Brevitas and the Disabled

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Abstract - Brevitas is a doctrine of communication style that emerged from classical rhetorical theory. This approach to writing or speaking valorizes directness, clarity, “just rightness” in choice of words, and ease of comprehension for the reader or listener—all the while pursuing the goal of greatest effectiveness. For the ancients, the idea was to find the virtuous golden mean for all one’s words, in the zone midway between the opposing vices of prolixity (too much) and obscurity (too little). The habit of speaking or writing with brevitas constituted a virtue just like courage, wisdom, self control, or any other virtue. It was one of the things that defined human excellence. In this paper, a college professor, a tutor, and a student discuss the value of brevitas and the way it was taught—and learned—in a technical communication course at an American university. For the student, who is both quadriplegic and nonverbal, the power and the philosophy of brevitas hold special interest.

Index Terms - Brevitas, disability, assistive technologies

I strongly believe brevitas allows people to communicate more quickly and efficiently—especially if you type with your eyes!  
—Gatlin Mcpherson

THE INSTRUCTOR’S PERSPECTIVE: AN INTRODUCTION FROM RUSSEL HIRST

During the past quarter century—spurred in great degree by the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 [1]—materials and resources supporting education of disabled people in the U.S. have expanded rapidly. In the United States, attention to such education in both the K-12 categories and at the college level has become, if not yet literally universal, at least widespread. Government and private organizations have been tasked or established to support education for disabled people (see for example the Office of Civil Rights in the U.S. Department of Education, the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice, the Association for Higher Education and Disability, the Learning Disabilities Association of America, and the National Center for Learning Disabilities). American universities, also, have risen to the task; for many years now, most colleges have had an Office of Disability Services, or Disability Resource Center, or some such title, and many of these provide websites replete with pedagogical resources for guiding our education of disabled students. Among the scores of good examples, see such offices at the University of Washington, at North Carolina State University, and at Texas Tech University. Our traditional “Learning Centers,” such as the disabilities section of Vanderbilt University’s Center for Teaching, have also taken on robust disability components. Although this trend did not spring from nothing in 1990—for example, the Journal of Learning Disabilities started in 1968—the Americans with Disabilities Act was indisputably a watershed event.

So, the literature has become vast on teaching people with disabilities, and it is available through government and private organizations and individuals, and through university offices and scholarly publication. Although it is beyond my ability thoroughly to canvass this field, the reading I’ve done suggests to me that scholarship is less extensive on the topic of teaching writing to people with disabilities, even less on teaching them the art of effective technical communication, and—despite the growing literature on assistive technologies—less again in reference to people with physical rather than cognitive disability. Of course I must qualify this last distinction, because physical disability always comes with cognitive and emotional challenge. The challenge for people with disabilities is to continue struggling to think clearly and to perform well while pouring out the energy necessary to push against their disability—and also to generate the courage and positive attitude needed to work and compete in a world of people advantaged by abilities. I think that most of us “abled” college educators understand this, as well as we can from our vantage point of ability—and even without deep study.
of pedagogies related to people who are disabled, we try our best to “accommodate” such students.

An accommodating teacher does such things such as “1) encourages student-faculty contact, 2) encourages cooperation among students, 3) encourages active learning, 4) gives prompt feedback, 5) emphasizes time on task, 6) communicates high expectations, and 7) respects diverse talents and ways of learning” [2]. For most of my teaching career, I have fallen more into the accommodation than the deep-study category when it comes to educating students who are disabled. Recently, however, in reaction to a student’s enthusiasm for my senior-level technical editing course, I went deeper. With me, the student, Gatlin Mepherson (co-author on this paper) and the tutor I acquired for him, Katie King (also co-author), explored the value of the core teachings of my course. We focused on that core material in terms of its application to the needs of students and professionals who are disabled—especially of those whose primary disability is physical.

This paper is a collaboration—a case study looking at the value of ethical, effective, unburdensome writing in the life of someone whose physical disability makes it very hard to communicate. As a single case study, it cannot penetrate far into the growing conversation about “the intersection of technical communication and disability studies.” But it is inspired by such studies [3]—and it notes that even a single exposure to the life of a disabled person reaching out for the fullest possible human experience is very inspiring and can lead a layperson such as me to enter conversations he had seldom entered in the past, and to think more deeply about what enables the disabled.

I now have a picture in my head. I think about the goals and challenges of universal design, universal usability, and rhetorical accessibility by imagining a big circle labeled “fully able humans”—referring to humans with normal and healthy physical, cognitive, and emotional faculties. I’ve made the circle big enough to list a lot of things able humans (reasonably young ones, by the way) do and enjoy. Like going shopping, going to concerts, working out at the gym, hanging out at pubs, driving cars, competing in athletic events, talking with friends, texting and otherwise communicating with friends, reading, holding down a good job, solving a problem, making a contribution, earning someone’s respect—and so on.

Around that bull’s eye with the drop-down list, I see concentric bands labeled with various kinds and degrees of human disability: visual and auditory impairments, mobility reduction, cognitive problems, illnesses, and so on.

Any kind of effort to enable the disabled can be seen as an effort to pull towards the center those people who are out in the concentric circles. Worldwide, there are hundreds of millions; Disabled World estimates that “Currently around 10% of the total world’s population, or roughly 650 million people, live with a disability” [4]. The goal of universal design for architecture, for example, would be to create buildings, spaces, and access routes/methods that could draw in as many of the disabled, as effectively as possible, towards the bull’s eye. Although it is impossible to get them all the way in, the goal is to draw them as far as possible towards full access. So—shifts new to a different enabling effort—what kinds of things will draw in someone who wants a career in professional communication, but whose disability puts him a long way out from the center?

I. Technical Editing class

On the first day of my senior-level tech editing class, Fall semester 2014, a young man rolled through the doorway in his mechanized wheelchair, accompanied by a caretaker. I walked over to greet him. His caretaker explained that Gatlin, a junior communications major wanting a technical communication minor, had enrolled in my course—and that he was quadriplegic and nonverbal, communicating via his Tobii eye-tracking device and the electronic voice that “spoke” the words he typed out with his eyes. He also communicated via a big smile and by nodding. He seemed very happy to be in class. Early in the semester, he jumped—metaphorically—at the chance to start a research and writing project about human trafficking that was recommended to the class by a guest speaker. Gatlin’s intelligence quickly became apparent to me. He is limited only by his body. He has severe cerebral palsy.

I was also impressed at the enthusiasm with which Gatlin embraced the content of my course. The core concept in the course is brevitas: a doctrine of communication style that emerged from classical rhetorical theory. This approach valorized directness, clarity, “just rightness” in choice of words, and ease of comprehension for the reader/hearer—all the while pursuing the goal of greatest effectiveness. It was a way of understanding the operation of good style as a tool of rhetoric. The idea was to find the virtuous “golden mean” for all one’s words, in the zone midway between the opposing vices of prolixity (too much) and obscurity (too little).

![Figure 1. The virtue of brevitas lies midway between the vices of obscurity and prolixity.](source: Hirst [5])

Too much and too little referenced a lot more, though, than mere word count. The vices referred to all sorts of excesses and defects of style—thereby helping define, by contrast, the better words that fell into the golden zone between them. At the same time, the ancients considered mastery and use of brevitas to be a laudable human virtue like other human virtues—something based on a theory of
proper interaction with others, and on the makeup of excellent human character. Thus, brevitas carried with it a distinct ethical dimension, and mastery of it lent the communicator a dignified ethos. I strongly emphasize this dimension of brevitas in my course. We devote a good portion of class time to discussion of ethics in the realm of professional communication, talking about how the various writing/editing techniques we’re mastering promote the reader’s success, safety, productivity, good relationships, and enjoyment—and reduce her/his mental burden.

Quoting myself from an article I ask students to read in that course:

Brevity has always been linked, not just with communicative efficiency in the abstract, but also with personal virtue. Men of few words are direct and true, not trying to deceive or flatter or get gain, nor avoid responsibility and danger, by their much speaking. Also, the habit of quietness affords plenty of time for self examination and meditation, so these persons of few words become self disciplined, self reliant, wise, even spiritual. King Henry V, in Shakespeare’s play, expresses the theory briefly: “Men of few words are the best men.” [4]

This concept appealed to Gatlin, a man performer of few words—verbally, of none.

*Technical Editing* is a weak name for my course. That title drifts towards the vice of obscurity. A better title would be *Effective and Ethical Style for the World of Work*. Although the limitations of this paper won’t allow me to present a detailed description of the workings of the course, I invite you to peruse the course syllabus—freely available online [6]—and especially to click on any of the links taking you to my interactive style lessons [7].

These lessons, together with the readings linked on the course schedule, teach the twin pillars of good technical communication: ethics and efficiency. The stylistic techniques presented in the lessons are nothing new to the realm of technical communication pedagogy, but I’ve tried to present them in a particularly enjoyable and accessible way. And, there is something else particular, if not precisely unique, about them—namely, their fusion with the notion of community, of helping empower, protect, prosper, and delight other human beings. This is the ethics pillar. Finally, the lessons are perhaps unusual in their constant reference to the principle of *conservation of mental energy*, based on the idea by nineteenth-century polymath Herbert Spencer and spelled out in one of my articles [8].

Gatlin became enthusiastic about the course. As I mentioned, he can nod, smile, and of course write—pointing at a letterboard or using eye fixations on the Tobii. But either method is laborious. It costs courageous Gatlin more to communicate than it does the rest of us. Every word counts.

I was able to provide Gatlin with a tutor, Katie King, a student who’d taken my course the semester before and was well prepared to guide Gatlin. She tutored him again the following semester as he pursued a technical communication internship as a web content developer. The three of us—student, tutor, and professor—have collaborated to write this article about the *brevitas* principle as applied in communication by, and to, disabled people. It describes Gatlin’s experience with sharpening his powers of communication, as well as his tutor’s and professor’s experiences in teaching—and learning—from him. It also suggests applications of the *brevitas* principle for instruction of and interaction with a broader range of disabled people, as well as its application to the work they themselves produce. The following two sections were written, respectively, by Katie King, Gatlin’s tutor, and by Gatlin Mcpherson himself.

**THE TUTOR’S PERSPECTIVE: KATIE KING**

Throughout my undergraduate career at the University of Tennessee, I have learned many concepts that will help me in my profession. None more so than brevitas. This concept harks back to Aristotle. It reminds us that communicating through written language is an art, not merely a subject that one passes or fails. The English language is the primary means by which we communicate; wars are fought or avoided based on communication, mergers succeed or fail, dates turn into marriages or just friendships.

Through Dr. Hirst, I have had the good fortune to meet Gatlin Mcpherson. I began tutoring him in the Fall of 2014. He has become less a student whom I tutor and more a friend I admire. I helped him navigate his way through the theory of brevitas and I am a better rhetor for the experience. I learned as he learned. I learned to see Dr. Hirst’s lessons through Gatlin’s eyes. I saw his struggles with the written and spoken word, and I knew brevitas would go a long way for him.

Gatlin is paraplegic and non-verbal due to cerebral palsy. He gets around in a motorized wheelchair and uses a Tobii augmentative device to communicate. The device follows his eyes as he picks out each letter of the words he wants to speak. When Gatlin has completed his sentence, Tobii then speaks for him. I’ve told Gatlin that Tobii needs a Southern accent to make the device more authentic. Many times I watch Gatlin’s head drop and shoulders droop when Tobii’s batteries have died during one of our tutoring sessions. He has an alphabet board and he can communicate with it, but imagine for a moment that your voice runs on a battery and if it dies you can’t speak until it recharges. It is strange to say that Gatlin is held back by technology because the technology has come so far. But in fact, technology has a great impact on what he can and cannot do.

When Gatlin and I first began working together, I knew I had just met a very smart young man. Although it was his first semester at The University of Tennessee, he was a junior. He has an associate’s degree in web technology from Pellissippi State Community College. Most of his work up
until entering UT consisted of working with computer platforms that did not require him to write very often, so Dr. Hirst’s technical editing class was very new to him, and it required a new kind of output. It seemed strange to me in the beginning because his writing was more at the high school than college level. It was as though no one had ever told him he could write with more depth and clarity. Simple things seemed foreign to him—like paying attention to subject-verb agreement, placing articles where they need to be, using helpful punctuation, etc.

Although we started by correcting these things, I kept the more important principle of brevitas in mind, as we worked. Brevitas requires that writers find just the right words—or at least nearly so. This "just rightness" can mean a number of things. It could be not using too many or too few words. It could mean finding alternate words that might reduce mental burden for the reader. It could be that a transition word in the right place would make a connection for the reader and conserve her mental energy.

Galtin and I talked about these things as we edited his writing and worked on his quizzes. There were moments when I thought he might be leaving out a word like the because he didn’t know he needed it. But the reality is that for Galtin, communicating uses up a lot of physical energy, not just mental energy. Typing the word the isn’t a big deal to most people, but when you’re Galtin every word is a big deal. As his tutor, I would remind him that our goal is that he be an excellent technical writer. I wanted him to learn to edit on his own, without me sitting next to him. I wanted him to know that sometimes he must use the word the. The stylistic vice of many students is “too much”; Galtin was in danger of the opposite vice, “too little.”

Galtin and I worked on making his writing Just Right. Part of doing this is editing. Our process included writing together, but more importantly we edited his work together. It was during the editing process, I believe, that he really learned brevitas. At first he tended to take one word, one sentence at a time. It was in the editing of his work that he learned to think about paragraphs and sections and how they came together to form a work bright with brevitas. The editing taught him how to make it just right. It was here, for example, that he learned how transitions reduce mental burden by providing logical connections that readers would otherwise have to come up with on their own (if they actually ever do it). I told him many times that when we edit, we are doing the reader’s mental work. We aren’t dumbing it down or simply using small words; we are creating a message that is easily accessible to everyone. We would find words that had been repeated several times and then find better words to replace them, or do away with a sentence that didn’t fit the overall flow of the work. As time went on, his first drafts became better and better. Whereas in the beginning editing would take hours, now it has become minutes. Galtin has learned how to find words and transitions that make reading easier for his readers. And importantly, he has reduced the mental and physical energy he expends on writing.

Galtin and I have spoken quite often about how brevitas may help others in the disabled community. He believes this process could help other paraplegics, stroke victims, and persons with ADHD. I don’t have the experience he has to be able to say it would help. I can only speak from my experience with Galtin. It helped him. I see an enormous difference in the way he writes and speaks now. A writing assignment used to be daunting to him. Now, he can’t wait to write. Again, the most important part of the process for him was editing, and especially learning that brevitas carries over from sentence to sentence. He learned that communication is not about one word or one sentence, but about putting together many sentences to form a message that flows from beginning to end.

Galtin is much more than his disability. He is an intelligent man with a bright future. He has become an impressive example to the disabled community of how brevitas helps people communicate more effectively, with less waste of energy—and with just the right words and thoughts.

**Figure 2.** Front to back: authors Gatlin McPherson, Katie King, and Dr. Russell Hirst on a visit to the offices of DesignSensory, a marketing company in Knoxville, Tennessee, USA. March 27, 2015.
I took English 460 in Fall 2014. This is a technical communication course that led me to a concept called brevitas. The idea is to deliver effective messages using just the right words, and neither too few or too many. I took this course to learn how to write technical manuals. I never expected it would lead me to a way to communicate quicker and better.

I am unable to speak because I have severe cerebral palsy. I use an augmentative device called Tobii which is controlled by my eye movements. There is a little cursor which follows my eyes’ movements to select letters. These letters then form each word that I would like to speak. Since I use my eyes to select what I want to say, it usually takes me longer to engage in a simple conversation. For example, it usually takes me five minutes to develop simple sentences. But using brevitas decreases my time developing sentences and giving responses.

My disability affects my ability to move my limbs, making it hard to use a normal keyboard. Brevitas not only decreases the mental energy required to communicate but also decreases the physical energy required. The principle of brevitas allows me to respond faster when people ask me questions. Knowing how to use brevitas, then actually applying it, has really helped me understand the concept.

Think of a scale that stretches from the fewest words to the most words you could use in your sentences. Your goal is to land in the middle of the scale. But you still miss the middle when you don’t use transition words to help readers connect the meaning of the sentences. This is why it's important to understand this concept; it focuses on helping your readers understand without tiring them out.

I strongly believe this style could help disabled people who may or may not have a disability similar to mine. Since the basic idea of brevitas is to deliver an effective message with minimal word count, I believe people with Attention Deficit and Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) can benefit from this concept. People with ADHD have a difficult time focusing while studying material, and that is where brevitas comes into the learning process. When you use this style, people will understand the material better, since brevitas brings you the message with fewer words and less demand on memory. It would make the context easier to understand for individuals with ADHD in an educational environment. Stroke victims, also, could use this principle to enable them to communicate faster.

I think brevitas could help disabled people communicate without wasting mental energy or fall behind so much while communicating. Before learning this principle, it was difficult for me to stay in a conversation. My peers would start talking about a different topic before I could form my response. This concept allows me to develop my responses quicker, so I can stay in an actual conversation. This writing style improves my communication skills, allowing me to focus on what needs to be said.

Brevitas would also help my friend who also has cerebral palsy, because he has limited use of his hands; he barely uses his left hand to type. This individual operates his augmentative device by his hands, so I know he is using both physical and mental energy. If I were to teach him how to use this writing style, I would start by telling him to trim unnecessary words. You need to bring conversation to a level where the fewest words still produce comprehension. At the same time, you must be particular about your choice of words; you wouldn’t want to make yourself sound uneducated, or miss the opportunity to make the impression you want.

Brevitas has allowed me to communicate more effectively without using too much mental energy. In a similar way, this concept would be good for stroke victims. They have to re-learn how to speak. Stroke victims usually have a hard time regaining their communication skills. This condition is known as aphasia – a language disorder due to brain damage. While the patient was relearning how to speak, the speech therapist would use minimal and familiar words, in short sentences, reducing patients’ confusion. In this way, patients would learn how to use brevitas to communicate without getting confused. Stroke victims often get confused when you use sentences with extra words. If therapists are developing a new means of communication for a patient, brevitas would form the foundation by balancing unnecessary words with basic requirements. For example, my grandmother had a stroke and is having trouble relearning how to communicate. I think she could benefit from a concept like brevitas, because it gets to the point. Brevitas could be the foundation for stroke victims learning to communicate again. Also, a person with cerebral palsy using his big toe to type because he is unable to use his hands would benefit from this concept in the same way.

Brevitas could also be the basis for teaching students with ADHD. Usually, students with ADHD are easily challenged when trying to focus on a learning task. This is because ADHD makes these students frequently daydream and lose focus on their schoolwork. Teachers could use brevitas to shorten the lessons so students with ADHD, who are having a difficult time focusing, are better able to learn. Brevitas gets directly to the point, so there’s less burden on memory and less danger of daydreaming.

Brevitas should be taught by theory and also by showing examples. It’s easier to learn brevitas when instructors show how it works. Teachers would show an ADHD student a chart of the proper way to use this concept. This chart will show a 40-word sentence, which will be reduced to an 18-word sentence. Students in the classroom would write a short paragraph and then instructors would work with the students to correct the paragraph using brevitas. Students would go through sentence by sentence to trim fat, reduce jargon, and use active voice. So, they themselves would learn to use brevitas, and also they would retain more
information presented in classrooms where the instructors are using it.

Brevitas could allow a trapped human to come out of their cage, out into society. This individual could be trapped by physical limitations, waiting on a way to express their personality. I strongly believe every word counts, especially if you have only limited use of your hand—or no use of your voice. Brevitas could open many doors for disabled people. It not only decreases the mental energy required to communicate, but also decreases the physical energy required to communicate. This concept could be used to help people with ADHD learn better. Stroke victims can benefit from this concept as they relearn to communicate after a stroke.

Brevitas has reduced my time when I develop sentences during conversations, and it has improved the impact of my communication. I never thought technical writing would lead me to a better way to communicate without struggle.

Anyone can use brevitas to communicate because it is simple to understand. Applying it takes practice, but it can be applied to communication in any profession. I would like to see brevitas become a common language for the disabled community. Promoting this style within the disabled world is the first step.

FROM HIRST: CONCLUSION

A case study doesn’t always reveal something new. Brevitas has been around for about three millennia now. And although its “virtue” component and attention to human energies make it a more sophisticated approach to good style than generic “plain language” approaches, many of its specifics match up with plain language doctrines: prefer active voice, denominalize key concepts, cut fat, reduce (or define) jargon and abstractions, prefer familiar words, use abundant logical connectors, etc. These things seem to improve communication across the board, for lay users and experts, native users of a language and non-native users, young and old—and as we see in Gatlin’s case and many others, for both the abled and disabled. In my technical editing course, when showing how brevitas for E2s (non-native users of English) is pretty nearly the same as for E1s, I often quote the old saying, “What’s good for the goose is good for the gander.” And of course I’m not the first to point this out (though perhaps I may claim the apt use of the old maxim about geese). The conversation about the intersection of technical communication and disability studies is verifying this principle of universal, or nearly universal design. For example, in their contribution to Meloncon’s collection, Jarrett, Redish, and Summers have a heading that reads “Helping one group helps another.” The text beneath begins:

Fortunately, research shows that improvements that are aimed at a particular special population (for example, older adults or low-literacy readers) will help members of other groups as well. In general, expert readers (not surprisingly) also prefer information that looks easy to read, gets to the point quickly, and provides plain language explanations of unfamiliar terms and concepts. . . . So adaptations that increase accessibility for at-risk groups help expert readers as well.” [9]

So, Gatlin’s growing enthusiasm for, and expertise with brevitas might have been predicted. We might say it’s just one more data point in the research on this theme. But for me, it’s a particularly important one because it suggests just how far out on that diagram of concentric circles this particular issue of accessibility reaches. It doesn’t have to do, primarily, with technology or architecture or robotics or medicine, as important as all those topics are in connection with the disabled. It has mostly to do with something much more fundamental and traditional—with what’s been called the “technology of English.” That is, wordcraft, particularly as it takes the approach we call brevitas: using just the right words, and neither too many nor too few, to accomplish one’s rhetorical purposes. According to my quadriplegic, nonverbal student, “promoting this style within the disabled world is the first step” towards discourse that can conserve energy, enhance dignity, and increase ability.

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