**From:** *On Writing Well*, by William Zinnser:

**Clutter Excerpt**

**Fighting clutter is like fighting weeds-the writer is always slightly behind**. New varieties sprout overnight, and by noon they are part of American speech. Consider what Nixon's aide John Dean accomplished in just one day of testimony on TV during the Watergate hearings. The next day everyone in America was saying "at this point in time" instead of "now."

**Consider all the prepositions that are draped onto verbs that don't need any help**. We no longer head committees. We head them up. We don't face problems anymore. We face up to them when we can free up a few minutes. A small detail, you may say-not worth bothering about. It is worth bothering about. The game is won or lost on hundreds of small details. Writing improves in direct ratio to the number of things we can keep out of it that shouldn't be there. "Up" in "free up" shouldn't be there. Can we picture anything being freed *up?* To write clean English you must examine every word you put on paper. **You'll find a surprising number of words that don't serve any purpose.**

Clutter is the laborious phrase that has pushed out the short word that means the same thing. Even before John Dean, people had stopped saying now. 'They were saying "at the present time, or currently," or "presently" (which means "soon"). Yet the idea can always be expressed by "now" to mean the immediate moment ("Now I can see him"), or by "today" to mean the historical present ("Today prices are high"), or simply by a form of the verb "to be" ("It is raining"). **There's no need to say, "At the present time we are experiencing precipitation."**

**Clutter is the ponderous euphemism** that turns a slum into a depressed socioeconomic area, a salesman into a marketing representative, garbage collectors into waste-disposal personnel and the town dump into the volume reduction unit. I think of Bill Mauldin's cartoon showing two hoboes riding a freight train. One of them says, "I started as a simple bum, but now I'm hard-core unemployed."

Is there any way to recognize clutter at a glance? Here's a device that my students at Yale found helpful. **I would put brackets around any component in a piece of writing that wasn't doing useful work.** Often it was just one word that got bracketed: the unnecessary preposition that is appended to a verb ("order up"), or the adverb that carries the same meaning as the verb ("smile happily"), or the adjective that states a known fact ("tall skyscraper"). Often my brackets surrounded the little qualifiers that weaken any sentence they inhabit ("a bit," "sort of'), or the announcements like "I'm tempted to say," or the phrases like in a sense that don't mean anything at all. Sometimes my brackets surrounded an entire sentence-the one that essentially repeats what the previous sentence said, or that says something that readers don't need to know or can figure out for themselves. Most first drafts can be cut by 50 percent without losing any information or losing the author’s voice.

**Look for the clutter in your writing and prune it ruthlessly.** Be grateful for everything you can throw away. Reexamine each sentence that you put on paper. Is every word doing new work? Can any thought be expressed with more economy? Is anything pompous or pretentious or faddish? Are you hanging on to something useless just because you think it's beautiful?   
Simplify, simplify.

**Laborious**: requiring much unwelcome, often tedious effort.

**Euphemism**: a word or phrase used in place of a term that might be considered too direct, harsh, unpleasant, or offensive.

**Ruthless**: having or showing no pity or mercy.

**Pompous**: having an excessive sense of self-importance.

**Pretentious**: extravagantly and consciously showy or glamorous.

**Faddish**: briefly fashionable

**From: *On Writing Well*, by William Zinsser:**

**Simplicity Excerpt**

Clutter is the disease of American writing. We are a society strangling in unnecessary words, circular constructions, pompous frills and meaningless jargon.

**But the secret of good writing is to strip every sentence to its cleanest components**. Every word that serves no function, every long word that could be a short word, every adverb that carries the same meaning that's already in the verb, every passive construction that leaves the reader unsure of who is doing what-these are the thousand and one adulterants that weaken the strength of a sentence.

It won't do to say that the reader is too dumb or too lazy to keep pace with the train of thought. If the reader is lost, it's usually because the writer hasn't been careful enough. The carelessness can take any number of forms. Perhaps a sentence is **so excessively cluttered** that the reader, hacking through the verbiage, simply doesn't know what it means. Perhaps a sentence has been **so shoddily constructed that the reader could read it in any of several ways.** Perhaps the writer has **switched pronouns in midsentence, or has switched tenses, so the reader loses track of who is talking or when the action took place**. Perhaps Sentence B is **not a logical sequel** to Sentence A--the writer, in whose head the connection is clear, hasn't bothered to provide the missing link. Perhaps the writer has **used an important word incorrectly** by not taking the trouble to look it up. The writer may think that "sanguine" and "sanguinary" mean the same thing, but the difference is a bloody big one. The reader can only infer (speaking of big differences) what the writer is trying to imply.

**Writers must therefore constantly ask: What am I trying to say?** Surprisingly often they don't know. Then they must look at what they have written and ask: Have I said it? Is it clear to someone encountering the subject for the first time? If it's not, that's because some fuzz has worked its way into the machinery. The clear writer is someone clearheaded enough to see this stuff for what it is: fuzz.

I don't mean that some people are born clearheaded and are therefore natural writers, whereas others are naturally fuzzy and will never write well. Thinking clearly is a conscious act that writers must force upon themselves, just as if they were embarking on any other project that requires logic: adding up a laundry list or doing an algebra problem**. Good writing doesn't come naturally, though most people obviously think it does.** The professional writer is constantly being bearded by strangers who say they'd like to "try a little writing sometime"—meaning when they retire from their real profession, like insurance or real estate. Or they say, "I could write a book about that." I doubt it.

**Writing is hard work. A clear sentence is no accident. Very few sentences come out right the first time, or even the third time. Remember this as a consolation in moments of despair. If you find that writing is hard, it's because it *is* hard. It's one of the hardest things that people do.**

**Component**: a part of something.

**Adulterant**: impurity.

**Verbiage**: excess of words.

**Shoddily**: poorly or carelessly made or done.

**Sanguine**: cheerfully optimistic.

**Sanguinary**: involving bloodshed.

**Infer**: conclude something from reasoning.

**Imply**: to make something understood without expressing it directly.

**Consolation**: source of comfort.