Writing and Editing for Eloquence

By Jolie Hobbs

Writing concisely is advice every writer has received. It is among the primary *goals* of editing: clarity, *conciseness*, comprehension, consistency, and accuracy.

But what does it mean to be concise? Does it mean we should cut words during editing to adhere to a specified word count? If so, how does that change our writing style? Think about Dickens's books—how could we distinguish Dickens's prose from Hemingway's were not for the abundance or scarcity of words?

Conciseness is a misunderstood word in the context of writing. Possibly, it is the wrong word altogether for what writers should aim to accomplish on behalf of their readers.

Word count is important, but only when adhering to genre conventions relevant to reader expectations. Readers who enjoy thrillers aren't as likely to pick up a 500-page novel as someone who enjoys history would be. But that isn't what we are discussing; concise writing isn't about word count.

Being concise doesn't mean slicing and dicing until your work gets boiled down to a bland, indiscernible narrative. It is about selecting words that transport your reader to understand your meaning with intention. Words are powerful, and unnecessary words can diminish readers' ability to connect with your intention. Consider this example:

"She muttered under her breath as she hurried down the soggy path."

What is wrong with this, you ask? The answer is nothing. However, it is not

the most precise or eloquent approach from a reader's perspective. After all, muttering is always done "under your breath, " right? A more eloquent approach would be:

> "She muttered as she hurried down the soggy path."

That might be too boring for the writer, but it isn't for the reader; their experience matters most. There is no benefit to forcing the reader's attention to linger on this sentence any longer than it takes for them to experience your intent.

Earlier, I stated that being concise was a primary "goal" of editors, which is an important distinction from it being a *rule*. The reading experience and readers' expectations are paramount in writing. For instance, a romance writer wants to draw out the first kiss so readers can savor the moment. In romance, the steamy bits should be sipped and savored by readers. For example:

> "He cupped her face in both of his hands and, pulling her to him, kissed her with tender passion."

Let's start with his hands. What else would he cup her face with? A spoon? Also, using the word "hands" implies he used both since we only have two. There are obvious ways to make the sentence more concise, but at what cost?

Still, cropping out too many *technically* unnecessary words for brevity alone deflates the reading experience and would not meet readers' expectations for the kissing scene. Someone who loves romance wouldn't want to read this:

> "He cupped her face and kissed her."

Good writers know how to achieve the right balance for a great reading experience. Here is a subtle yet more eloquent and equally savory revision:

"He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her with tender passion."

The latter revision eliminates two words, rendering it more *concise*, but that isn't what matters. The prize is to write precisely what you intend readers to convey in the way you intend readers to experience it. That's not conciseness—it's *eloquence*. Certainly, achieving the best results often results in fewer words. However, good editing results in more eloquent writing, irrespective of word count.