

The Ape Exercise

This exercise was adapted from an exercise for composition classroom use. In the classroom, it could be used for team-building or to teach sentence combining, punctuation, conciseness, clarity, overall style, audience, medium, REVISION... In your personal Intensive Writing Experience (IWE), it offers a chance to play around with a sentence in order to make it as concise as possible. For scholarly writing, which often has word limits, this is an extremely useful skill.

Directions: The sentences below were taken from a news site.¹ Use the steps given here to write a single sentence with the fewest number of words that still preserves the original meaning.

1. Combine all of the sentences into a single sentence. You may rearrange the order or delete words as necessary; however, the end result must preserve the meaning.
2. Count the number of words in your sentence. The original had 23 words. How does yours compare?
3. Revise the sentence to make it as concise as possible, while still preserving the meaning. How many words does the revision have? If you are doing this activity with a group, make it competitive. Who can come up with the shortest sentence that still preserves meaning?
4. Repeat step 3 until you can no longer revise without changing the meaning.
5. Take a few minutes to make a list of strategies you used in order to make a more concise sentence. For instance, did you remove redundant words? These are strategies you might apply in your scholarly writing as well. If you are working in a group, discuss the strategies. Which were familiar to everyone? Which were new to you?
6. If you plan to teach, consider how you might use this with your students.

Hundreds of people dressed up in gorilla outfits.

They ran through the streets of London.

They wanted to bring awareness to the public.

The awareness they want to make public concerns the plight of apes.

The apes are endangered.

¹The original sentence, as taken off a “crawler” from CNN in 2001: “Hundreds of people ran through the streets of London dressed in gorilla outfits to bring awareness to the plight of the endangered apes.” (23 words)