SAY THINGS WITH FEWER WORDS!

The age of information—or should that be excess information?—has accomplished one thing you may not think much about.

Our attention span has shortened. Drastically. The most recent data indicates our attention span is now at an all-time low of 8 seconds. Compare that to a goldfish’s span of 9 seconds.

How do you translate this new standard into oral or written content that’s compelling and engaging enough to keep readers’ attention? Make every word count.

We were taught in secondary education and university to write to a minimum word goal for our essays—500 words would get you a C, while over 1,000 words would get you an A. Rather than seeking to get to the point as succinctly as possible, we spent hours labouring over superfluous and incomprehensible words in the Thesaurus we thought made us sound more intelligent.

Now it’s time to discard that way of thinking and be concise, clear, and succinct. Think the best way from “Point A” to “Point B” is a straight line.

Following are a few suggestions to help you say more with fewer words.

**“Murder your darlings.”**

English writer Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch first spoke this often-paraphrased quote in a lecture he gave at Cambridge University nearly a century ago. You must be willing to ruthlessly cut words out of your content that don’t support the main theme or move the reader forward.

Each word must have an express purpose, so if you’ve fallen in love with a turn of phrase that makes you sound eloquent, but doesn’t add depth to your piece, cut it out.

**Delete all unnecessary words.**

For example, go through your content and cut out the word “that.” It’s usually extraneous and tightens the prose. Also cut out adverbs and adjectives that don’t change the meaning of a sentence, such as:

* “She sped quickly through the crowd.” If someone sped, chances are they’re going pretty quickly.
* “Enjoy our free gift.” Aren’t gifts usually free?

**Try to get your point across in 6 words or less.**

This little exercise will help you identify the heart of the matter. Next time someone asks what your firm does, rather than pontificate on its every virtue, open the conversation with a 6-word sound byte that sums up your core philosophy or benefit.

When asked by an acquaintance what a content writer does for a living, he or she might answer, “My words grab readers’ attention.” This sparks your listener’s interest and gets them asking questions.

**Pause if you feel the need to add dummy words.**

Dummy words are merely fillers to use while we try to think of something intelligent to say, like when we mumble “um” or “uh.” Pause instead, and take a deep breath while you think about what you actually want to say. Don’t ramble on with useless statements like “on the other hand” or “and in conclusion.”

Pausing gives you the opportunity to collect your thoughts and be succinct. Pausing also adds a certain amount of anticipation or tension to your speech that will keep your audience on the edge of their seats.

**Be the personification of brevity.**

Learn to be a person of little words. But make each one count. Don’t use a four-syllable word when a simple word works just as well. You want people to be able to read or hear your words and instantly comprehend the gist of what you’re saying. They won’t be able to do that if they’re trying to figure out your expansive vocabulary along the way.

**Use the rule of three.**

The human brain can maintain its awareness of three things at a time. When speaking, try to limit your ideas to three main points. If you use more, your audience will try so hard to remember all of them that they might walk away remembering none.

**And now for the take-away…**

Succinct and concise words and ideas grab attention and get your point across. Remember, keep it simple.