

## Wallop Your Wordcount

1. Before you begin whittling down those pages, let's **assess** where you are in **the process**. Think holistically about the needs of the project and discuss for a few moments with a partner here. (You're also welcome to freewrite.)

a. Are you still writing the **first draft**, but you've realized it's shaping up to be too long for industry standards? [How Many Words in a Novel? A Word Count Guide for 18 Book Genres \(thewritelife.com\)](https://thewritelife.com/2018/05/15/how-many-words-in-a-novel-a-word-count-guide-for-18-book-genres/)

b. Have you **completed** the **manuscript and/or already edited once for overall arc**?

c. Have you **revised a few times**, but you're still plagued by a high word count?

d. Are you concerned at the micro level, meaning that you're hoping to reduce needless blow by blows or speech tags and/or polish each sentence to improve cadence?

e. Are you here because YOU think you're wordy? Or has someone else told you this?

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## 2. Big picture strategies:

- a. **Outline.** This doesn't need to be extensive. Your best bet is to use the *Save the Cat* beat sheets. We won't do that in this quick session, but here's a link. [And then here's another.](#)
- b. **Cut (OMG, Kendra, really? .... Yes!!)** any scene that does not further the plot or character arc. Work through, scene by scene, w/ a few lines of summary, comparing it against your story arc to deduce this. Or you can use a more complicated system like [the Story Grid](#).
- c. Ideally, every scene should serve at least two functions. For example, plot and characterization, character arc and a comedic break, plot and necessary backstory, etc. Thus, you'll want to cut or combine the best elements of your "extra" scenes. Don't be afraid to summarize info when needed or combine scenes.

- d. Donate, don't delete. Let the beloved content become promo or reader magnet material and you'll have a much easier time letting it go.
- e. **Trust your reader and cut out the unnecessary blow by blows** such as *she opened the drawer, removed the knife, and began cutting up the pie*. Just say she cut the dang pie! Unless, of course, instead of opening a drawer, *she lifted up one foot to remove a switchblade from the heel of an old bowling shoe she found at Goodwill* before cutting that pie. If you trust the reader, you'll also **avoid wordy transitions from one scene to the next, avoid the need to explain why characters didn't make alternative choices or deductions, and avoid constant repetitions of the characters' motivations.**
- f. **If you're still on your first draft, don't edit right now.** Just keep writing. Don't do anything to slow the process! You'll revise later — (spoiler!) — many, *many* times.

### 3. Smaller picture strategies/line editing overview:

Reduce filtering

Reduce qualifiers

Reduce prepositional phrases and dependent descriptive clauses

Remove overused constructions or repeated words

Use seek/control F to fix these previously stated issues

Condense repetitive/weak dialogue

**Tip 1: Reducing filtering**, the process of relating the characters' perceptions through an extra layer (filter) of narrative distance as the camera pans. Filtering creates distance, pushing the character further from their experiences and pushing the reader further from the character. Filtering happens when we use verbs that show perception — *feel, see, hear, touch, smell, taste, perceive, notice, realize, know*, etc., to say a character perceived something happen rather than just saying it happened.

An example: "Boffo *heard* the rain pound on the roof" vs, "The rain pounded on the roof."

Ex: "The sound made Boffo feel lonely" vs. "It was a lonely sound."

A non-filtered account might even combine these: "The lonely sound of rain pounding on the roof reached Boffo's ears" or "Boffo felt lonely as the rain pounded the roof."

Here's an example of overly filtered writing:

"I *saw* their brown eyes that I *had known* I was missing so much. As they walked closer, I *heard* them sigh. As I *watched*, they took out their phone. Soon the sound of music *reached my ears*..."

**Tip:** When revising, try making what was heard, or who made the noise, the grammatical subject.

Ex: "I heard the sound of birdsongs."

Revision: "Birdsongs fluttered through the leaves."

Revision: "At dawn, birds traded songs like kids playing tag."

## **Tip 2: Reduce qualifiers**

Qualifiers are words or phrases that "soften" statements or that create a *sort of* wiggle room.

Writers use and overuse qualifiers and modifiers for many reasons.

They're insecure/don't want to commit: "I think it's *likely* a *somewhat* important idea."

They're developing narrative voice: "Boffo was *a titch* lonely these days despite already being a *slightly* misanthropic clown."

They're developing character voice: "I don't *actually* get why my parents don't just divorce! It's *really kind of* irritating to *constantly* listen to them *basically* ignore each other."

Lastly, writers often lapse into patterns when drafting and then forget to edit!

Other common qualifiers, related to distancers, are the words "seem, feel, look, appear, sound, etc." For example, "Vel seems crabby," indicates that something about Vel's demeanor demonstrates sadness, yet the writer is unwilling to commit to saying she *is* crabby. Likewise, saying "the rain sounded lonely" requires less commitment than "the lonely rain."

Try revising this sentence, or one from your own writing, with fewer distancers and qualifiers.

"I *saw* their brown eyes that I *had known* I was missing so much. As they walked closer, I *heard* them sigh. *As I watched*, they took out their phone. Soon the sound of music *reached my ears...*"

## **Tip 3: Reduce prepositional phrases and descriptive dependent clauses**

A **prepositional phrase** begins with a preposition and ends with a noun.

Ex: "across the highwire," "under the haybale," "inside Boffo's shiny red nose"

Your first drafts will include tons of prepositional phrases, because your writer's brain is literally (almost) constructing the staging of the scenes, people, and objects. But when possible, streamline sentences by turning ~~the noun in the phrase~~ the phrase's noun into a modifier.

Ex: "He replaced the trap in the sink"/ "He replaced the sink trap"

Ex: "They went to a show in the big top"/ "They caught big top show"

**Descriptive dependent clauses** also modify. As clauses, they contain a subject and a verb, unlike mere phrases.

Ex: “That he swiped from the jugglers”

Ex: “Who never saw it coming”

Ex: “What/that they had worked so hard to create”

All right, it’s game time. Let’s edit this.

*“In the morning, Boffo drank his coffee with tons of cream that he had swiped from the jugglers while they practiced their jumping jacks in the tent that was set aside for acrobatics.”*

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#### Tip 4: Remove overused constructions and repeated words

When done intentionally, repetition creates beautiful echo. Consider these poetic lines:

“The sounds of soft rain pattered across worn floorboards, chasing Sati toward the open doorway.”

Or: “The rain splattered across worn floorboards, chasing Sati across the floor.”

Here the unfortunate repetition of “floor” sounds dissatisfying, and the clearly unedited repetition of “across” is flat-out annoying.

Here’s the gist for **Tip 4**: Repetition should be pleasing to the ear, not grating.

1. Avoid repeating words needlessly; use synonyms when possible
2. Reconstruct sentences at the line level when editing to avoid unintended repetition
3. Recognize, and then edit, your personal patterns of repeated words

“Boffo picked up his clown shoes and scowled at the dents he’d just put in them by kicking the curb in anger. These shoes already looked ridiculous – they were hyperbolically large and sported striped, rounded toes like shoes a roller-skating barber might wear on a third date with an ogre.”

“Boffo picked up his clown \*shoes and scowled at the new dents he'd caused ~~dents he'd just put in them~~ by while kicking the curb in anger. His \*\*required footwear already looked ridiculous – the shoes were hyperbolically large and sported striped, rounded toes like shoes \*\*\*something...”

#### Tip 5: Use seek/control find to spot repeated words

**My magic list** of commonly overused words/phrases (in all tenses:)

that, ever, some, never, really, very, start, begin, try, attempt, said, asked, next, then, now, like, as, “going to” before a verb instead of just the verb, rejoinders (saying “now, well, okay, right” before the main dialogue), extra prepositional phrases, extra that/which/what clauses, names in dialogue, and beginning sentences with coordinating conjunctions (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so).

### **By the way, here’s what I came up with for the last exercise:**

“Boffo drank his *morning* coffee thick with cream ~~that he~~ swiped from the jugglers’ practicing ~~their~~ jumping jacks in the *acrobatics* tent ~~set aside for acrobatics.~~”

### **Tip 6: Streamline your dialogue**

*“Sure I do,” said Kevin, reaching for the chips. “Of course I love you. I love you beyond all space and time.”*

*Kevin reached for the chips. “Of course I love you. Beyond all space and time.”*

Consider this showdown between Boffo and Bopsy. They’re clowns. A month ago, murder hornets attacked the bigtop, and Boffo drove away, alone, in the only clown car.

“Well, can you blame me for driving away?” Boffo cried. “Murder hornets are terrifying!”

“I *do* blame you!” Bopsy said. “And so does everyone else!”

“Is that why they changed the door code to the trailer?” Boffo asked.

“Of course that’s why! All the clowns are pissed,” said Bopsy.

“But think about it. I’m allergic to bees!” Boffo defended.

“Well...” Bopsy said, trailing off in doubt.

Boffo asked in a demanding tone, “Well, what?”

“You ditched us, though,” Bopsy yelled back angrily.

“Yes, I did ditch you, but think about it from my perspective. Murder hornets might have, well, murdered me! I had to drive away in a hurry!” Boffo said, again defending his actions.

“Well, I never thought about it like that, I guess,” Bopsy said, pausing to twirl her rainbow-colored wig curls while thinking. “I mean, never thought about the fact that you might die.”

“Exactly!” And now I need the other clowns to forgive me!” Boffo said.

“Where are you staying?” Bopsy asked.

“I’m staying in a hotel. And I can’t afford to stay there anymore.”

“I see,” Bopsy said. “That’s too bad. But it will take a lot for the other clowns to forgive you.”

“What happened after I drove away?” Boffo asked, looking abashed.

“Everyone got stung. Bongo even got stung inside his nose. Everyone was really pissed...”

This dialogue isn’t awful — there are no technical errors, and it adequately demonstrates conflict, plot, and characterization. Writing a passage like the one above doesn’t mean anyone’s a poor writer. It simply means the writer didn’t edit. Most writers overwrite their scenes as the ideas first spill onto the page.

To improve this, and likely all conversations:

**First** — avoid asking questions or bringing up talking points that can be anticipated and condensed into a single response. That way, the conversation doesn’t sound like a Q and A session. \*

**Second** — remove needless speech tags. Yes, “said” washes out well, but with cleverly composed dialogue between only two people, tags should be sparse anyway.

**Third** — don’t re-describe with a speech tag what the dialogue already shows. If Boffo’s words demonstrate anger, we know he’s angry. If a line includes a question mark, readers already know it was “asked.”

**Fourth** — streamline the excessive back and forth; it reduces urgency and damages pacing; thus the reader loses investment in the conversational outcome.

**Fifth** — avoid small talk even if it shows characterization. That can be worked in elsewhere.

**Sixth** — of course — in dialogue, use fragments and contractions, vary speech and action tags, and omit most names.

**Task:** rework any scene that you feel needs a good polishing for wordiness, and try to apply as many of these strategies as possible. If you’re stuck, rework the above scene.

(Don’t peek if you’re reworking the Boffo/Bopsy scene!)

“Can you blame me for hightailing it out of there? Murder hornets are terrifying!” Boffo cried.

“Yes! I can! Everyone blames you! That’s why we changed the door code on the trailer!” Bopsy said.

“You ditched us!”

Boffo looked abashed. “I know. \*But I can’t afford the hotel anymore. And you know I’m allergic to bees! Murder hornets could have actually murdered me!”

“Well...” Bopsy twirled her rainbow wig curls. “I never thought about it like that. How you might’ve died. But it’ll take a lot for the other clowns to forgive you. After you drove away, Bongo got stung inside his nose.