The Art of Brevity

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Abstract

The briefest construct of words which explicitly states a thought is long enough.
—Brün (1986, #3)

There is a myth in our educational culture that a long essay is better than a short one. This notion may help explain the preponderance of long-windedness in intellectual life, however problematic. In response, I propose an aesthetic turn toward the use of brevity. Below I share some of my thoughts on the subject, while using the constraint of brevity to articulate them.

A concise formulation can use parallel structure to communicate a breadth of phenomena in a short space. Consider: one’s freedom of speech used to be limited by how difficult it was to distribute a message in the public. Today, one’s freedom of speech is limited by how easy it is to make a message public—the flood of available information effectively drowns out any message without a publicity agent.

The art of brevity consists in removing all linguistic elements un-necessary to convey a particular message, just like marble sculptures are produced by removing excess rock. Concise writing does not have to imply a loss of content, but it should involve the refinement of form. Short works are complete works; they are not abbreviations. Brevity is a formal constraint upon the use of language in that it
forces a person to commit to a specific wording while avoiding lengthy sentences. In this sense, brevity represents an aesthetic contribution to today’s print culture.

Brief example: John Trinkaus, a business professor from Baruch College (CUNY) has published the shortest academic papers I have ever encountered. Since 1978, he has published over 100 studies that average less than two pages. I have compiled a complete collection of his publications, and the longest is only five pages (Trinkaus, 1989). While the subject matter of his research may not interest everyone—his seminal work is a one-page study on stop sign compliance (Trinkaus, 1982)—the form of his research is unique, and precious little time is required to study his work.

I have used Trinkaus to teach the art of brevity. I have asked students to write “Trinkaus Papers,” that is, short, quirky, yet rigorous analyses of observable phenomena. I have asked students to practice different presentation styles while using Trinkaus as a source material, in order to explore a multiplicity of presentation formats in a single classroom meeting (e.g., How many different ways can one present data on stop sign compliance?). I can envision the launch of a new journal dedicated to the concision that Trinkaus uses.

None of this negates the need for long-form presentations of information. Brevity is just an alternative, but it is an alternative that is often found lacking. In scholarly domains we often see the surfeit of verbiage resulting in dysfunctionality. For instance, I once had to submit a lengthy proposal to apply to participate in a conference, but then once the proposals were accepted, each presenter was given only ten minutes to present his or her work. The conference proposals were required to be too long to fit within the conference itself!

Pecha Kucha is an example of brevity applied to live presentation. Started in Japan in 2003, Pecha Kucha involves slide show presentations where presenters are constrained to 20 seconds for each of 20 slides. With only 400 seconds (6 minutes and 40 seconds), presenters are forced to prepare, refine, and rehearse their material works within the medium.

It makes sense that certain writings, such as dissertations, histories, and theoretical expositions, go to great lengths to recapitulate previous work, establish context, and so forth. What is lacking in our institutions of knowledge production is a complementary project of distinguishing the minimum linguistic architecture necessary to make an intellectual contribution. Talk, unlike archival quality art materials, is cheap—in the medium of language, brevity must be stipulated to ensure the use of economy of means.

Short pieces are easy to remember. Unfortunately, they can therefore be used as a tool for propaganda. The Pledge of Allegiance, the Lord’s Prayer, and other forms of everyday perjury show the potential for brief formulations to decay
into brainwashing incantations. By contrast, when an artist is brief, memorable, and musical, she or he acts in the interest of the never-complete project of increasing variety of human constructions in the world of signs.

References

