

A TIGHT SQUEEZE

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Many beginning writers are easily disheartened when their work is criticized for that inevitable tyro vice, wordiness. Others, indignant over what they consider to be an impugnement of their artistic sensitivity, ignore all admonitions to tighten up their styles, choosing instead to continue at the ratio of one sentence per ream of paper. Still others, intent on pleasing their mentors, plunge immediately into the kind of ellipticism that would make J.P. Donleavy seem like a chatterbox. The following hypothetical situation concerns such a fellow.

During his first day on the job, a zealous young reporter was sent to cover a story at the local courthouse. A few hours later he returned to his editor's desk and handed in the following:

The boisterous, nasty-tempered plaintiff in a recent turnpike accident case was awarded damages today in County Court. The presiding judge, known throughout the state for his brusqueness, passed sentence after hearing how the defendant in the case, a friend of the plaintiff, had attempted to play a practical joke by loading the plaintiff's truck with mollusks whose total weight exceeded that allowed by safety limits established by the Highway Department. The mollusks had been obtained from a third party, a friend of the defendant, who is said to have originated the joke. The excess weight caused the truck to lose its balance and go off the road and into a tree. The attorney for the defense, an extremely timid gentleman with a penchant for unethical tactics, was ostensibly upset by the judge's brief remarks, and hastened to secure a retrial by asserting under oath that the plaintiff was psychologically unbalanced and had in fact imagined the entire incident.

The editor read the story with interest, but handed it back to his young protege. "It's good, kid," he said. "But you've got to remember that we're only a small weekly -- we just don't have the space for this kind of stuff. I'm sorry, but you're not the man we're looking for."

"Hold your horses, chief," the young man said, and rushed out of the office. Less than five minutes later, he ran back in and slapped a fresh sheet of copy on the editor's blotter. The copy read:

Crass plaintiff claims cash in collision;
 Court curtly cites clams in collusion.
 Shy shyster shook up by decision,
 Swears swerving was psycho's delusion.

QUERY

In Problem 45 (The New Chemistry) in Beyond Language (Scribner's, 1967), Dmitri Borgmann introduces the concept of difference words. For example, the letters of the word FORM occupy positions 6, 15, 18 and 13 in the alphabet. The difference between 6 and 15 is 9; between 15 and 18, 3; and between 18 and 13, 5. The letters of the word ICE occupy positions 9, 3, and 5 in the alphabet; therefore, ICE is the difference word of FORM. Three-letter and four-letter difference words are relatively common. The reader is asked to consider the following two unsolved problems: without using proper nouns, (1) find a five-letter word with a four-letter difference word, which in turn has a three-letter difference word; (2) find a six-letter word with a five-letter difference word.