

Short content - for print and web -

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EDITING TOPIC - short - for magazines and web. Plus short features that allow "grazing material" for readers.

SLIDE - Objective: Overview of this session: We will focus on editing short content for the web and print. The session will include the **role and importance** of short pieces, and will also give **tools for excellence in editing short pieces**.

SLIDE - History of short pieces in print - "filler"

Filler— Short informational stories or advertisements, usually timeless, used to fill small spaces where needed.

"Filler." Fillers were originally designed to do exactly what the name implies: Fill up space. Back in the "olden" days (30 years ago), editors sent their articles off to the typesetter. The typesetter manually retyped *all* that information, and printed it out in long, long strips. These strips were the width of the publication's columns, whatever that width happened to be.

The strips then went to the magazine's art director, who would paste them up on "boards" (big sheets about the weight of greeting card stock, marked with lines like graph paper; for magazines, each sheet accommodated a two-page spread). Armed with the typeset copy and any photos or illustrations that were going to be included in the article, the art director "laid out" the issue.

Sometimes, articles would end up too long for the allotted space, which is why, when you finally saw an article in print, you'd discover that entire paragraphs had been cut from it. But quite often, articles would be too short. You'd have a few inches left over. And that's where fillers came in. Editors would stock up on short pieces, such as anecdotes, quotes, light poetry, recipes, tips, "household hints," etc., that could be plugged into these holes. Often, they'd be typeset and ready to go. The art director would simply rummage around for a piece of "filler" that was precisely the right number of *inches* to fit into the gap. (Content really didn't matter at this point!)

So - historically - the word "filler" in magazines really did mean unimportant, extra content. Used to make everything "fit" on the page.

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Slide - Short does not mean Unimportant -

Unlike the origin of the word "filler" to mean "short" - short no longer means unimportant. Short pieces perform an important function in content.

Web content - short is a hook to engage the reader, and get them to click through to more content, or related content - the blurbs that go with an article are as important as the article - because otherwise no one is reading the article.

What you will also notice online with content that is designed to motivate action (clicking for more) - often there are even short pieces that aren't part of the actual article that are on the page - because the web algorithms tell the content producers, that if you like this content, you might also like other, related (or even seemingly unrelated) content.

Digital Newsletters - these are often full of short content - information for the reader, a few lines to get someone to click through and read more - various topics so the reader will find at least one thing that they want to read more of.

Print - Short pieces are often back of the book - after the feature articles OR maybe one short page up front by TOC. But they are still an important part of the overall content of the magazine

Invest time and energy in the quality of short - has to be the very best - in a short package. Short is not an after-thought. Spend time developing great short pieces for your publication.

When we call short pieces "filler" which makes them sound unimportant, which is not true.

The short pieces in our magazine, usually near the front and back of the book, are important hooks that entice our readers to stay in the magazine, to come back for more, to plan to dive into the overall content.

So we need to pay as much information to the short pieces as we do to the main course.

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SLIDE - Various functions of short today - online and in print

- eye catching - - with pull-quotes, sidebars - these kind of short graphics pull the eye into an article. In the same way - short articles can be eye-catching. They also give your designer potentially more space to design a compelling package of content.
- digest - short news bits.
- teaser - short leading to long (particularly online - excerpt for an article or blog post)
- resting space (more for print than online) - Discipleship journal used to have a beautiful page in the page - designed to tear out and hang on your wall -
- filler - yes - sometimes short is actually helpful in the magazine layout - so short content can be used to help fill up a page, but that doesn't mean that the content is unimportant.

As editors, we often put lots of time and energy into what we consider the “meat” of the magazine, the longer articles, the features, the interviews, the thematic focus.

We need to affirm the purpose of short and decide to invest in it. Because you want the quality of your WHOLE magazine or digital newsletter to be excellent - you don't want excellent feature articles and mediocre short content. It is all part of the package for the reader. And different readers are going to approach content differently.

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SLIDE - eye-catching

Show some examples – FullFill – QuickFill.

lots of places for your eye to engage with the page - a survey, 2 lists, a couple of quotes, some practical ideas.

Slide - teaser - teasers are extremely important for online content - people have to be motivated to click and read the whole article. we'll talk more about this later - but teasers are not an after-thought - they require effort and are worth it.

Slide - Digest - these are short news bits - they differ from teasers in that each of them is a complete thought - sort of like headlines + a few more details. They help a busy reader gather information quickly.

These are from The Economist – - another thing that the economist does is they do a short version of their feature article. digest on the topic then the full thematic article. They have several ways to hook the reader on the topic.

Repurposing - short content can be repurposed content from a longer piece - perhaps there is a great story that was used either online or in print, that has several components. Sometimes you can trim that story into several stories - to repurpose longer content into a series of short pieces, not necessarily connected, but to use great content in a different setting.

SLIDE - Short - isn't necessarily new

Key feature of short is word choice - every word matters

Of course, now twitter is the ultimate in “short” form, with 140 characters. But actually, in many of our languages, poetry is the ultimate historical short form. Whether it’s Haiku from Japan or Ghazal (ghuzzle pronunciation) in Arabic, Persian, Urdu and Bengali poetry, poetry by nature is very economical with words, choosing carefully each word in a couplet or refrain, to convey a feeling, idea, emotion or other truth.

And in Biblical language, there are poetic sections in the wisdom literature – Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, along with Psalms which were poetic as well. Proverbs are short phrases.

- 6 word memoirs – a modern poetic form, but the discipline can help you form potent word pictures.
 - My heart broke when yours stopped.
 - I still make tea for two.

Short is all about word choice - even if poetry is not your genre (I don't consider myself a poet) - learn from poetry to improve your word choice. I went to a poetry workshop at a recent conference, just to stretch my thinking.

Fountain pen - Neil deGrasse Tyson, an astrophysicist quoted in the WSJ

"I collect fountain pens. If I'm giving a speech, I'll write it in ink fist. If you look at memorable speeches of the past, the rhythms happen to be in five - to seven-word pulses. Then you learn that a single dip of a quill got you five or seven words. It may be that the rhythm was shaped by how much ink could sit in the

shaft of a quill pen. As I write, I'm conscious of this. When you give a speech, you don't want your sentences to be too long. "

Slide - types of short features

Here are some ideas for short features that you can include on a grazing page:

- Tweets
- Poem
- Thoughtful or thought-provoking phrase
- Fact
- Quotation
- Bible verse
- Digest – summary of a larger idea
- Question
- List with a couple of items
- Idea starters
- A short story - yes - sometimes a story can be told in a few words - and that's it.

Discipline of clear, focused communication

Even though I have hopefully made the case that short isn't just useless filler, as in the old days, short content is useful -- you can collect short ideas to help you when you are putting together a page of short, or when you need additional content. Just like the old typesetters used to have a drawer of short pieces.

As you are reading, keep a file with short pieces (including sources) so you have something to pull from when you are creating or editing short pieces.

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Slide - Editing short pieces - some of same principles as long

Editing a short piece:

- **Focus** – this is the same issue with any length- clear concise ideas that connect with a reader and are memorable. The big idea needs to be clearly articulated and stripped of any extra concepts that will send the reader on bunny trails. Often a long article will have 2-3 big ideas, but a short article needs to truly focus on 1 main thing. All the other information might be interesting, but it isn't essential to the one main thing.
Sometimes a longer article can be re-purposed as a short piece - by trimming out all the extras and selecting one big idea to emphasize. We will do this in an exercise at the end.
- **Structure** – again – this may sound simplistic to say that a short article or essay has a beginning, a middle and an end, but that is true of any piece of writing. It's just that with a very short piece, the writer has to be very quick from the beginning to the middle to the end, they can't linger and elaborate too much. Every good story has a character who wants something and overcomes conflict to get it. This is the essence of every story, and our human story, so the structure of short is the same as long, but as you are editing short pieces, particularly if you are trimming something that is longer to fit a short piece - there are several techniques to help you - first of all - how much description to include.
- **Description** – how much is enough – this is a balance, because if you trim out all description, then the article will be boring. You need enough detail or the story to be interesting and unique, but to cut description and detail that don't add to the main point of the story. Be surgical and cut cut cut.
Once I was working with a new writer who was struggling with description and was always exceeding the word count for her articles. Her point in the article was a lasting friendship that had started in childhood, so she was describing a childhood scene that was indicative of the friendship. Later in the article she talked about how this person had been killed in a plane crash. It was compelling detail, but I had to have her cut it out of the short article because it was description that was distracting to the reader, not helpful. Sometimes it is hard to get writers to cut these kind of side stories, but I always tell them that they can save that story for some other article where it will fit the main point better.

- **Implication** – everything doesn't need to be spelled out in great detail. If you look at the 6 word memoir, "I still make tea for two". There is a poignant voice in this, this person is alone but they used to be together with someone, maybe a spouse who died, but it is all by implication in this very short piece, however, it catches the reader, makes them think and feel something, and to linger over the words.

Slide - Writing teasers/excerpts:

- ▶ Blog software or social media software might default to 1st sentence. Of course, your first sentence should be compelling, as we talked about last week when talking about leads. But your first sentence may or may not be the best teaser for an article. Jeremy also talked about this in his headlines evening workshop - and he has great expertise in this area.
- ▶ Take time to think through compelling excerpt. It may be a combination of the first sentence and a compelling thought from further on in the article.
- ▶ Some online content is "click-bait" – your article should **deliver what is promised** in the teaser/excerpt. It doesn't really do you any good for people to click on something and then be annoyed with the content because it didn't deliver what you expected.

You can actually test this in your online content - what kind of titles and teasers get the best open and click rates - by looking at your google analytics. See what people are clicking on - and work to make more of your content inviting to click on. If you are doing e-newsletters - you can see what links people click on - I know constant contact does this - and I assume mail chimp does as well.

SLIDE - throw-away words to eliminate

When you are editing a piece for short, impactful content, you want to get rid of all the extra words.

- Word choice – concise and clear – vocabularly matters, using just the right words, rather than too many words.
- Eliminate unnecessary words – really, basically , kind of, sort of, type of, actually, generally, definitely
Also eliminate repetitive wording – words that have similar meaning and don't build on the content
Omit redundant pairs – "completely finish", "true facts", "unexpected surprise", "sudden crisis" – we sometimes just add too many words to make a point.
Illogical modifiers – "very unique" – the word unique says it all, doesn't need a modifier

These are just a few examples - but in editing or writing short pieces, every word has to matter.

And I think the discipline of editing short - can also make your long content better - because you don't want extra words in long content either - long is just longer because it is addressing a larger idea.

Slide - How short is short:

This depends on the standards for your publication. If you look at different magazines - there are different styles - Atlantic Monthly has long essays. Other magazines might have shorter articles.

Think about screens -

Web - above the "fold" - without scrolling

Web – short articles – less than 300 words, words on a screen are important.

teasers - 30 words (might depend on your software - in wordpress it is a certain # of characters.

Smartphone, fewer words visible. - 100 or less

Magazines – 25 – 250 words.

SLIDE - why short matters

- catch attention - you want the reader to want to read more

- engage the reader - perhaps they start with a short article, but it is such great content, they pause to read a longer, meatier article.

- you want them to read more - this is true on the web and in print. On the web we can measure this - how many pages they click on, how long on a page. in print, we don't necessarily know, but we can do surveys to learn reader behavior.

Short - with quality - it matters.

Try it out

Let's say you want to have a page with short pieces on it - either as part of a digital or print newsletter.

If the topic is Prayer - what are some short pieces you can include either on a page or scattered through your magazine.

- verse of scripture -
- quote from someone about prayer / or an actual prayer
- book info on a resource for prayer
- a couple of ideas for someone to practice in prayer

Practice trimming something to make it shorter:

Chicago - world citizen article

Now - there is nothing wrong with this article - it is 1400 words, and was a web story so there was no word count limit (which can sometimes be a problem). But we wanted to repurpose it as a shorter story. So for that we had to make choices in what to include. This story follows one young man's testimony from high school, through college, to career. So one way to cut would be to just pull out a piece of the story that focuses on one part of this young man's life. His college story, for example.

But there are other ways to trim - we don't just have to cut this chronologically. Part of his story is that he grew up in a multicultural environment, and was comfortable ministering to people in a diverse setting, so that could be a thread pulling all the way through, eliminating some of the details that aren't about that. There might be one piece that you could keep from his high school that illustrates the multicultural leaning, then pull that together with his ministry in Chicago.

Also - chronological isn't always the most interesting way to tell a short story. You might want to start with a compelling piece from later on, then flash back to include a little bit of his background (the birthday party with friends from singapore).

Practical Takeaway-

What role does SHORT have in your content right now?

Is there a place to upgrade how you are using short content and improve the quality of your short pieces?

Do you have a collection of short pieces that you can use in your content - how are you going to start collecting short pieces?