Saying more with less

▶ **Don't be too literal or wordy.**

Don't over explain things. People learn faster when they have less verbiage to wade through. When you're describing a graphical interface, you can often provide context and minimal "how to" information, and the reader can figure out the rest.

For example, don't explain the result of an action when that result is obvious or irrelevant, such as that a button is highlighted when you click it.

Similarly, don't burden the reader with unnecessary explanations or examples. When describing how to open files by typing on the keyboard:

Instead of   If you make a mistake or change your mind while typing a file or folder name, pause for a moment to start over. When you pause, the Workspace Manager assumes that you're typing a new name, rather than continuing the previous one. For example, if you type **S**....

Try this   If you make a mistake or change your mind while typing a file or folder name, pause for a moment to start over.

The second example provides all the information anyone needs to perform this task. The first example belabors the point, wasting space and the readers' energy by explaining what is obvious as soon as they perform the task.

One of the best ways to cut down on words and make the documentation more usable is to use illustrations. See "Replacing Words with Pictures" in this chapter.

Pare It Down

When writers first documented the original NeXT computer, they opted to leave out no fact, implementation, or functionality, no matter how subtle. It was a brand new computer and they wanted to give readers all the information available.

Two releases later and after a few years of using the computer, the writers reviewed their original work and saw where they could make it more effective by saying less.

You, too, may find it helpful to draft a section by providing all the information you can think of. Then go back over it and omit what's obvious or simply irrelevant.

There's often a way to shorten something after you first write it. For example:

Instead of   How the Scale button affects your printed pages depends on the application you're working in.

Try this   The Scale button works differently in different applications.

In particular, cut words that don't add meaning. For example:

Instead of   You edit an event configuration file by making changes in the Alternate Event window: When you use this window to change event configuration, the change is recorded in the event configuration file.

Try this   You edit an event configuration file by making changes in the Alternate Events window. Changes you make appear in the file.

Also, don't use extra "conversational" words, such as *basically* in *There are basically two types*, or *automatically* in *The Deliver button automatically sends the message*.

Avoid *If…then* constructions. Usually, *then* isn't necessary and it makes the prose read like code. Don't use redundant or ungrammatical constructions, either, like *most unique*, *very unique*, or *most importantly*.

Keep It Short and Sweet

Here are examples of ways to avoid wordiness and keep things simple.

Instead of	Try this	Instead of	Try this
prior to	before	end result	result
utilize, employ	use	type in	type
desire, wish	want	in order to	to
obligatory	required	print out	print
depends upon	depends on	all of	all
dependent upon	depends on	inside of	inside
input (v.)	type	outside of	outside
output (v.)	send, print	whether or not	whether