

**Grab-and-Go Writing Activity:  
Pruning Your Prose: Achieving Conciseness**

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**Timeframe:** 20 minutes

**Materials needed (including preparation)**

1. Handout with principles of “pruning” prose and samples of wordy prose [“Handout 1: Pruning Your Prose, Strategies and Practice Sentences”]
2. Diagram of how to prune trees or roses with before and after drawings [“Handout 2: Principles for Pruning Trees”]
3. Several pens for a whiteboard or chalk for a chalkboard
4. (Optional) Samples of wordy paragraphs for homework
5. (Recommended) A laptop to project the diagram, principles, and student samples
6. (Recommended) An overgrown plant in a pot, a pair of pruning shears, and a bag to hold the trimmed-off pieces. *Ficus benjamina* trees are good for this.

**Objectives:** After the activity, students will be able to

- recognize excessive verbiage.
- cut excess verbiage judiciously, reflecting an understanding of the rhetorical context.

**Introduction:** [2 minutes]

Using “Principles for Pruning Trees,” introduce the concept of pruning as it applies to plants: *pruning is crucial* to the health, productivity, and beauty of the plant.

Also note that *pruning rules are flexible*. They *must be applied judiciously*, adjusted for the different growth patterns among plants. For example, pruning strategies that maximize fruit production for apples will minimize fruit production for apricots. Different gardening goals also call for different pruning strategies.

**Procedures:** [17 minutes]

**Step 1 [2 minutes]:** Demonstrate these principles by pruning the plant you brought, defining your goal first (e.g., to produce a more attractive shape, reduce the size, open up the center to light, or some combination of these goals). Consider pruning just one side, saving the other side for contrast. You could let a student try, too. Alternatively, you could draw a tree on the board and then simply erase lines representing excessive or errant branches.

**Step 2 [2 minutes]:** Segue into discussing writing by giving students the handout called “Pruning Your Prose: Strategies and Practice Sentences.” Explain that *prose also needs to be pruned judiciously*, depending on the goals of the writer and the preferred communication style of the audience. Discuss the dangers of over-pruning, as well.

Using the handout, go over the guidelines for pruning prose. Show at least one before-and-after sample. (See sample on Handout 1.) Tip: Don't give students this handout earlier, especially if the sample wordy sentences are on the back, or some students will start working on it, ignoring the plant pruning.

**Step 3 [8 minutes]:** Give the students the wordy sample sentences and tell them to prune them. Direct some students to start from the last sentence and work their way to the first to be sure all four sample sentences get pruned by someone.

**Step 4 [5 minutes]:** Ask for volunteers to read their best work (one sentence each). If you are using a laptop that can project the lesson on the screen, you can type in the students' sentences as they speak. Otherwise, write them on the board or have the students write them up. Discuss which ones are best and why.

**Closure/Evaluation: [1 minute]**

To reinforce the lesson, assign a fuller version of the in-class exercise as homework. Give the students handouts with excessively wordy paragraphs to prune. Although each student will revise only one paragraph, it would be best to have at least five different paragraphs (i.e., five different versions of the homework). This strategy reduces the opportunity for "unauthorized group work" and gives you more samples of good pruning to share with the class later. Some of the paragraphs should contain a series of short, choppy sentences to be combined, while others should feature excessively long sentences to be broken up and/or whittled down. I have included a sample of each kind ["Homework for Pruning Paragraphs, Two Samples"].

**Activity Analysis:**

**Strengths:** This exercise is applicable for a wide range of skill levels, from weaker students who need to be taught to write clearly and concisely to excellent writers who need to be reminded occasionally. The visual elements of the lesson should help students understand, while the hands-on activity will let them see that they can apply these ideas to improve their writing. The lesson can also be expanded to offer additional strategies for improving conciseness, for example, combining choppy sentences in a paragraph or breaking up excessively long sentences. Weeding out redundant sentences from a wordy memo is also good practice. The activity could also be contracted, after the initial lesson, to a 15-minute drill to use extra classroom time throughout the semester. It could even be made into a game, with different teams competing for the fastest rewrite and/or the best version of one wordy sentence.

**Weaknesses:** Even in its simplest form, this exercise will take careful time management. Furthermore, the live pruning demonstration might prove too cumbersome for some, as it involves hauling the plant(s) around campus. Costs for the plant and pruning shears might also be prohibitive.

## Handout One: Pruning Your Prose: Strategies and Practice Sentences

### Prune Excess Verbiage

- Prune unnecessarily wordy phrases. (due to the fact that = because; in a timely fashion = quickly; keep in mind = remember; with all due respect = respectfully; in a swift and silent manner = swiftly and silently; the one at the end of the line = the last one)
- Prune to eliminate repetition. (I asked him what his favorite part of his job is, and he told me that the best part of his job is that he is always learning things that are new to him = He said the best part of his job is that he is continually learning.)
- Prune unnecessary details. (My dog, a female border collie-greyhound mix that I adopted from your shelter last month when your organization had that adoption fair at the Almaden Shopping Center in front of PetSmart, seems old enough for spaying, so I was wondering what clinic you would recommend I take her to for that. = My dog is nine months old now. Where would you recommend that I take her to get spayed?)
- Prune unnecessary modifiers. (*unexpected* surprise, *terrible* tragedy, *completely* flabbergasted)
- Prune the “there is/there are” construction. (There are three things that must be kept in mind by all contestants = All contestants should remember three things = Remember three things.)

### Prune Judiciously

Don't get carried away with this. Sometimes the wordier phrasing is rhetorically justifiable, whether to provide emphasis, to clarify, to avoid harshness, or to produce an effective cadence. Below are some examples.

- “These are the times that try men's souls” sounds better than “These times try men's souls.”
- “Four score and seven years ago, our forefathers brought forth on this continent a new nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal” is stronger than “Eighty-seven years ago, our forefathers founded a free nation.”
- “To be or not to be, that is the question” is more powerful than “Is it better to be dead?”
- Wouldn't you rather receive a letter that said, “We regret that we cannot accept your application at this time due to an unexpected abundance of excellent candidates for the position,” rather than one that said, “You didn't get the job”?

### Sample

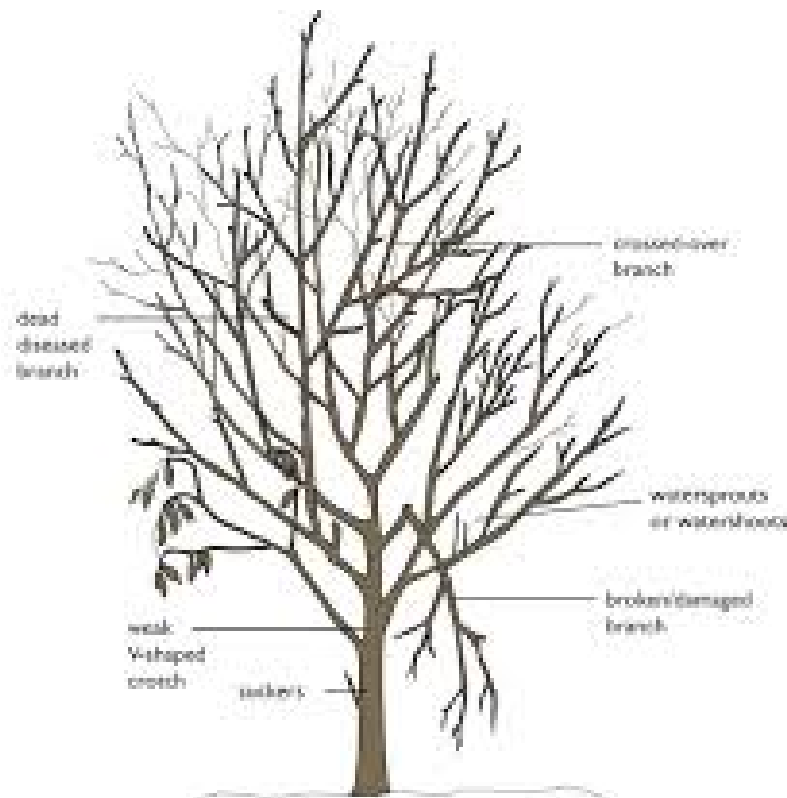
**Wordy version:** There is currently a lively, ongoing controversy among many sociologists and other professionals who study human nature : theories are being spun and arguments are being conducted among them about what it means that so many young people—and older people, for that matter—who live in our society today are so very interested in stories about zombies. (58 words)

**Revised:** A lively controversy currently rages among sociologists about why so many young people—and older people, for that matter—are so interested in stories about zombies. (26 words)

## **Sentences to Prune**

1. In my humble opinion, it should be noted by those promoting San Jose State University that the students who go to SJSU are really very fortunate to be getting an education in such a great area where they have access to a lot of super dynamic companies that can serve as places to get internships and later first jobs in their chosen field of study, especially if their chosen field of study is related to technology in some way. It would not be wrong to say that this is not at all a minor perk. (96 words)
  
2. One thing among many other things that makes the current generation of young people—those approximately 10 to 25 years old—truly remarkable and to be admired is that so many of them are interested not just in getting jobs that make a lot of money but also in finding a sense of purpose and really making the world a better place, not only for themselves but for other people, whether living in our own country or living abroad, especially in what are still called “third world countries.” (89 words)
  
3. One example of this is the TOMS shoe company, which was created by an idealistic young man named Blake Mycoskie, who has been a huge success even though he has never aimed for personal success for himself alone but has also aimed to help the less fortunate, and he is also kind of amazing as a guy who became a big success in terms of money and fame even though he never completed a college degree. (77 words)

## Basic Principles of Pruning Trees



Pruning judiciously can improve the health, strength, beauty, and productivity of a tree.

For the health of the tree, prune off branches that are **dead, diseased, damaged,** or **dysfunctional** (e.g., those growing too sharply upward, or toward the center of the canopy, or crossing or rubbing against other branches).

The basic idea is to open up the center of the plant to light and air, without removing too much. Cutting too radically can weaken or even kill a plant.

Adapted from

<http://www.avtreefarm.com/pdf/Fruit%20Tree%20Pruning%20Basics.pdf>.

## Homework: Pruning at the Paragraph Level

### Sample #1, Wordy Version:

It has been noted by observers of world events that the Nobel Peace Prize nominations in recent years have been a demonstration that peace can be achieved in unexpected ways and by people who aren't even diplomats or heads of state. For example, in 2004 the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Wangari Maathai, a very impressive woman from Kenya who earned her Ph. D. in vet medicine and became a professor and later chair of her department but then went on later to become the founder of the Greenbelt Movement, which trained African women who were uneducated and impoverished and generally undervalued by their society—not foresters--to grow trees and then plant them by the millions to fight desertification, control erosion, protect the people's access to parkland in cities, and to provide a source of food for all to share, all of which helps prevent conflicts and even wars over resources. (153 words)

### Sample #1, Pruned Version:

Recent Nobel Peace Prize nominations have demonstrated that peace can be achieved by unexpected people using unconventional methods. For example, Dr. Wangari Maathai, a Kenyan woman, won in 2004 for founding the Greenbelt Movement, which trained women who lacked education and resources to grow trees and plant them by the millions to provide food and fight desertification, erosion, and loss of parkland. The Nobel Committee judged that this movement helps prevent conflicts over resources. (74 words)

### Points to note with this sample:

- You can reduce wordiness by breaking up long sentences.
- Using the passive voice is sometimes justified, as when you want to shift emphasis away from the doer to the action, and it can reduce wordiness by omitting needless actors (e.g. “Many workmen built Chartres Cathedral in the Middle Ages” could be changed to “Chartres Cathedral was built in the Middle Ages” since the workmen do not need to be emphasized.)
- Choosing which details to omit will depend on what you want to emphasize. Because the theme is *unconventional* methods of waging peace, I didn't include details about Wangari Maathai's work as an activist using nonviolent protests to defy a ruling dictator, Daniel Arap Moi. That is the sort of work we *expect* from peace-makers, not tree-planting.

### **Sample #2, Wordy Version:**

Similarly, Muhammad Yunus won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006. Dr. Yunus is another professor who achieved great things outside the classroom. He was originally a professor of Economics in Bangladesh. Yunus was nominated for this prize because he founded Grameen Bank. This bank revolutionized banking by offering loans to the poorest of the poor. Regular banks would not offer loans to them. Regular banks want to make as much profit as possible. So they loan money to people who are already wealthy. This is because wealthy people are believed to be more likely to pay back their loans. But the Grameen Bank is very different. It was not set up to make big profits. It was set up to give very poor people the resources they need to climb out of poverty. Ironically, the very poor people—mostly women—who borrowed from the Grameen Bank were *more* reliable than “regular” borrowers at for-profit banks. Grameen Bank had an average of 96% repayment. Furthermore, its borrowers started businesses that made them self-sufficient. The Nobel Committee gave the peace prize to Yunus because they believed that we will never have world peace until the masses of poor people at the bottom of society can rise to be self-supporting. The Committee decided that, Grameen Bank showed that “even the poorest of the poor can work to bring about their own development.” (229 words)

### **Sample #2, Pruned Version:**

Similarly, Dr. Muhammad Yunus, originally a professor of economics in Bangladesh, won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006 for founding Grameen Bank, which revolutionized banking by offering small loans to the desperately poor. Regular for-profit banks would not help these people because they seemed like poor risks. But Grameen Bank aimed not to make big profits but to give poor people the resources they need to climb out of poverty. Ironically, Yunus found them to be *more* reliable, with an average of 96% repayment, than “regular” borrowers at for-profit banks. Furthermore, these women started micro-businesses that made them self-sufficient. The Nobel Committee recognized Yunus because “lasting peace cannot be achieved unless large population groups find ways . . . to break out of poverty,” and because Grameen Bank showed that “even the poorest of the poor can work to bring about their own development.” (144 words)

### Points to note with this sample:

- You can reduce wordiness by combining short, choppy sentences.
- Adding too many transitional words and phrases can create wordiness, but using too few produces choppiness and often reduces clarity.
- Sometimes quoting directly can be more concise than paraphrasing.