

## “Murder Your Darlings”: Still Good Advice

by Deborah L. Wilhelm

I first “discovered” onionskin paper as a Marist High School junior, typing my assignments on Grandma Evelyn’s old cast-iron Underwood, praying not to run out of ribbon, not to accidentally type a line of text into the margin that I’d reserved for footnotes, and NOT to commit typographical errors, each of which required a labor-intensive application of Wite-Out<sup>®</sup>. Remember? Onionskin was erasable and thereby diminished the tragedy of errors, but erasable paper or not, the typewriter was still a lot of work, with its stiff keys, manual returns, scruffy letter alignment, dilemmas about word hyphenation, and of course the ribbon that always, *always* ran out at midnight before the paper was due. “How long does it have to be?” we’d whine to Sr. John or Mr. Zuber, and getting to 1,500 reasonably correct words was like digging up 1,500 diamonds, each a precious gem from our teenage minds, cut and polished in spiral notebooks before being set into place on those aged Underwoods or Smith-Coronas.

These days, of course, the “delete” button vaporizes mistakes instantly. “Cut,” “copy,” and “paste” move words, paragraphs, entire sections in seconds. **Bold?** One click. *Italics?* One click. Spell check, thesaurus, quotation from esoteric online source? Click, click, click. Nevertheless, modern word processing hasn’t been an unreserved good. When words are too easy, they can easily become cheapened. Our challenge today, frankly, isn’t finding enough words to say. It’s knowing when we’ve said enough.

How true this is in our liturgical assemblies, where people gather to be fed with God’s Word from ambo and altar. Preachers understand this hunger, and we want to help fill it, and richly.<sup>1</sup> To do so, we know that we should pray, study, ponder, write, revise, edit, practice; that our preaching should have a single point; that the point should matter, and that it should be a gift to the hearers. We know what to do. Why aren’t we doing it? Whether it’s the pressure of frantic days, the relief of a long-awaited preaching idea, or the conviction that people won’t really notice, for many preachers the rough draft is the only draft. I’m convinced, however, that the reason some preachers don’t revise is simply that they don’t know how. “Richer fare” doesn’t mean more words. It means better words, words that better open us to the holy and living God.

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<sup>1</sup> Most preachers know by heart the admonition from *Sacrosanctum Concilium*: “The treasures of the Bible are to be opened up more lavishly so that a richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God’s word” (51).

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Help is available, Dear Preacher, in the form of the e-word, and I don't mean *electronic*. I mean *edit*. And editing for preaching doesn't mean agonizing over whether that comma should be a semicolon; it means revising and cutting so that the words invite your hearers—and you—into deeper communion with God.

First, let's discuss revising. To revise is, literally, to "re-see," and re-seeing demands perspective, so your first draft should cool off a bit before revision. After all, you need not edit sentences before you have edited ideas, and big-picture editing works best after you have begun to forget exactly what you've written—and how attached you are to it. Put that initial draft away, and after it has relaxed in a drawer or a closed computer file, question it carefully for meaning and coherence:

1. Does this preaching have a single point that *matters*?
2. Is the point illustrated with specific, relevant, accessible, interesting details?
3. Does the preaching have an observable<sup>2</sup> beginning, middle, and ending, all of them logically connected?<sup>3,4</sup>

Revise so that the big picture is meaningful, concrete, and connected. Then you're ready to cut, which happens in two main areas: content (ideas) and verbiage (word count). Any first draft, whether for reading or speaking, should include everything you want to say. It should reward your diligent study and allow you to write freely without worrying about what works, what's correct, or how much is too much. But in subsequent drafts, you delete everything that isn't the one point that matters or its support. The task is to examine that cooled-off first draft and further interrogate its ideas, removing waste, such as any cliché, any joke present for its own sake, any re-telling of the scripture reading (you'll never say it better than the original!), any description of how you created the preaching, any words that a reasonable listener won't be able to understand or remember, any interesting "side" idea, any ending that isn't the actual ending, or any words that deprive your hearers of the joy of doing additional reflection on their own. Go ahead and write all of these things in your first draft, especially if they help you get started. Then delete them. If you can't bear to part with them, open a computer file called "Awesome Stuff that I Cut from My Preaching," and save away. When you're done, even if you've beefed up the main idea with a specific detail or two, your content should be significantly shorter, more focused, and more unified.

When your draft is focused and unified, it's time to cut excess language, a challenge for modern writers. For example, my preaching and theology students rarely struggle to reach 1,500 words. They struggle not to exceed that limit, and I receive last-minute panicked e-mails pleading that the paper cannot take more cutting; it's down to the bare bones; additional cutting will ruin the carefully crafted ideas and ruin their elegance; and who dreams up these arbitrary length requirements anyway? So I'll request a sample paragraph and can usually remove 20% or more of the word count with no loss of meaning. You can do the same.

Unconvinced? Pull out one of your own preaching texts and take a look. Excess verbiage can exist at phrase level:

*In the event that ...* versus ... *If*  
*It is often the case that ...* versus ... *Often*  
*Until such time as ...* versus ... *When*  
*At the current time ...* versus ... *Now*

2 In this case, "observable" really means "well spoken." The hearers need language signposts so they can follow your ideas. They haven't done your research. They don't have your notes. Their children's crayons may be straying off the coloring books, into the songbooks, and onto the pews. Their granddads may be innocently but loudly asking people in the back to help with the collection. Enough said.

3 Moving listeners from idea to idea by using transitional language is a skill all its own. Perhaps for another column!

4 I've written more about all of these items elsewhere, including *Preaching Matters: A Praxis for Preachers* (Sylvester Ryan and Deborah Wilhelm, Chicago: Paul Bechtold Library, 2015).

Or at sentence level:

*It was decided by the disciples to undertake a journey to the city of Jerusalem, which they did.* Eighteen words.

*The disciples journeyed to Jerusalem.* Five words.

*Even Mark, which is the shortest among the four gospels, has a significant number of parables that have an agriculturally related theme.* Twenty-two words.

*Even the shortest gospel, Mark, has six agriculturally themed parables.* Ten words.<sup>5</sup>

*It has been determined by biblical scholars that a number of interpretations of the word “rebiristos” are possible and that of these multiple interpretations, two are considered the most likely.* Thirty words.

*Biblical scholars offer two main interpretations of the word “rebiristos.”* Ten words.

Sometimes you’ll seek both inflated language and unnecessary content:

*I’ll never forget the day that I first “discovered” onionskin typing paper, when I was one of about a hundred high school juniors at Marist High School, typing all of my papers on my grandmother’s old cast-iron Underwood typewriter.* 39 words.

*I first “discovered” onionskin paper as a Marist High School junior, typing my assignments on Grandma Evelyn’s old cast-iron Underwood.* 20 words.

At some point, honestly, it’s time for murder.

Don’t worry—I’m not suggesting crime, but rather the ruthless excision of redundant, inflated, or ineffective words. It just takes a little practice. As Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch advises writers, “Murder your darlings,”<sup>6</sup> and the most important word in his instruction is “your.” When I focus on what I want to say, my erudite language, my scholarly research, my meticulous quotation of obscure philosophers and poets, my assessment of what this assembly needs to hear from me, I’m thinking about myself and what I’m saying, rather than about God and what God is saying. The resulting words are darlings—my darlings—and I’m polishing and caressing them, when the only darlings that belong in the preaching are God’s. Editing’s purpose isn’t to make the preaching brief or to fit an arbitrary time limit, but to strip away the excess so that our human words reveal God and invite our hearers to listen for God in the same way that we’ve listened. Pope Francis reminds us “that it is God who seeks to reach out to others through the preacher, and that he displays his power through human words.”<sup>7</sup> How can we use our language, then, with anything other than respect for its source and its destination?

“Wait,” you may say here, “I don’t see how cutting a few words here or there helps anything.” With practice, however, conciseness becomes habit at both the technical level (the words themselves) and the spiritual level (how those words point to God). Others may protest that because they preach without notes, this type of editing doesn’t make sense. As a notes-free preacher myself, I assure you that writing and revising a text—not to read, memorize, or perhaps even use—helps develop the habits of mind that make editing second nature.

<sup>5</sup> If you look carefully, you’ll notice that the revision actually includes more information than does the original!

<sup>6</sup> Arthur Thomas Quiller-Couch, “XII: On Style,” in *On the Art of Writing: Lectures Delivered in the University of Cambridge, 1913-1914* (New York: Putnam, 1916), 281.

<sup>7</sup> Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, (2013), no. 136, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html).

“OK, fine, but I just don’t have this kind of time,” you could be saying now, and it’s true—indeed, it’s true for almost everyone. Pope Francis himself offers strong encouragement here in his discussion of preaching preparation: “I presume to ask that each week a sufficient portion of personal and community time be dedicated to this task, even if less time has to be given to other important activities.”<sup>8</sup> Given the importance of the preaching ministry, I suggest that we don’t have time *not* to edit.

Today, whether my texts are penciled on envelope backs or tapped out on a tablet, I approach editing as practice and discipline. Meanwhile, the only typewriter keys I’ve seen lately have been pried from their former homes and fashioned into jewelry at chic boutiques. Perhaps that’s a good metaphor for how preachers can think about their words: crafted into jewels, given rather than sold. Of course, some things haven’t changed: Your printer may still run out of ink at midnight before your paper—er, preaching—is due.

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<sup>8</sup> Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no.145.