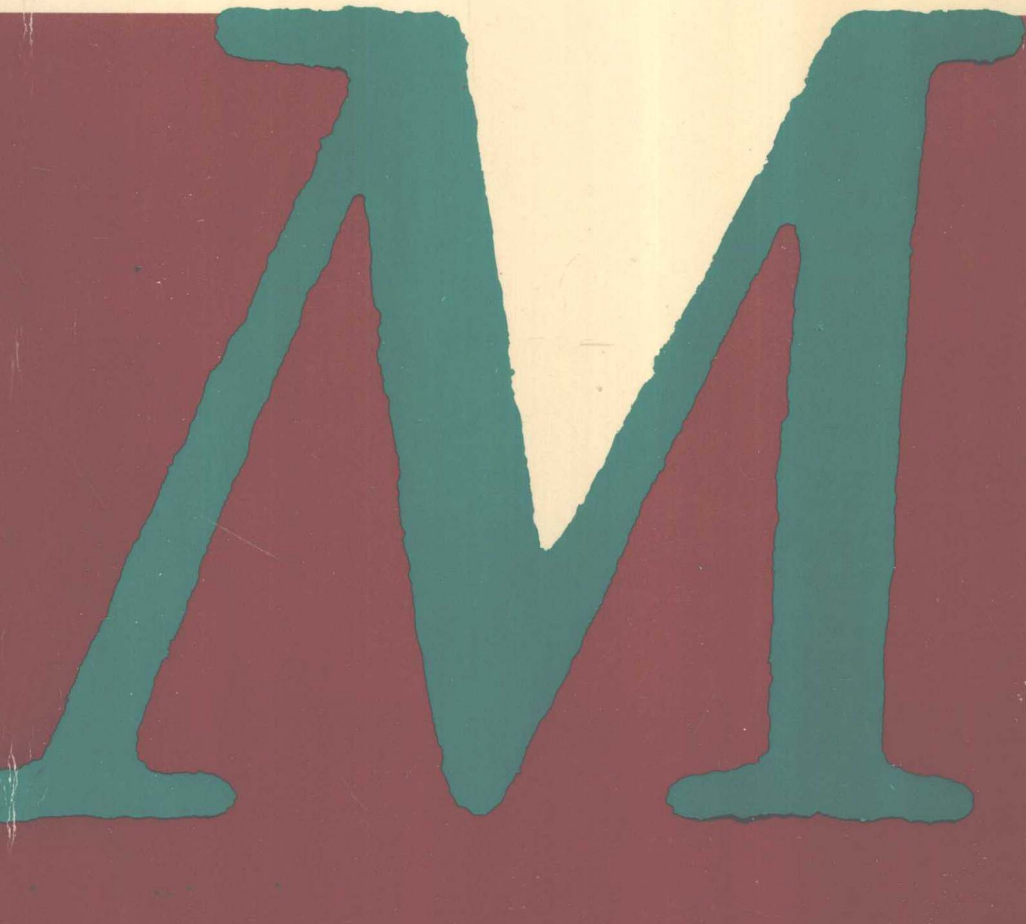
From Murk to MASTERPIECE

Geraldine Henze



From Murk to MASTERPIECE: *Style for Business Writing*

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Mark and John; Mom and Dad

Preface

Caring about style means caring about both thinking clearly and communicating thoughts and information persuasively to others. Style is, therefore, particularly important to businesspeople, who write to effect changes in people and organizations. By attending to style, business writers can check the soundness of the changes they advocate as well as communicate recommended changes effectively to others.

Nothing in *From Murk to Masterpiece* is entirely new; however, it differs from other books on style in two respects. First, it focuses on style as it applies specifically to business writing. Second, it emphasizes the processes through which good styles can be achieved. Many excellent books on style have limited appeal to the writer in business because they address students and professional writers of nonfiction. In *From Murk to Masterpiece* I've tried to demonstrate how questions of style apply to business writing and why concern with style is as important to the business writer as to the undergraduate English major, the essayist, or the novelist. I've also tried to give business writers a sense of where stylistic issues fit into the overall process of composition; that is, of how to achieve good styles while composing.

Chapter 1 suggests that style is the outcome of choice. As we compose, we continually make choices about words and their arrangement; thus, we constantly inhabit the realm of style. Chapter 2 offers suggestions for living comfortably within this realm; it provides guidelines for breaking the process of composition into stages and budgeting time for each stage. It also presents a series of questions about readers that business writers should consider during the process of composition. Frequently, business writers must address recommendations for action and change to readers who have a stake in the status quo. Assessing readers' needs, biases, knowledge, and interests is usually more crucial to the businessperson than to the essayist writing for a "general" audience or the student writing for a professor.

Chapter 3 acquaints business writers with the choices they face when formulating sentences. Chapter 4 addresses organization and structure as matters of style, using the paragraph as the basic structural unit in composition. Chapter 5 extends the concept of style to the graphic communication of information.

Taken together, Chapters 3, 4, and 5 form a guide to what I think of as "systematic editing." From my experiences as an editor in the business world and a teacher of writing to MBA candidates, I've learned that certain stylistic weaknesses crop up in almost every sample of business writing. Writers can become more effective and efficient editors of their own work by becoming familiar with these weaknesses and searching for them systematically when reviewing drafts of their letters, memos, and reports. I think it is crucial, however, that these chapters be viewed as a guide to editing rather

than to composing. When writers become overly concerned with whether their thoughts come out in active or passive voice, for example, their thinking gets bogged down; they begin to suffer from paralyzing self-consciousness. When ideas flow freely into words, the flow shouldn't be staunched in order to express each idea perfectly. It is better to let the words flow. One of the beauties of writing is that it allows us to return to our words and play with them until we are satisfied.

I hope *From Murk to Masterpiece* will be useful to a varied audience, including managers, students of business, and teachers of business writing. Whether used as a reference, a text, or a supplement to other texts, *From Murk to Masterpiece* should be augmented by other reading and by writing. One of the best ways to improve your writing style is to become aware of style while reading what others have written. I hope readers of *From Murk to Masterpiece* will begin to examine everything from routine memos to magazines and books with an eye for stylistic strengths and weaknesses. When you find something you're reading difficult, I hope you'll begin looking at its style. By knowing what to look for in terms of style and by becoming aware of what you like and dislike as a reader, you'll develop a good sense of what to strive for as a writer.

Nobody can become a better writer without practice, and writing never improves significantly overnight. Changing habits isn't easy, particularly writing habits. But I hope *From Murk to Masterpiece* will encourage business writers to experiment with new approaches to writing and new ways of expressing themselves. More important, I hope it will give them greater confidence in many of the strategies and tactics they already use, per-

haps without even recognizing them as good approaches to writing.

Acknowledging all the intellectual and personal debts accrued in writing *From Murk to Masterpiece* would be impossible, so I'll confine myself to the major ones.

Most of all, I owe thanks to Christine Kelly, Associate Professor of Management Communication and Director of the Business Communications Program of New York University's Graduate School of Business Administration. Under her guidance, much of the material in *Murk* was first developed. Throughout the process of turning that material into a book, Chris provided encouragement and criticism, both of which contributed significantly to the final product.

A preliminary version of my manuscript was read by three colleagues in the field of management communication: Professor Robert Gieselman of the University of Illinois at Urbana, Dr. Olivia Stockard of Chase Manhattan Bank, and Ann Bohara of Wharton. The thoughtful comments of these reviewers greatly strengthened the manuscript.

On its seemingly interminable journey to final form, the manuscript was also read and critiqued by a variety of other people who made valuable contributions: Professor Charles Bastable of Columbia Business School; Gail Williams of Home Box Office, Inc.; Chris Novak of Foote, Cone, and Belding; Marcus Edward of Credit Lyonnais; Laura Hansen, who has been my teaching assistant during the past three terms at Columbia Business School, and students in my classes.

Finally, I'd like to extend special thanks to three people. Professor Irene Nichols of Northeastern University furnished support in many forms. She helped me think my way through the material on process in Chapter 2 and got me past several writer's blocks by listening patiently and intelligently to my frequent complaints of discouragement. As a non-business writer working in the business world, Lowery McClendon provided refreshing perspectives on the manuscript, which he also helped prepare for publication. Last, I am deeply indebted to Rob Rosecrans for his faith in the value of the project, his helpful criticisms, his generous donations of time and encouragement, and in other ways far too numerous and personal to recount.

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From Murk to
MASTERPIECE

Chapter 1

The Role of Style in Business Writing

The realm of style is the realm of choice. The choices we make about clothing define our style of dress; the choices we make about spending time define our style of life. The choices we make about words in letters, memos, reports, essays, articles, and books define our style of writing.

Style includes everything not governed by rules, laws, constraints, or force. English grammar demands that we form singular possessives (in most cases) by adding an apostrophe and an *s*. To compose correct, meaningful sentences, writers must follow certain rules, like the rules governing the formation of possessives. The rules of English grammar do not tell us, however, whether to write "The company's strategic plan" or "The strategic plan of the company." When we decide between these alternatives, we enter the realm of choice—the realm of style.

Through their choices, writers reveal their motives, values, knowledge, skill, experience, self-image, and status, *whether they mean to or not.* No writer lacks style; every writer must make choices about words and their arrangement. The choices may be poor ones—uninformed, hasty, inconsistent, derivative—but they are choices, nonetheless. And they reflect the chooser—the writer—in the reader's eye. When we write, we not only reveal our choices but also record them. The relative permanence of writing (what we *say* usually vanishes even as we speak) gives style particular weight in writing, especially in business, where so much that is written remains in files, the memories of organizations.

Most of us acquire writing styles by imitation. Sometimes we consciously imitate models; at other times we unconsciously mimic the style of the writing

we read. When asked to write a letter requesting payment from a client, a business writer will often search the files for letters making similar requests. In such cases, imitation is conscious, deliberate. Often, however, we imitate unconsciously, without being aware of precisely what we're imitating or why. People surrounded by poor writing usually wind up writing poorly because they imitate, consciously or unconsciously, what they read. Unfortunately, the prose written in most organizations and the prose found in many business texts provide bad models for budding business writers.

When I speak of business prose as "bad," I mean unnecessarily time-consuming to read, understand, and retain. Prose that is difficult—that makes a reader work hard—isn't always bad. In fact, rewarding prose often makes readers work hard for understanding. Reading Emerson, for example, requires concentration and persistence. A reader could spend hours, days, even years contemplating the meaning of the following passage from "Self-Reliance":

> To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men—that is genius.

This passage is difficult because it defines a complex but familiar concept—genius—in an unexpected way. It makes us stop reading to think. It invites us to recall our own experience and notions of genius in order to understand the meaning of Emerson's statement. Perhaps it makes us pause as we note the paradoxical similarity between Emerson's definition of genius and what we normally think of as "madness."

A wealth of thought and insight informs "Self-

Reliance." To discover even a portion of the truth in this essay, we must read it carefully, reread it frequently, and stop for thinking at numerous points along the way.

Compare the difficulty of the Emerson passage with the difficulty of the following sentence from a report by James Barnes, Director of Nevada's Energy Department:

> Ostensibly, the rule is being proposed to minimize proliferation concerns related to the weapons program.
>
> *New York Times,* August 16, 1983.

This sentence also requires hard work; however, the reader's work yields little by way of reward. Here we struggle to uncover a statement obscured by inflated language, buzzwords, and passive voice. We may suspect that Mr. Barnes hasn't said what he meant, and we may wonder whether the obscurity and ambiguity are intentional. Did Mr. Barnes want to talk about minimizing "proliferation concerns" or about minimizing the likelihood of proliferation? Does he mean "concerns related to the weapons program" generally, or is he referring specifically to nuclear arms?

Many good writers make us work hard, but good writers reward our labor. Bad writers also make us work hard, but the fruits of our labor aren't worth the effort. When we struggle with bad prose, we usually struggle to uncover messages buried in murk. Having taken the trouble to disinter these messages, we are often dismayed to find that they are ill-conceived and unintentionally ambiguous.

Much of the prose we find in the business world, in business texts, and in books about business is bad—