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In Presentations, Kill Your Darlings

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by Jerry Weissman

Historian Amanda Foreman, author of the bestselling *Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire*, has written a new book, *A World on Fire: Britain's Crucial Role in the American Civil War*. In an article for the *Wall Street Journal's* "Word Craft" column about her creative process, Foreman provided a valuable lesson for presenters:

The fruit of my 11 years of research meant that I had more than 400 characters scattered over four regions ... This vast mass of material was so unwieldy that I could hardly work my way through the first day of the conflict, let alone all four years.

While few presenters spend 11 years developing their stories about their businesses, they, like Foreman, have a vast mass of unwieldy material that they have to communicate to various audiences. Unfortunately, most presenters then proceed to deliver that mass to their audiences as is, inflicting the dreaded effect known as MEGO, "My Eyes Glaze Over."

Although Foreman is a respected scholar with a doctorate in history from Oxford University, she has storytelling in her DNA. Her father was Carl Foreman, an Oscar-winning screenwriter who wrote the classic *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. At the end of her research, Amanda Foreman realized that, even for a story as immense and complex as the Civil War, she had too much information for both writer and reader to process. Her solution:

I plotted the time lines of my 400 characters and identified and discarded people who, no matter how interesting their stories, had no connection to anyone else in the book. This winnowed my cast down to 197 characters, all bound to one another by acquaintance or one degree of separation.

Foreman was tapping into a practice — well-known among professional writers — called "kill your darlings." In fact, a community of writers in Atlanta has adopted that name for its website. The phrase is often attributed to novelist William Faulkner, but it was actually coined by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, a British writer and critic who, in his 1916 publication, *On the Art of Writing*, said:

Whenever you feel an impulse to perpetrate a piece of exceptionally fine writing, obey it — whole-heartedly — and delete it before sending your manuscript to press. Murder your darlings.

The sentiment was echoed by Christopher Markus and Stephen McFeely, the screenwriters of *Captain America*, the current Hollywood action film based on the 70-year-old comic strip character. In another *Wall Street Journal* "Word Craft" article, the team wrote:

Adapting an existing work for film is usually a process of reduction. Whether it's a novel or a short story, a true-crime tale or 70 years' worth of comic books, the first job is distillation. If this means losing someone's favorite character, so be it. The simple fact is that we can't put everything on the screen. Darlings must die.

The phrase rings true because writers, who labor over their ideas and words like expectant mothers, invariably fall in love with their offspring and are reluctant to find fault, and even more reluctant to part with them. In the same manner, presenters who live, breathe, walk, and talk their businesses want to share every last detail about them with their prospective audiences. But audiences do not share their interest, and so presenters, like writers, must kill their darlings.

In presentations, the process begins by assembling all your story elements. A chef prepares for a meal by gathering all the ingredients, seasonings, and utensils, but doesn't use every last one of them. Once you have assembled all your presentation ingredients, assess every item for its relevance and importance to your audience — not to you. Your audience cannot possibly know your subject as well as you do, and so they do not need to know all that you do. Tell them the time, not how to build a clock.

Delete, discard, omit, slice, dice, or whatever surgical method you chose to eliminate excess baggage. Be merciless. Retain only what your audience needs to know.

Once you have made that first cut, make another pass, and then another. Each time you do, you will see your draft with fresh eyes and find another candidate for your scalpel. Follow the advice of the classic Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*: "It is always a good idea to reread your writing later and ruthlessly delete the excess."

Bestselling horror novelist Stephen King — who knows a thing or two about ruthless killing — follows a similar practice. In his 2000 book *On Writing*, he shared a note his editor once sent to him:

You need to revise for length. Formula: 2nd Draft = 1st Draft - 10%.

Deal with your vast mass of unwieldy material in your preparation, not in your presentation; behind the scenes, not in front of the room. A gentler way of saying "kill your darlings" is, "when in doubt, leave it out."

A footnote: Amazon lists Amanda Foreman's new book at 1,008 pages. Imagine how many more pages it would have run had she not killed those 203 characters.