



Thoughts from Linda:

Smart Brevity  
*The Power of Saying More with Less*

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(1059 Words. 5 Minutes to Read.)

## Introduction

Who has written hundreds of thousands of stories and now created an AI-powered tool to help people communicate effectively and efficiently?

The authors of this book have, and it is one of the most practical and valuable books I have read in the past few years.

These three journalists/businessmen and their organization which you may know as Axios, a forward-leaning news agency, have 'cracked the code' on Mark Twain's dilemma. Twain is often quoted as saying, "I didn't have time to write a short letter, so I wrote a long one instead." Too bad that Samuel Clemens isn't with us now because he could have learned a lot from this pithy book.

## Why This Matters

The data is humbling for those of us who communicate via the written word in any setting.

As they say, "...we are all a prisoner to words. Writing them. Reading them. Listening to them. Texted words. Memo words. Story words. Words, words, words...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."

Basically, much of what is written today goes unread by others. With the 'old ways' of communicating, almost no one, it turns out, is listening.

- Eye tracking indicates that people today will only spend 26 seconds scanning what is written to determine if they go further.
- Data show we spend fewer than 15 seconds on most web pages we click.
- One study shows that in 17 milliseconds, we decide if we like what we just clicked, and if not, we zip on.
- People share most stories without bothering to read them.

This book, *Smart Brevity*, provides a framework for practical advice on ways to lean into the trends and adapt to the challenges to communicate important information to others.

## Going Deeper

The authors of this book are all journalists and have developed a style of organizing information for today's readers, especially adapted to the limited space of the mobile phone and the developing norms of readers.

They make a case for their approach with many compelling statistics that recognize the billions of words that are "wasted" as they report, "most words of most news stories are not seen, and most chapters of most books go untouched."

The book is organized into three parts:

- What is Smart Brevity?
- How To Do It
- Smart Brevity in Action

Part 1—What is Smart Brevity focuses on the theme: "Short Not Shallow." As a reviewer of books, I appreciated this section as they provided a disclaimer about what is NOT intended. As they noted, "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*."

The key message is that if we want critical information to be meaningful to others in our digital world, we all need to radically rethink and repackage how we deliver it.

They provide examples from the CIA to Mitt Romney learning their method. They teach a framework and give illustrations of 'before and after' messages, showing the increased impact of the application of the form. I loved how they described their system as somewhat of a "straitjacket on your worst instincts or habits in communication...as a way of cleaning up and framing your thinking—then delivering it with punch."

Part 2—How to Do It focuses on the mechanics of bringing this approach to life in your world. With the advice of Dr. Ronald Yaros, a professor from the University of Maryland, they show the pitfalls of using words/emojis to communicate *even when people are very interested*.

His research indicates that "even if a reader cares, you may not be able to keep their attention as time can limit engagement even with content for which we have interest." He warns about a dynamic called "kick-outs," which means anything that loses readers. The top 4 kick-outs he mentions are:

- Too much text
- Too much jargon
- Too many choices
- Long video

He found that these concepts apply across all forms of communication, even video games. It turns out we consume information in short bursts and then quickly move on.

The theme is 'brevity or perish.'

Part 3—Smart Brevity in Action has 13 chapters and takes you through applications of the Smart Brevity practice. A few of the titles give you a sense of it. Examples are:

- The Art of the Newsletter
- Smart Brevity in Your Email
- Smart Brevity in Your Speeches
- Smart Brevity in Your Social Media
- Smart Brevity Your Visuals (using the term as a verb!)
- The Cheat Sheet
- Take Smart Brevity for a Spin

The chapters in this section give you very specific templates and tools to apply their teachings to your own work.

The section on how to 'Smart Brevity your Presentations' reminded me of the Japanese practice of *PechaKucha*, the Japanese storytelling format where a presenter shows 20 slides for 20 seconds each. This practice, inspired by an architectural group of young designers in 2004, was named for the phrase "chit-chat" in Japanese. It has become a global phenomenon with PechaKucha nights (PKNs) being conducted in Japan and European countries as ways people can share thoughts in only 6 minutes and 40 seconds with each other. While not mentioned in this book, the theme of 'tell less, show more' is all a part of the concept of Smart Brevity.

In the final chapter, you learn how to try this form out and get immediate feedback. You can go to their website, [SmartBrevity.com](http://SmartBrevity.com), upload your writing, and see how it scores. They also have helpful videos, case studies, and tips on how to implement this approach in your own organization so that you can break through all the noise and communicate with confidence that your words will be heard again.

If you have read this review this far, let me say a personal 'thank you' for your own time and interest. I've worked to implement their practices into this review and will be using their website myself going forward.