Compression (Technical Writing)

Overview

In technical writing, compression is the reduction of the word count while maintaining or improving clarity. It is not chronological compression, nor is it merely sentence compression in the lexical analysis sense. This technique forces the writer to include only the most relevant material and utilize a syntax and word choice appropriate to the body of text.

Examples

Fiction example [1]

Original: "It was a simple coincidence, of course, like many events that make us smile and which we forget every month of our lives. To me it seemed to contain some hidden significance, and I could not clear my mind of the impression. When my wife came back from the living room I turned to her with the book in my hand, having opened to the page on which I had been reading only the night before, and I held it out to her with a sort of boyish expectation that she was going to be immediately interested also."

Compressed: "It was a simple coincidence, like thousands of events that make us smile and then forget about; but I could not clear my mind of the impression that it contained some hidden significance. When my wife returned from the kitchen, I held the book out to her, opened at the page where I had been reading the night before. I felt boyishly expectant that she would immediately be interested also."

Sentence Example [2]

Original: "Have you ever had the thought while you were proofreading your paper that the sentences seemed too long due to the fact that they were too wordy, making the overall paper that you wrote confusing and frustrating?"

Compressed: "Have you ever had the thought while you were proofreading your paper that the sentences seemed too long because they were too wordy, making the overall paper confusing and frustrating?"

Other Examples [3]

The gamekeeper preferred to make television documentaries *about wildlife*.	The gamekeeper made *wildlife* documentaries.
She used to look at me *in a pensive manner*.	She used to look at me *pensively*.

Methodology
- Switch to active voice wherever possible. [4]
- Identify a purpose for each sentence, or even each phrase. If it doesn't actively contribute to the message of the text, delete it or combine it with another such passage.
- Convert prepositional phrases to adverbs. [4]

Disadvantages

Compression can be time-consuming. An author may feel that cutting out any details at all would be detrimental to ease of reading and comprehension. They may feel that every single detail is critical to the context. Other times an author will feel a need to compress their work further, without knowing what to remove. [1]

Another risk is losing formality as a passage is compressed. For example, a government sign saying "Look out, potholes!" doesn't sound like it came from a government body, as compared to "Be advised, there are multiple potholes ahead." The first one is obviously shorter, but may not carry the tone the poster of the sign wished to convey.

See Also

Concision
Awkwardness
Run-ons

References

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[3] Bly, R. W. (1998, June). Avoid These Technical Writing Mistakes. Retrieved from http://web.csulb.edu/~tgredig/docs/TechnicalWriting1.pdf
[4] Sentence Compression Examples. (n.d.). Retrieved from http://homepages.inf.ed.ac.uk/mlap/cgi-exp/examples1.html