

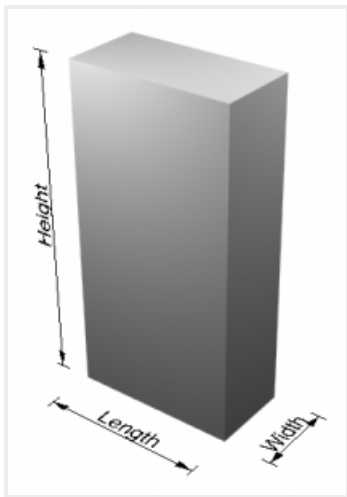
# Hannibal and Me

*What History's Greatest Military Strategist Can Teach Us About Success And Failure*

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## About not confusing length with depth

by Andreas Kluth on May 9, 2009



A brief meditation on: *length in writing*, which is to say word count.

As a writer I am intensely aware of word count, throughout the entire process, even while I am still [conceptualizing my story idea](#). What would be the *natural length* of this idea? What new idea would I have to add, or how would I have to expand the idea, to justify *more* word count? Could I deliver the same idea in *fewer* words?

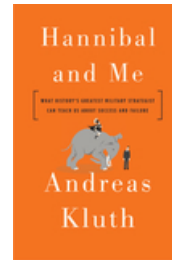
At *The Economist* we have a very inflexible page layout. For example:

- A *lead note*, in our jargon, is the first piece in a section, and should just turn a page, but within a prescribed line count. = 1,100 words
- A *note*, which is a regular piece in a section, = 600 or 700 words.
- A column—such as *Lexington* (US), *Charlemagne* (Europe), *Banyan* (Asia), *Bagehot* (Britain), *Face Value* (Business), *Economics Focus* (Finance), or *Obituary*—is a few words short of 1,000.
- A *box*, ie a short and quirky sidebar, = 300 or 500. And so on.

I have learned to like writing for prescribed word counts. It is great discipline.

For example: When I write *Face Values*, I write 990 words, then cut six words to leave my piece one line short. Why? Because that way an editor can't take anything out without putting it back in! 😊 It's also my way of winking at my editor, and they, tending to be [cavaliers](#), usually get it and wink back.

Even when I write something much, much longer, such as [my book](#), I instinctively count the words. (As you

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were able to see [in the screen grab](#) of my email when I sent off my manuscript to my publisher: 108,000 words.)

Even in these sloppy blog posts, I always look at the word count, out of interest.

Did you know that the [average](#) blog post, and possibly also the [ideal](#) blog post, is about 250 words? That's just about what our boxes are at *The Economist*. My average is above that, but that is beside the point. The point is that....

## Length matters

As you regular readers know, I love the *New Yorker*. And *he who loves* is allowed to offer helpful criticism. (See my critique of [America](#), for example.) The problem with many (though not all!) pieces in the *New Yorker* is, as [Bill Emmott](#) (my former boss, the previous editor-in-chief of *The Economist*) once put it, that they:

*confuse length with depth.*

I heard Bill say this when he was leaving *The Economist* and giving farewell interviews, in which he was explaining what was special about *The Economist*. *Brevity*, for one. You know: Not driveling on and on.

Of course I know where that reaching for length on the part of writers comes from. All my students (when I taught at a [Journalism School](#)) always wanted to write *long* pieces. There is more kudos in it. You don't get awards for 300-word pieces.

Well, that is a scandal. You *should* get awards for 300-word pieces, and even for shorter pieces. Haikus! [Limericks](#)! Sonnets!

(Editor: 'Nice piece, William, but, you know, could you make it longer? William: 'Er, OK. How 'bout: *Shall I compare thee to a summer's day, in the sweltering and sultry heat, just after a really, really big downpour....*'.)

Why do people never listen to what the great writers say? That same William in the sonnet joke, for instance, said, via Polonius (in Hamlet, II, 2), that

*brevity is the soul of [wit](#).*

Or take Mark Twain, his American equivalent:

*I'm sorry I didn't have time to write you a shorter letter.*

Or take [Ed Carr](#), one of my editors, who once, 10 years ago, told me to

*crucify your darlings,*

> Danny/Ben/Sam

Hannibal/Hasdrubal/Mago >

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The Economist & me

Frankl: He who has a WHY can bear any HOW

by which he meant that I should write and then find the phrases in my writing that *I was most proud of* (!) and just ... cut them! For the heck of it. To prove to myself that I can. To stay humble and nimble. That phrase was my screen saver for three years.

## Seeing negative shape



*Well cut*

The skill in all the arts is to take away stuff, not to add stuff. When they asked Michelangelo once how he made such beautiful figures out of stupid blocks of marble, he said something like:

*Easy. I visualize the figure inside, then I cut away the rest.*

A lot of art goes wrong because the artist does not dare to do that. This is when a great and riveting Hollywood movie suddenly becomes unbearable—because instead of ending when it should, it goes on for another twenty minutes of moral summary and closure (in a courtroom, probably) just in case you didn't get it.

## Cutting into flesh

Michelangelo only cut marble fat, not marble flesh, of course. Over-cutting is just as bad as over-writing. This has also happened to me.

Sometimes, I write something that demands space and expansion, but then news happens and our layout changes at the last minute and an editor has to cut my piece to fit. This can go wrong. Perhaps the piece was subtly humorous or ironic, and now the tiny signals and implied winks are missing and it falls flat. Or a logical connector gets cut and the piece seems like a *non sequitur*. Or something went from being simplified to oversimplified and is just plain wrong.

Or a writer might simply have a great subject that, by nature, *wants* to go on and be told as a story but instead dies a premature death.

But I've observed that writers overwhelmingly err to one side: they overwrite; they rarely overcut. And they suffer more when an editor cuts than when an editor asks for more. Even though, to improve, they should always consider both options, simultaneously.

All of this is simply to say: Every story, every thought, every joke, every movie, every poem has a natural (=optimal) length. A lot of good writing is simply intuiting that length and then writing to it, and not one word more or less. Unless you want to wink at your editor and leave it one line short.

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FROM: STORY-TELLING, THE ECONOMIST, WRITING

[← Free as Diogenes: a fantasy](#)[More on complexity in American life →](#)**22 Comments** [Post a comment](#)**Phillip S Phogg** #

*“.....There is more kudos in it.....?”*

You were using irony in saying “is”, not “are”, no?

I think American journalists overwrite more than do their English counterparts. How say you?

Given that paragraphs today are much shorter than in the days of yore, what think you of today’s short paragraphs? What thinks the Economist?

*May 9, 2009*[Reply](#)**andreaskluth** #

No irony, actually. *Kudos*, I believe, is the Greek (singular) for *glory*. So *there is more glory in it*.

I do think that Americans overwrite more than the Brits, but it's an individual thing. I know plenty of great American authors who get it just right.

Shorter paragraphs: I think it's part of the general shortening in the online culture. Everything needs to become more digestible, thus shorter. Not an altogether bad trend, in the right hands...

*May 9, 2009*



Phillip S Phogg #

I have egg on my face. I had in my mind, "kudu", a species of antelope.

*May 9, 2009*

[Reply](#)



Jag (defensive punster) #

Great points.

Needful brevity not just online.

All suffering "time poverty".

Writers ignore at peril.

P.S. – 8 hours to listen to weekly Economist audio.

Despite brevity.

P.P.S. – original meaning of sarcasm = flesh cutting.

*May 9, 2009*

[Reply](#)



andreaskluth #

Flesh-cutting etymology: V telling. Must commit to memory and re-use!

8-hour Economist podcast: scandalously long. Surprised you made it.

*May 9, 2009*



Matthew Gertner #

One of my many dorky pet peeves is the way that the financial incentives of the U.S. television industry (specifically the money made from syndication and DVD release) lead to networks running shows far longer than their underlying premise justifies.

Shows like *Lost* — which would surely be hailed as one of the all-time TV masterpieces if it had been kept to a 2-3 year run with a beginning, middle and end — are instead reduced to rambling, interminable messes.

Another pet peeve of mine: business books, which could almost always be reduced to a

three-page magazine article without sacrificing any useful information. But you can't charge \$19.99 for a magazine article, so these books are padded with another 247 pages of repetitive filler. I usually read 30-50 pages and then put them back on the shelf.

I'm also reminded of a blog post by Chris Anderson ([http://longtail.typepad.com/the\\_long\\_tail/2005/05/natural\\_portion.html](http://longtail.typepad.com/the_long_tail/2005/05/natural_portion.html)) arguing that 30-minute TV shows are an anachronism doomed to vanish in the age of digital distribution. Single track sales on iTunes are another example of this phenomenon, as is the inevitable debundling of newspapers.

All this to say that I heartily agree with your thesis that most content nowadays is too long, usually for reasons that no longer make any sense. I'm confident, however, that digital distribution will blow apart our preconceptions about how long content should be. In particular, the artificial correlation of length and price will die a well-deserved death. Time is money, more than ever in the age of information overload, and I'd personally pay more to get shorter content, provided it is of high quality.

May 11, 2009

Reply



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andreaskluth #

Amen!

Your comment about business books dovetails with what I've said before:

*"....But non-fiction books do tend to contain a fifty-page idea that the author must stretch out to 300 pages just to please the publisher, leaving lots of books with 250 unread pages on most people's shelves, as Seth Godin, an author and blogger, told me in my article on the subject. Good fiction does not face that problem, because it tells stories, and human beings love good stories...."*

I agree that digital distribution will lead to a surprising kind of *honesty* in the length of media content.

May 11, 2009



Christina/Seeger #

Dare I say it? Practicing on Twitter with its 140-character limit has made me a better writer.

May 11, 2009

Reply



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andreaskluth #

Really? If you convince me, I'll finally try Twitter.

“Hard to be both” is a good meme, with potential, btw....

May 11, 2009



Christina/Seeger #

Thanks! I am a true Twitter believer. I love its immediacy and the limit of 140 characters is constantly challenge to be succinct even with complex thoughts. Plus you can dip in and out as it suits you. The opportunity to spew creativity and share information with a community whenever is really appealing to me. Let m know if you join up. I'm a fan of your writing here.

May 12, 2009



andreaskluth #

My concern is the centrifugal force of joining yet another thing (which then demands updating and engagement). I think Twitter might tip me over the edge. But you've convinced me to keep an open mind....

May 12, 2009



Jag (defensive punster) #

Late addition. Tweeting a story. Also relevant to mechanics of magazine writing.

Tweet-compilation of how Dan Baum was hired at New Yorker.

<http://www.metafilter.com/81577/Twitter-the-antiNew-Yorker#2560572>

Includes – following quote.

I was paid \$7,750 for “Jake Leg,” which ran 5,000 words. Dollars-per-word isn't a very good measure of pay. Because writing short can take more work than writing long, but either way, this was good pay but not terrific. At the time, I was writing just about full time for Rolling Stone, which was paying me \$3.40 a word.

May 14, 2009

Reply



andreaskluth #

My god, Jag, you have ruined my working day. I am engrossed in Dan Baum's ordeal at The New Yorker.

I must say: They treat us better at The Economist.

I must contemplate this entire notion of tweeting a narrative....  
(I suddenly feel old, very old)

May 14, 2009



Cheri #

Convince me that being hired or published by or in the New Yorker isn't about status.

May 14, 2009

[Reply](#)


Jag (defensive punster) #

Cherie – wouldn't even try. I favour the view that much human culture has evolved as a means to compete for and demonstrate status. Darwin seems to have partially agreed, he made a distinction between 'natural selection' and 'sexual selection' – which is not about simply being the fittest. Some who ascribe to this theory – are of the “deliciously seductive view that the human brain is a sexually selected ornament”.

Good, though not brief summary of most prominent recent reincarnation – Millers Mating Mind Theory is at <http://www.cogsci.ecs.soton.ac.uk/cgi/psyc/newpsy?12.008>

PS – clearly the Economist is one of the other peaks of the journalistic status heirarchy. And we are blessed to be able to interact with one if its successful conquerors.

May 14, 2009



andreaskluth #

Actually, Jag, you should know that Cheri knows all about sexual selection.

May 14, 2009



Cheri #

Ha!

I mean *ahem*.

Sexual selection, yes...Gobble..Gobble..

May 14, 2009

[Reply](#)


Edward N. Haas #

I agree about brevity, but have never be able to abide by it. I have 17 self-published books in print and hope to produce at least one a year for the remainder of my life. At 73, even one a year shall probably not increase the number much beyond 17. The main



point, though, is this: Each of my books is a prime example of how to violate horribly the principle of brevity. God bless.

EDWARD N. HAAS D.O.B. 04/13/1936  
39193 HAAS ROAD – HAASWOOD  
PEARL RIVER, LA 70452

May 27, 2009

[Reply](#)



andreaskluth #

Well, your comment above is certainly brief and punchy enough.

And, of course, my point was simply that each idea has a *natural* length. If your books are indeed the result of “thirteen years of heroically intense inner concentration”, your output may be just be terse, relatively speaking. 😊

May 27, 2009



exuvia #

How refreshing

August 25, 2009

[Reply](#)

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