

17th March 2024

Brevity

**“Amplification is the vice of modern oratory ...
Speeches measured by the hour, die with the hour.”**

Thomas Jefferson, *Letter to David Harding, 1824*

Before I leave the subject of conciseness, précis, succinctness, and the like, it's worthwhile sharing something a friend drew to my attention recently. It's a memo from Winston Churchill, and it's worth quoting in its entirety.

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SECRET

9 August 1940 - WAR CABINET

BREVITY

Memorandum by the Prime Minister.

To do our work, we all have to read a mass of papers. Nearly all of them are far too long. This wastes time, while energy has to be spent in looking for the essential points. I therefore ask my colleagues and their staffs to see to it that their Reports are shorter.

- i. The aim should be Reports which set out the main points in a series of short, crisp paragraphs.
- ii. If a Report relies on detailed analysis of some complicated factors, or on statistics, these should be set out in an Appendix.
- iii. Often an occasion is best met by submitting not a full-dress Report, but an Aide-memoire consisting of headings only, which can be expanded orally if needed.
- iv. Let us have an end of such phrases as these, "It is also of importance to bear in mind the following considerations ...", or "Consideration should be given to the possibility of carrying into effect ..." Most of these woolly phrases are mere padding, which can be left out altogether, or replaced by a single word. Let us not shrink from using the short expressive phrase, even if it is conversational.

Reports drawn up on the lines I propose may at first seem rough as compared with the flat surface of officialese jargon. But the saving in time will be great, while the discipline of setting out the real points concisely will be an aid to clearer thinking.

W.S.C. 10 Downing Street. 9th August 1940

Memo to self

a) Pin above on noticeboard above desk. b) Remember: what applies to the written word, also applies to public speaking. c) Pass on to others.

T.J.G. Port Seton. 17th March 2024.

A prayer for today

I'll be brief, Lord. It's me again ... Amen