



Radical advice

REDUCE YOUR EMAIL INBOX BY WRITING SHORTER EMAILS

Every so often I write a column giving tips about how to reduce the size of your e-mail inbox. In past columns I have suggested unsubscribing from unwanted email lists instead of just deleting unwanted emails; or moving emails to folders to read later.

This column will give you different advice about how to cut down the size of your inbox. It is also advice about how to communicate better.

My advice is a new and radical solution to the bloated inbox problem: Write shorter emails. Convince your friends and associates to do the same.

Now, that sounds like a simple piece of advice, one that should be easy to follow. Trust me, it may be simple, but it's not easy.

For 15 years I have communicated with trial attorneys, mostly via email. Without question, trial lawyers write long emails, often filled with unnecessary, even useless words and phrases. These emails read as though the lawyers are charging by the word and need to pad their bill. That leads to emails that do little to communicate clearly and are often ineffective.

I thought about this recently when I saw a quote (from an athlete, not a trial lawyer) that read: "This is really kind of a dream come true."

When I read the quote, the copy editor in me changed it to read: "This is a dream come true." Suddenly a vague, passive statement became strong and clear. But athletes aren't unique, trial lawyers are just as guilty of using unnecessary words, and they should know better.

I want to acknowledge three experts on how to write and communicate better. Verlyn Klinkenborg taught literature and creative writing, was an editor of *The New York Times* and wrote the book *Several Short Sentences About Writing*. Diana Urban is an author who also works in digital marketing for startups. Benjamin Dreyer is copy chief for Random House and author of the book *Dreyer's English*. I have borrowed suggestions from each of

them about how to write shorter, clearer pieces, including emails.

Klinkenborg begins his book with a preface that is an outstanding way to begin changing your writing habits. He writes: "Here, in short, is what I want to tell you. Know what each sentence says, what it doesn't say and what it implies. Of these, the hardest is knowing what each sentence actually says. Short sentences aren't hard to make. The difficulty is forcing yourself to keep them short. There are innumerable ways to write badly. The usual way is making sentences that don't say what you think they do. What can the reader possibly believe? Your sentences or you?"

Klinkenborg talks about how we've been taught to write, and his lessons are especially true for trial lawyers. He says that we have been taught that short sentences are childish and that you'd like to think your education has carried you well past short sentences. "But you've been delivered into a wilderness of false assumptions and bad habits, a desert of jargon and weak constructions, a land of linguistic barbarism, a place where it's nearly impossible to write with clarity or directness, without clichés or meaningless phrases." Klinkenborg says writing that way makes you "sound quite grown up, quite authoritative, in the manner of college professors and journalists and experts in every field." He then asks: "How well do they write? How much do you enjoy reading them?" Klinkenborg's advice is clearly good for trial lawyers.

Klinkenborg, Dreyer and Urban all talk about the benefits of eliminating unnecessary and useless words in sentences or emails.

Klinkenborg says "Writing short sentences will help you write strong, balanced sentences of any length. A crowded sentence betrays the writer's worry that the reader won't follow the prose if parted by a period. To make short sentences, you need to remove every unnecessary word."

Dreyer and Urban go a step further with their advice. They share unnecessary

words that should never appear in your writing or your emails.

The first sentence in the first chapter of Dreyer's book reads: Here's your first challenge: Go a week without writing:

very	in fact	of course
rather	just	surely
really	so	actually
quite	pretty	that said

Dreyer says if you meet his challenge "you will at the end of that week be a considerably better writer than you were at the beginning."

Diana Urban went even further in 2015 when she wrote a blog post entitled *43 Words You Should Cut from Your Writing Immediately*

She said, "There are certain words you should delete to make the text stronger and cut your word count."

In addition to Dreyer's choices of unnecessary words, here are a few more from Diana Urban and a couple from me. I'm sure you have some of your own, too:

that	truly	probably
then	kind of	basically
totally	honestly	virtually
completely	literally	somewhat
absolutely	definitely	somehow
	certainly	

All are words we can do without when writing emails, memos or even magazine columns. Try eliminating these words from your emails and see if their advice works for you.

In 2020, CAALA's Education Committee plans to present at least one seminar with tips on how to be a better writer. I will share with them the thoughts of Verlyn Klinkenborg, Benjamin Dreyer and Diana Urban. I also will strive to write shorter emails by eliminating unnecessary words and phrases. If you do the same, guess what? We will reduce the size of our email inboxes. 📧