

# Ruthless Relevance

## An Exercise in Style

This activity is derived from an exercise from *Steering the Craft* by Ursula K. Le Guin called “A Terrible Thing to Do.” The purpose of this activity is to hone in on the most essential parts of a chapter of your text as it relates to your characters, your plot, and your readers. We know the word count requirements are high, but we want your writing to still be crisp and concise without rambling. Like your stories, your writing should strive to be Immediate, Engaging, and Commercial, and this activity will help you figure out the most relevant segments of your chapter, which is where your focus should be. It’s easy to emphasize information that is not relevant to your readers and this exercise is meant to help you find and potentially remove these specific spots in your chapter.

This type of editing is an excellent practice for sharpening the most crucial components of your chapter and understanding how much power a single word can wield. You may be forced to cut some of your favourite words or phrases, but for the sake of this exercise be ruthless in the pursuit of telling the simplest version of your story. Allow the story to tell itself.

It’s important to remember that this is a writing exercise only (this activity likely won't leave you with a chapter you want to publish!). This activity is meant to illustrate what information is essential and what can be cut. It is meant to get you thinking about the components of your style that work and what could be augmented. Feel free to complete this exercise with a peer and exchange feedback on each other’s truncated chapters.

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Step 1 — Take a chapter of your story and take note of the word count. Ideally, this is a chapter near the start of your story where you may be using more words than normal to explain or set-up your plot and your characters.

Step 2 — Cut the chapter in half. For example, if your chapter is 2200 words, do your best to cut 1100 words. If there is any dialogue, cut any particularly long speeches or longer conversations in half as well. Your goal here is twofold: 1) finesse your chapters by removing superfluous language and 2) keep the narrative clear for a potential reader. Scrub descriptions and adjectives from your chapter, and keep character actions, reactions and emotions. To quote Le Guin, “Consider using revision consciously as a time to consider what *could* go out if it *had* to.”

Step 3 — Read your chapter and answer the following questions:

How has your chapter changed?

How has the style changed? Has the style sharpened? Or has the style become too sparse? Is the reader missing any crucial information? Is there another way you might convey that information?

How has the pacing changed? Does the story move faster? Are there any essential plot or character elements that feel compromised due to the reduction in words?

Has the emotional impact of the chapter on the character and the reader intensified or shifted? If so, how?

Will a reader have an easier time understanding what is happening and why it's important in this shorter version of the chapter? Why or why not?

Step 4 — Cut your chapter in half again. For example, if you started with a 2200-word chapter and cut it to 1100 words, edit it once more down to 550 words. You may think there are passages you simply cannot cut because its omission will leave a hole in your plot, but give it a shot: you may be surprised to see that your story works without it.

Step 5—Revisit the questions with this shortest version of your chapter in mind:

How has your chapter changed?

How has the style changed? Has the style sharpened? Or has the style become too sparse? Is the reader missing any crucial information? Is there another way you might convey that information?

How has the pacing changed? Does the story move faster? Are there any essential plot or character elements that feel compromised due to the reduction in words?

Has the emotional impact of the chapter on the character and the reader intensified or shifted? If so, how?

Will a reader have an easier time understanding what is happening and why it's important in this shorter version of the chapter? Why or why not?