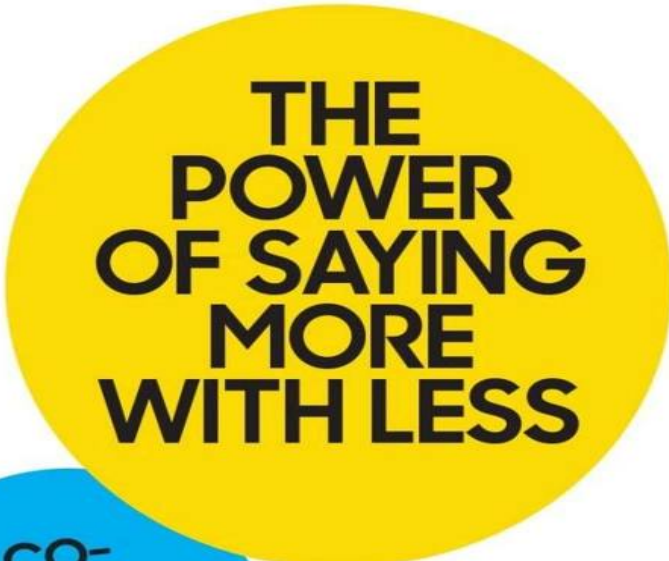


Smart Brevity



**THE
POWER
OF SAYING
MORE
WITH LESS**



**CO-
CREATORS
OF AXIOS &
POLITICO**

**Jim VandeHei, Mike Allen,
and Roy Schwartz**

Jim VandeHei, Mike Allen and Roy Schwartz

Smart Brevity

**THE POWER OF SAYING
MORE WITH LESS**

**SMART BREVITY
COUNT:
28,001 words
106 minutes**

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Contents

INTRODUCTION

The Fog of Words

PART 1

WHAT IS SMART BREVITY?

1 Short, Not Shallow

2 Smart Brevity, Explained

3 The Road to Smart Brevity

4 Audience First

PART 2

HOW TO DO IT

5 Be Worthy

6 Grab Me!

7 ONE Big Thing

8 Why It Matters

9 Go Deeper

10 The Right Words

11 Emojis



PART 3

SMART BREVITY IN ACTION

- 12 Mike's Playbook
- 13 The Art of the Newsletter
- 14 Be Heard @Work
- 15 Smart Brevity Your Email
- 16 Smart Brevity Your Meetings
- 17 Smart Brevity Your Speeches
- 18 Smart Brevity Your Presentations
- 19 Smart Brevity Your Social Media
- 20 Smart Brevity Your Visuals
- 21 How to Run a Company on Smart Brevity

- 22 Communicate Inclusively
- 23 The Cheat Sheet
- 24 Take Smart Brevity for a Spin

Acknowledgments



INTRODUCTION

The Fog of Words

SMART BREVITY COUNT:

969
WORDS

3½
MINUTES

Never in the history of humanity have we vomited more words in more places with more velocity.

WHY IT MATTERS: This new and exhausting phenomenon has jammed our inboxes, paralyzed workplaces, clogged our minds—and inspired us to create Smart Brevity . . . and to write this book.

Be honest: You're a prisoner to words. Writing them. Reading them. Listening to them.

- Slacked words. Emailed words. Tweeted words. Texted words. Memo words. Story words. Words, words, words.
- We spend our days listening, watching and reading them, pecking at our tiny screens in endless pursuit of more of them.

Our minds are frazzled by all of this. We feel and see it daily. We're more scattered, impatient, inundated. We scroll. We skim. We click. We share.

- Eye-tracking studies show that we spend 26 seconds, on average, reading a piece of content.
- On average, we spend fewer than 15 seconds on most of the web pages we click. Here's another crazy stat: One study found that our brain decides in 17 milliseconds if we like what we just clicked. If not, we zip on.
- We share most stories without bothering to read them.

Then we wait, fidgeting, chasing instant gratification or just *more*—a laugh, a provocation, a news nugget, a connection, a like, a share, retweets, Snaps. This pursuit makes it harder to focus, to resist checking our phones,

to read deeply, to remember stuff, to notice what matters.

- We check our phones 344-plus times each day—once every 4 minutes, at least. Behavioral research—and our own BS detectors—show we underreport our true usage.
- We scan, not read, almost everything that pops up on our screens.
- Mostly we're feeding a jones for dopamine jolts that come from yet more texts, tweets, googling, buzz, Slacks, videos, posts. *Click.Click.Click...*



WHAT SCIENCE AND DATA TELL US: There is actually little evidence that this behavior is rewiring our adult brains. Rather, we've always been prone to distraction. It's just that now we are getting slapped silly with an explosion of minute-by-minute distractions.

- This exploits two human flaws at once: Most of us are terrible multitaskers, and we struggle to refocus once our attention is yanked away. It takes most people more than 20 minutes to snap back into focus after a distraction.
- No wonder the old ways of communicating fail to land amid this unfolding chaos.

THE BIG PICTURE: We're wallowing in noise and nonsense most of our waking hours. And flopping over in bed for little dabs and jabs while we sleep. It's the madness of the modern mind.

This growing fog of words has two root causes: technology and our stubborn bad habits.

1. The internet and smartphones opened the floodgates for everyone to say and see everything at scale, for free, instantly, always. We all won equal access to Facebook, Google, Twitter, Snapchat, TikTok. And boy, do we use and abuse it.

We can share our every thought. Post when proud— or pissed. Google when confused. Watch a video on any topic at any time.

2. But people keep banging out emails, letters, memos, papers, stories and books like it's 1980. Think about it: We know everyone has less time, more options, endless distractions—yet we keep coughing up the same number of words. Or more. Written in the same way we have been writing for generations.

This isn't new. Mark Twain, writing to a friend in 1871, confessed, "I didn't have time to write you a short letter, so I wrote you a long one."

- Everyone does this. We try to fake it—or show off our smarts—by overindulging in words. We see this at work, in personal emails, in the professional media.

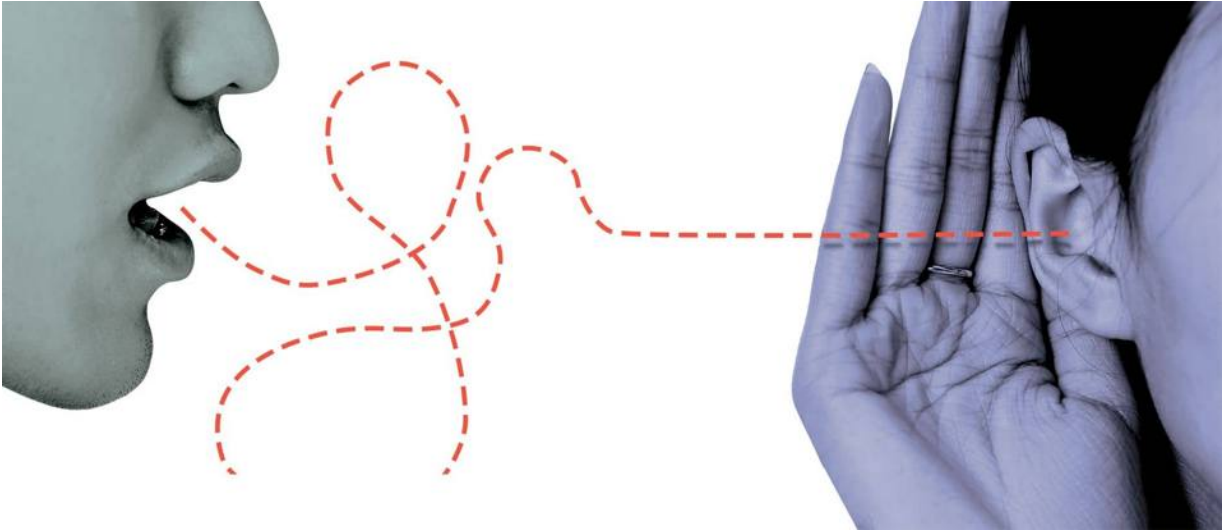
- We're taught that length equals depth and importance. Teachers assign papers by word count or number of pages. Long magazine articles convey gravitas. The thicker the book, the smarter the author.
- Technology turned this obsession with length from a glitch to a stubborn, time-sapping bug.

The result is billions of wasted words:

- Roughly one-third of work emails that require attention go unread.
- Most words of most news stories are not seen.
- Most chapters of most books go untouched.

The problem is most acute in just about every workplace in America. It does not matter if you work at Apple, a small business or a new start-up, it has never been harder to get people focused on what matters most.

- The work-from-anywhere reality of a world changed by COVID-19 has turned communications into a profound and critical weakness for every company, every leader, every rising star, every restless worker.
- This problem will echo loudly through every organization because a vibrant culture, a clear strategy and swift execution rely on strong communications in a scattered world.
- Stewart Butterfield, the CEO of Slack, told us that, in a hypothetical 10,000-employee company that spends \$1 billion on payroll, 50 to 60 percent of the average employee's time is spent on communication of some sort. Yet no one provides the tools and training to do this well.



THE BOTTOM LINE: All of us confront an epic challenge: How do you get anyone to pay attention to anything that matters in this mess?

OUR ANSWER: Adapt to how people consume content—not how you *wish* they did or they did once upon a time. Then, change how you communicate, immediately. You can do this quickly by adopting Smart Brevity.

THE UPSIDE FOR YOU: You will learn to punch through the noise, be heard on what matters most to you and win recognition for your most important ideas. And you will learn that this new way of thinking and communicating is liberating, contagious and teachable.

Part 1

What Is Smart Brevity?



1

Short, Not Shallow

SMART BREVITY COUNT

843
WORDS

3
MINUTES

A lunch-spattered piece of paper hangs on the wall of the Arlington, Virginia, newsroom of our start-up, Axios. It reads: “Brevity is confidence. Length is fear.”

WHY IT MATTERS: We run a media company. We live, breathe and make money off words and getting the most influential, demanding readers to consume them—CEOs, political leaders, managers and curious news junkies.

- Yet our solution to the fog of words is enticing people to produce and consume fewer of them—*far fewer*.

We call it Smart Brevity. It is a system and strategy for thinking more sharply, communicating more crisply and saving yourself and others time. It guides you into saying a lot more with a lot less—and that is its greatest power.

- Thanks to the internet, how we consume information has evolved drastically. But little has changed how we write and communicate now that people are distracted and deluged.

Smart Brevity attacks this problem head-on. In this book, we will show you how strong words, shorter sentences, arresting teases, simple visuals and smartly organized ideas transform writing from unnoticed to vital—and remembered.

- We’ll show you how the data, the consumption habits of the powerful, the modern digital and workplace trends and our own professional journeys reveal the surprising benefits of communicating shorter, smarter and simpler.

- We'll teach you the foundational strategies that helped us create two companies (Axios and Politico), rise to the top ranks of American journalism and become better leaders and people.
- Along the way, we'll tell you funny and illuminating stories to lighten the mood and show how you too can apply Smart Brevity in your own work and life.

The three of us run a media company, but this isn't a book for journalists. We wrote it to help empower everyone.

- If you're a student, Smart Brevity will make your papers and presentations more captivating.
- If you're in sales, Smart Brevity will make your presentations more illuminating—and help you win business.
- If you run an organization—be it a corporation, a city, a university or a nonprofit—updates in Smart Brevity will make your messages clear and memorable, so everyone stays aligned and inspired.
- If you're anyone trying to communicate important information to others—it doesn't matter if you're a manager, a teacher or a neighborhood leader—this book reveals our secrets for being heard.

THE BOTTOM LINE: You can't rally people around a strategy or an idea if they don't understand what you're saying—or zone out.

- With the old ways of communicating, almost no one is listening.
- We'll show you how to restructure how you think. Then, your writing will break through with crystal clarity.



Do ~~a lot~~ more with ~~a lot~~ less.

We get that you might be a Smart Brevity skeptic.

- Most people are at first. Hell, we were. Each of the three Axios founders made a good living producing words for their bosses.

Jim's wife, Autumn, hated the concept for this book. Watching him bang out chapters on his iPhone made his kids dubious too. Autumn is a lover of words—an academic, a voracious reader. We'll tell you what we told her:

- We're not arguing that there's no time for indulging in words, especially in fiction, poetry, love letters or casual conversation.
- You should still curl up with *The Atlantic*, devour a good book and watch *The Godfather*.

We're also not saying to write short for short's sake—you bring more soul and salience to your writing by being direct, helpful and time-saving. Don't omit important facts or nuance, oversimplify or dumb down. “Short, not shallow,” is what we tell our reporters.

GO DEEPER: What we're arguing is this: If you want vital information to stick in the digital world, you need to radically rethink—and repackage—how you deliver it.

- Start by accepting that most people will scan or skip most of what you communicate—and then make every word and sentence count.
- Share MORE value in LESS time.

- Put your readers first. People are busy and have expectations of the precious time they give you. All they usually want to know is what's new and "Why it matters." Give them that.
- Change your methods and style for reaching readers. Now.



You will see quick and substantial results if you do.

- Smart Brevity will make you more efficient and effective at work, a more forceful communicator and more useful and memorable on social media. Your voice and words will pop and echo like never before.

- It will force you to rethink other time-wasting aspects of your day and put your audience before your own ego and bad habits when sharing thoughts, ideas, updates and news.
- The biggest beneficiaries are those you're trying to reach. Smart Brevity can save CEOs and managers countless hours, align companies around their missions, unleash creativity and clarify what matters most, whether you're sitting in your office, school, church or college dorm.

MOST IMPORTANT: You will quickly discover a new self-confidence in your crisp, clear voice—and find others listening and remembering (and hopefully sharing) your most salient points. You will be heard again.

2



Smart Brevity, Explained

SMART BREVITY COUNT

2,402
WORDS

9
MINUTES