

How to Write Tight

Everything I learned about concision I learned from Elaine Benes



Photo: NBC / Getty Images

Back in the mid-'90s, I pulled the trigger on what had been a pipe dream: I applied for a job as a [freelance](#) copywriter for the J. Peterman catalog.

You know the one: A year or so after I'd signed on, it made an appearance as a running gag on *Seinfeld*. John Hurley played Peterman, and, well, Elaine played me.*

At the time, I was the youngest-ever writer for the catalog, and I loved writing for it. It was one of a kind — printed on thicker-than-usual stock and folded into a narrower-than-

normal format, it used watercolor and gouache to illustrate its items, and the copy was pure romance. Witness (from a 2009 catalog, but the DNA is still there):



Photo BruceMcTague.com

Writing and conceiving of copy like this allowed me to exercise a million flights of fancy. I could get florid if I wanted to. I indulged in some research whenever the urge struck. (*Were there coffee plantations in South Africa? Would a woman have worn a caftan while lounging on her porch there?*)

But mostly, I got to write tight. Long before Twitter taught me how to corral most of my individual thoughts into 140 characters (yes, 140, [you pampered newbs](#)), I was writing whole stories, whole imaginations, whole character histories into 50, 100, 200 words.

Of the two years I wrote for Peterman, I only kept one clip. I'm not sure why I didn't keep them all: Every time I got a shipment of items to write for, I sat with them for hours,

running my hands over them, trying them on, imagining the lives they might populate. Those bits of copy, what I thought of as mini-stories, were such a joy to produce, until they weren't anymore — one evening, staring at an item I was flatly [uninspired](#) by and marveling over the three empty beer bottles it'd taken me to get to the point of admitting I was uninspired, I told myself it was time to hang up my Urban Sombrero.

(Stop it.)



Photo: NBC

But by then, the seed was planted: I love miniature everything, from [fashion dolls](#) to [historical interiors](#). Even now, over 20 years down the line, I struggle with producing longer work. (My [best essays](#), I think, are my shortest ones.) But, perhaps because as a child I was accused of always saying too much, this is a skill I return to time and time again; reminding myself of the value of writing concisely

and pithily; reveling in the words I trim away, until something says exactly what I want it to, and not a word more.

Here are the things I tell myself. You might find them useful, too.

Rely on common experience. Some emotions, things, and events bear some universal knowledge, even if that knowledge is not firsthand. We've all seen enough TV to know that cabs are yellow in New York; what getting dumped looks and feels like; what flirting looks and feels like. You can trust your reader.

You don't need most adjectives and adverbs. [Enough has been written](#) about this that I won't rehash it here. Suffice it to say, examine each one and ask yourself what work it's doing.

White space can say a lot. Sometimes, a good line break or section break does wonders. Your smart reader (see above) can fill in the rest.

Include only what will move the plot or story or narrative forward. Admittedly, this one is a convention of Western literature. But we are dealing with a catalog in the Western world, so I'll allow it, and maybe revisit other literary conventions in a later post.

Specificity over length, every single time. This is an offshoot of the adverbs thing, above: No one is "happy," or

"sad." We are joyful, optimistic, exuberant, smiling. We are despondent, depressed, morose, or blue. Get specific.

Whether you're trying to pare something down to meet a word limit or you've just looked at your work and realized just how yammery you are, keeping these things in mind will help you to write more concisely. I know they've helped me.

Oh, and in case you're wondering, here's the clip I kept.

Breaking Traditions.



"I'll bet you the royalties off my next book," she said, "that you'll never be able to guess why my mother had this staircase built."

We sat at the base of said staircase, shaded against the wicked Indian sun by a gigantic landing above.

"I couldn't guess," she said.

"Because she dreamed that one day she might see me float down it in a wedding gown..." She looked the smallest bit guilty. "I'm not ready yet," she said.

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*I have no tie to the *Seinfeld* producers or writers. This was just an odd coincidence. It was very weird to see my specific job on the screen like that, although it did provide me with great cocktail conversation for years to come, and still does.

*copy reads: Breaking Traditions: "I'll bet you the royalties off my next book," she said, "that you'll never be able to guess why my mother had this staircase built."

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