

# 1 Why Brevity Is Vital

**L**ong story, short. Executives are busy, and your rambling presentation gets lost in their daily flood of information.

## Get to the Point or Pay the Price

You cannot afford to miss the boat on brevity. It's the difference between success and failure. And if you think you've already got it covered, you're wrong.

I've spoken with hundreds of leaders and executives over 20 years and heard countless stories about how someone's inability to get to the point quickly spelled disaster. The dysfunction is real, immediate, and lasting.

Here are a few examples.

- *General dismissal:* A field-grade Army officer uses a series of PowerPoint slides to deliver a brief to his superiors on a recommended strategic course of action. He watches his presentation unravel as a high-ranking general obsessed with details spends the entire time feverishly highlighting every single typographical error on the handout. The officer lost his audience in the minutiae.
- *A rising star stalls:* A brilliant young woman who looks as if she is right out of Central Casting—bright, talented, and attractive—is widely recognized by senior leadership as the

future go-to person. Her fatal flaw is well known, however: she cannot close big deals because she cannot shut up. Her motormouth bars her from any client-facing assignments.

- *Done deal comes undone:* After closing a \$500,000 contract with a new client, a sales executive is shocked to discover that his overenthusiastic support person has followed up with the client and explained all the reasons why he thinks they've purchased way more technology than they need. The verbal misstep drops the deal by \$200,000.
- *98-pager delivered:* A vice president of communications who's frantically looking for a simple, one-page product summary for a big press release discovers that the best her organization can deliver is a mega PowerPoint file with nearly 100 slides. It chokes her e-mail inbox and kills the story.
- *Hero's story overlooked:* A police detective takes the initiative to recognize a fellow officer's generosity and impact with disabled athletes by pitching his feel-good story to a major magazine. A reporter speaks to the detective, who unfortunately cannot quickly sum up his pitch and rambles on. The reporter becomes too confused and doesn't run the story.
- *Luncheon leaves a bad taste:* Three hundred busy executives attend a fundraiser for a nonprofit organization during their busy workweek. The keynote speaker is slotted 20 minutes after the meal. He blows far beyond the allotted time, and after nearly an hour, the room is half empty and the feel-good charity loses its appeal.

You get the point. Today's world is on information overload, and there isn't enough time to sift through all the messages. If you can't capture people's attention and deliver your message with brevity, you'll lose them.

## Executive—Interrupted

I once met an executive named Ed who was a lot like many business leaders nowadays—easily distracted.

“I’ve got way too much going on in my life and in my head,” he lamented. “It seems like my mind is under constant assault throughout the day. There are nonstop e-mails, meetings, calls, interruptions, and information,” he explained. “It’s taxing.”

Ed continued, “A few weeks ago, I had a really important meeting with a small agency about the launch of a new advertising campaign targeting younger buyers. It’s tough reaching that segment and getting their attention, so I was really interested to see their strategies, timelines, and plans.”

Even though Ed disliked meetings, his interest in the topic had him surprisingly geared up. But when I asked how the meeting went, he replied, “We had an hour scheduled. They assured me their PowerPoint was only a few slides, but they were pretty densely packed with research and recommendations. Although they kept the slide count down, they jammed every inch they could.”

“They were probably trying to keep it short and to the point for you. But it sounds like there was way too much to cover,” I said.

“And that wasn’t even half the problem,” Ed said. “About 5 minutes into the meeting, I feel my phone go off in my pocket. False alarm—you know, one of those phantom rings when your leg vibrates and the phone’s not even there when you check. I eventually found it in my bag—and by then, I’d already been digging around for it and not really paying attention to their presentation.”

[brief] BASICS

## THE ELUSIVE 600: MANAGING EXCESS MENTAL BANDWIDTH

*People speak about 150 words per minute, yet have the approximate mental capacity to consume about five times that number, or 750 words per minute.*

You're having a conversation with some old friends at a college reunion, and they start talking about some hilarious memories. While they're recounting your exploits, your mind immediately **races** to an incident from your senior year with an old flame. You recall in vivid detail how painful it was when you ended the relationship. You imagine the entire break up scene, while listening to and laughing with your buddies **at the same time**. Two separate conversations run through your mind simultaneously.

This phenomenon of thinking about one thing while listening to and engaging in a conversation about another is called **the Elusive 600**—and it's always at work. Here's how it happens:

People speak about 150 words per minute, yet they have the approximate mental capacity to consume about five times that number—750 words per minute. So while someone is speaking, you have **600 extra words per minute** to think other thoughts. Your mind's spare bandwidth is always present when you're speaking or listening. This is the cause of many of the issues that make brevity relevant. For example, some implications of the Elusive 600 are:

- ▶ **It can leak.** Others' ideas can easily pop into your mind while you are talking, and you might impulsively start sharing them.
- ▶ **It sets off triggers.** While you are either listening or speaking, a single word or an unrelated distraction can cause you to lose focus.
- ▶ **It needs to be managed.** Whether you're talking

or listening, you have the responsibility to manage your Elusive 600.



“Then I notice that I really had gotten a text from my wife, which I of course impulsively check. She tells me that there was a past-due financial aid packet I needed to send in for my daughter’s college fall semester—so I have to respond, too.”

“It happens to all of us. You’ve got a smartphone, so people can find you no matter where you are or what you’re doing,” I add, trying to excuse him.

“Right—but this time I am in a super important meeting, and we are 10 minutes into it and the agency guys start asking me questions. I get a little defensive and even nervous, because I know I haven’t been listening carefully,” he admits.

“It’s like getting caught in high school daydreaming when the teacher calls on you,” I sympathize.

“Right. So I try to get things back on track and apologize. I conveniently blame my wife and tell them, ‘Let’s dive back in.’ “I still feel a little disconnected, but I’m committed to focusing on their plan and analysis. Then someone knocks at the door—my coworker, saying that it’s really important and will only take a minute. I step out and talk to her about another project that she needs me to make a decision on. It takes 3 or 4 minutes before I cut her short,” Ed says.

At this point, it’s clear how it all unraveled.

“I return and apologize yet again. Everyone says it’s fine, but our momentum slows down more and gives us even less time to discuss. After talking with the team for another few minutes, I start worrying that we are not even close to finishing on time. Handling all the open issues seems like a lost battle, and I start worrying about my next meeting that was right afterward.”

“So did you reschedule with the agency?” I asked, wondering if he had realized by that point there was no way to regain their focus or expect them to talk faster.

“No, I just started getting annoyed. I don’t know why, but there was a growing tension in the meeting that wasn’t there in the beginning.”

“But did the agency people help sum up the findings and adjust to the circumstances?”

“No, not really,” he says. “They understand how busy I am, but it took them 50 minutes to get to the point. There was too much buildup and no clear message. I know they’re brilliant people, but it all got buried.”

“Whose fault was it?”

“I am not sure who’s to blame, but that tends to keep happening to me. And it’s not getting any simpler or clearer. As the day rolls on, the loose ends just build to an overwhelming point,” Ed sighs.

“But what if the agency people could have managed *you* better?”

“Me?” Ed looks surprised, and then reconsiders. “Maybe you’re right. I was the one checking texts, getting interrupted,” he says. “But they should have gotten to the point faster.”

“Ed, your world is not getting simpler, and change is not going to stop,” I explain in an attempt to make him feel a little better. “The calls, e-mails, texts, social media, and interruptions that require your constant attention are not going away anytime soon.

“The agency—or whoever needs your attention—has to adapt to and manage *you*, and be mindful that this is your life,” I say. “The agency’s brilliance was lost on you because the presenters

failed to find creative ways to cut to the chase and help you get and stay focused.”

## Who’s Responsible for Adapting When the Message Is Not Being Heard?

What happened to Ed happens to executives every day. Who’s at fault? Smart people present to busy people, who are constantly flooded with information, are regularly interrupted, are easily distracted, and often grow impatient.

When they don’t get the clarity they need quickly, they check out. You’ve likely been in the same situation when you need to get someone like Ed’s attention. You know you have terrific ideas to pitch and important information to share. So how do you get the other person to listen to it?

The modern, multitasking mind is a barrier—and brevity is the key to entry. When you think you have an hour and you wait to deliver the good stuff until the end, you’re too late. You already lost your audience—whether it’s 1 or 100—in the first few minutes. But if you capture their attention and manage it right away, none of these challenging circumstances will affect your presentation. You have to get to the point in 5 minutes, not 50.

A master of brevity says less and gets more done.

## Timing Is of the Essence

It would be a mistake to approach brevity simply from the point of view of time. But a media trainer in New York put it to me this way: “Being brief is not just about time. What’s more important is how *long it feels* to the audience.”

*Brevity is not just about time.* [brief] BITS

There is no magic amount of time—word counts, stopwatches, or otherwise—that defines brevity. To be brief is to create a compact quality of expression. Don't be in a rush to say a lot of words quickly. Always think about how to say more with less.



So don't be fooled by a narrow "time is short" view. It's not about using the least amount of time. It's about making the most of the time you have.

### **BRIEF Balance: The Harmony of Clear, Concise, and Compelling**

Not everyone wants people to be brief. Tim McGuire is president of National Merit Scholarship Corporation, the organization that awards \$50 million in grants every year to an elite group of about 10,000 high school seniors.

"There's a ton of detail when you're dealing with a brand new group of over 1.5 million individuals every year," McGuire said. "And we have conversations every year with geniuses who were on the cutting room floor because of the limited funding."

The competition is fierce and every application produces scores of candidates that all look practically the same.

"It's like splitting hairs," he said.

McGuire and National Merit need finalists to expound on their credentials, not trim them, to help break the deadlock.

Cutting out too much detail can actually kill an applicant's chances of getting the scholarship.

Even though potential merit scholars need to divulge lots of details about their achievements, they still need to adhere to the principles of brevity. It's a balancing act of being concise, clear, and compelling. All three need to be in harmony.

Take applicants who need to explain more about their background and extenuating circumstances in one of their final interviews. They need to be clear but cannot let themselves ramble on about a project to oversell their strengths; they still need to be compelling and concise. The interviewer needs to see that the applicants can paint a picture that sets them apart.

To be brief doesn't just mean being concise. Your responsibility is to balance how long it takes to convey a message well enough to cause a person to act on it. That's the harmony of brevity when it's striking the right chords.

## A BRIEF Timeout

Let's take a final moment before diving into the book to clarify the kind of brevity we're discussing. There's a tendency to think brevity is pushing for less and runs the risk of being superficial and lacking substance.

Bernie Trilling, Founder and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of *21st Century Learning Advisors* and coauthor of *21st Century Skills: Learning for Life in Our Times*, coined the terms *light brevity* and *deep brevity* to make this important distinction.

"Light brevity is being concise without comprehension," Trilling said. "Deep brevity is being succinct with savvy."

Brevity starts with deep expertise. Only with thorough knowledge can you accurately make a summary.

“You have to go deep first and be confused for a while,” he said. “Then come back up with clarity from a deeper perspective and in that clarity you can be brief.”

Being brief can demonstrate how you’ve gone through that learning experience.

“It’s perspective that must come out of deep work,” he said. “You’ve got to give the essence of it. You can’t give the whole thing because your audience would have to do the same amount of probing and work.”

The road to brevity, then, requires hard work and lots of time. Doing all the digging and analysis on your own time saves the members of your audience from doing the labor themselves.

Timeout is over. Game on.

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