Mark Twain on Writing: "Kill Your Adjectives"

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In honor of Mark Twain's birthday, here's a piece of writing advice from a [letter](#) he wrote to a student named D.W. Bowser:

"I notice that you use plain, simple language, short words and brief sentences. That is the way to write English—it is the modern way and the best way. Stick to it; don't let fluff and flowers and verbosity creep in. When you catch an adjective, kill it. No, I don't mean utterly, but kill most of them—then the rest will be valuable. They weaken when they are close together. They give strength when they are wide apart. An adjective habit, or a wordy, diffuse, flowery habit, once fastened upon a person, is as hard to get rid of as any other vice."

His words still ring true. Copywriters, especially, can benefit from plain language and clear sentences. We tend to get carried away describing our products and services, but adjectives often distract from what we're trying to say. Twain's note is a reminder to get to the point and eliminate fluff during the self-editing process. Before publishing your work, ask yourself: Is every word meaningful? Are the sentences concise? Is the message clear?

Words like "really" and "very" are rarely useful. Twain [famously](#) said to "substitute 'damn' every time you're inclined to write 'very;' your editor will delete it and the writing will be just as it should be." I think of him every time I type—and then delete—the word "very."

There's a lot more advice where that came from. [Letters of Note](#) has a fantastic [archive of Mark Twain's letters](#).