1 When commas go missing

(1) Last time they met Player B was in Player A’s face.

(2) Tabloids know how to exaggerate the truth but not lie.

(3) Tabloids know how to exaggerate the truth, but not lie.

(4) Tabloids know how to exaggerate the truth but they do not know how to not lie.

(5) Tabloids know how to exaggerate the truth without lying.

(6) Ed didn’t give away his cougar because it bit him.

(7) Ed didn’t give away his cougar, because it bit him.

a. He gave it away because he wanted to devote more attention to his llamas.

b. He still has his cougar; he was going to give it away, but the biting forged a new bond between them, he says.

2 An advertisement?

The original:

(8) “[... ] perhaps the topic was a little too grandiose to be tackled in under seven pages.”

The ad copy:

(9) “[... ] the ideas in this paper run so deep and so wide that it was a struggle to keep the exposition under seven pages.”
3 Experiment

The goal of this experiment is to find out what happens when we follow Williams’ maxims to the letter.

The maxims

(10) “Put in the subject/topic position of your sentences ideas that you have already mentioned, or ideas that are so familiar to your reader that if you state them at the beginning of the sentence, you will not surprise anyone.” (p. 56)

(11) “Among groups of related sentences, keep their topics consistent, if you can. They don’t have to be identical, but they should constitute a string that your readers will take to be focussed.” (p. 56)

(12) Avoid complex nominalizations unless they are in the service of (10)–(11). For example, favor Ed washed the bicycle. That was smart of him over The washing of the bicycle (by Ed) was smart . . . unless the washing of the bicycle is needed as a topic for some reason.

(13) Avoid passivization unless it is in the service of (10)–(11). For example, favor Ed washed the bicycle over The bicycle was washed (by Ed) unless the the bicycle is needed as a topic for some reason.

Corollary of (11): “At this point some of you may be recalling advice that you once received about avoiding monotony” — vary how you begin your sentences, avoid beginning sentences with the same subjects. Bad advice.”

Select a paragraph in your rough draft. Rewrite it sticking to the maxims slavishly. Is the result an improvement over what you had before?

A simple illustration

(14) What happened to the tree? (15) What happened to the truck?

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What happened to the tree?

a. The truck hit the tree.
b. The truck hit it.
c. The tree was hit by the truck.
d. It was hit by the truck.

What happened to the truck?

a. The truck his the tree.
b. It hit the tree.
c. The tree was hit by the truck.
d. The tree was hit by it.

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