effective argument against needless incarceration.

I later found a better example, the winning entry in a nationwide contest on good government, just six words. It said, “Good government. Good government. Sit. Stay.”

Refine your intentions. Fancy language doesn’t help; it hurts. If you think you’ve come up with an especially clever turn of phrase or metaphor, that’s a sign to rethink. Be ruthless.

Simple sentence construction helps: subject —> verb —> object is hard to beat for effective communication. (A famous parody of Time Magazine style said, “Backward ran sentences until reeled the mind.”)

Rewrite. Omit needless words: the word “that,” almost all adverbs, most adjectives.

Be adult: polite; no name-calling. Cite evidence.

Persist. Editors face multiple demands; try, try again

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