

## Converting Negative Verb Contractions

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Using contractions is a simple way to make your prose more concise and informal. But when used to negate verbs, contractions can weaken sentences and make them verbose.

Consider the following sentence, a bit of summarized dialogue:

When I asked him where he'd been, he simply stared at me in misery and *didn't say anything*.

So what's wrong with the contractions here? Contracting "he had" to "he'd" is fine. The negated verb "didn't" is the problem. This final part of the sentence can be stated in a stronger, more concise way by moving the negation from the verb to the noun:

When I asked him where he'd been, he simply stared at me in misery and said nothing.

One negative contraction can spawn others. The following sentence:

He seemed that he wasn't able or willing to respond.

could be restated better:

He seemed unable or unwilling to respond.

There are instances where you *won't* want to convert such constructions—for example, in dialogue. But the technique to master is locating such contractions, removing the negative from the verb, and converting the noun. This practice often tightens your prose and strengthens the language.

Next week, we'll take a macro view of the types of editing you can perform on your fiction.

—Lee Allen Howard