

Lesson 15

name: date:

Where's the Message?

Imagine that it's your birthday. The candles on your cake are ablaze, and friends are gathered around. Someone starts to sing the old favorite, "Oh, joyous day honoring the anniversary of the momentous occasion of your arrival and dedicated to you who were born on this day. . . ." Why did that particular song never catch on? Well, "Happy birthday to you" clearly says it all. One component of good word choice is finding the right words for the job—and leaving out the ones you don't need.

Sharing an Example: "Good Shot!"

Unnecessary words clutter your writing and smother your main idea. Read the following sample, and see whether the writer carefully selected words or buried the main idea under clutter.

"Good Shot!"

My mother the doctor is a doctor of pediatrics. This means that she is a pediatrician, a doctor who works with children. As a pediatrician working with children, she often has funny things happen to her when she is working with children in her office. Not every day but at least a couple times a week, she comes home with hilarious stories of her patients doing funny things. My mom told me a story just the other day after coming home from a day of working with her interesting patients. This one patient, a child around the age of five, had to get a shot. Now this was one five-year-old who didn't like shots at all. In fact, this child

had what you could call a bad case of “shot phobia,” or a real fear of getting a shot of any kind. When this child, a boy I’ll call Theo, heard the word “shot” come out of his doctor’s (my mother’s) mouth, he began to scream. His scream was not an ordinary “You-scared-me-a-bit” scream. No, Theo’s scream was a wild, crazy, jungle-animal, “There’s-a-psycho-chasing-me-and-an-elephant-just-stepped-on-my-foot,” loud, long, blood-curdling scream that caused my mom’s nurse, who works for my mother, to drop the hypodermic needle she was holding. The hypodermic needle did not drop down to the hard, tiled floor where it would have shattered into hundreds of pieces. No, this hypodermic needle bounced off the cushioned examination table, where my mother has her patients sit, turned over in the air one time, and landed in a very soft place. The soft place where it landed was Theo’s behind. Theo, who had been screaming, stopped screaming and stared at the nurse. The nurse, who had been trying to give him a shot, just reached down and finished off the shot. It’s hard to believe, but, unbelievably, Theo began to laugh. When my mom told me this story, I had to laugh, too.

My Response

If word choice involves a careful selection of words, how would you rate “Good Shot!”?

_____ It’s fine! The writer might want to say even more.

_____ It’s a *little* wordy, but the writer just wants to send a message.

_____ This is way too wordy! Start cutting!

Partner Up to Pare Down

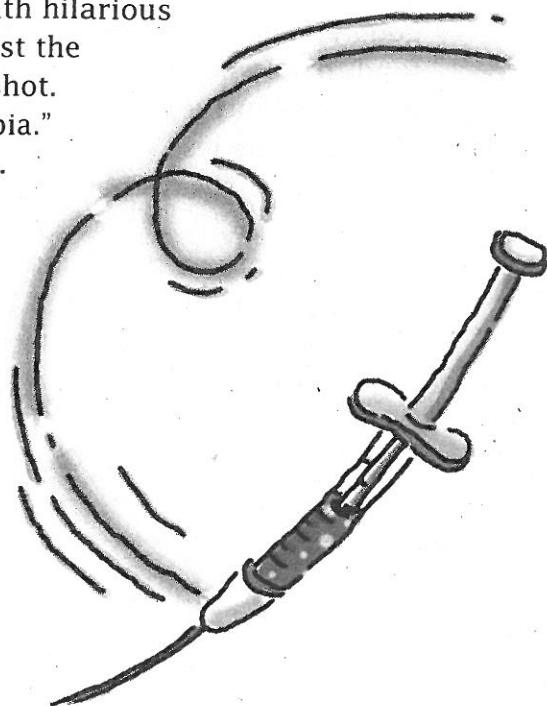
Work with a partner to revise this sample. One of you should read the piece aloud as the other crosses out any unnecessary words, phrases, or sentences. As you revise, remember the birthday song—make every word count! Read your revised writing aloud to be sure the clutter is gone. Change the wording slightly if necessary.

A Quick Comparison

Compare the revision on page 69 with yours. Did you and your partner cut the same clutter?

“Good Shot!”

My mother is a pediatrician, a doctor who works with children. At least a couple of times each week, she comes home with hilarious stories about her patients. My mom told me a story just the other day about five-year-old Theo, who had to get a shot. Theo had what you could call a bad case of “shot phobia.” When Theo heard the word “shot,” he began to scream. His scream was not a “You-scared-me” scream. No, Theo’s scream was a long, wild, “There’s-a-psycho-chasing-me” scream that caused my mom’s nurse to drop the hypodermic needle she was holding. The hypodermic needle did not drop to the hard, tiled floor, where it would have shattered into hundreds of pieces. No, this hypodermic needle bounced off the cushioned examination table, turned over in the air, and landed in a very soft place—Theo’s behind. Theo stopped screaming and stared at the nurse. The nurse just reached down and finished off the shot. It’s hard to believe, but Theo started to laugh. When my mom told me this story, I had to laugh, too.



Share and Compare

Compare your revision with the sample revision. Then, put a check next to the sentence that best describes the comparisons.

- We cut even more clutter.
- We cut almost as much clutter.
- We didn’t cut as much, but we like our paragraph.
- We didn’t cut as much, but we decided to cut more next time.

More Clutter Cleaning

Read the following passage on your own, crossing out any clutter. Then, rewrite the piece concisely. Remember, it’s all right to change punctuation or sentence structure to make your final revision read smoothly.

Both my parents, my mom and my dad, are on this diet, or as my dad would say, “shedding some unneeded pounds.” I think it’s good they’re trying to do this because it’s good for them in the long run to be in better shape and more fit. It’s good for me, fortunately, that they don’t have to eat a bunch of wacky, strange food that I wouldn’t want to eat. Fortunately, they’re trying to eat less food with lots of fat and replace the fatty foods with foods that are good for them. This means eating less junk food and more fruits and vegetables. This is OK with me because I’ve always been a fruit and vegetable person. That may seem strange for a kid to eat a lot of fruits and vegetables, but I do. My parents are also trying to exercise more by doing more exercises like walking, biking, and even running. Fortunately, getting beaten by me at basketball is another way of exercising, along with the walking and biking that they seem to like.

Share and Compare

Were you able to trim this passage about weight loss? Share your revision with a partner. Review the changes each of you made.



A Writer’s Question

As you were reading and revising, how did you decide what was “clutter” and what was worth keeping?