

precision
a
reference
handbook
for
writers

Robert J. Gula

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Preface

Precision: A Reference Handbook for Writers is designed for anyone interested in precision: precision in thinking, in analyzing, in writing, and in communicating. It attempts to put between two covers as many areas of technical expertise as students of English may ever need to consult. Hence it includes sections on grammar and syntax, punctuation and mechanics, spelling, usage, documentation, sentence structure, paragraph unity and development, literary terms, and manuscript presentation. It is designed primarily as a reference book. The explanations are brief and the illustrations simple. Problems of writing have been itemized and isolated as discretely as possible under various headings; since some items apply to more than one heading, however, there is often duplication among the various chapters for the sake of thoroughness.

This book is not designed as a rhetoric; its aim is to serve as a resource to those who wish to use the language as accurately, precisely, and correctly as possible. It therefore by and large assumes a context of formal writing. Some of the entries may seem petty: does anyone care about the difference between *compare to* and *compare with*, for instance? Educated people should at least be aware that there is a distinction between the two. They can then honor or disregard that distinction at their discretion. But if they use *disinterested* instead of *uninterested*, they are exposing themselves to misinterpretation. It is such misinterpretation that this book has been designed to combat. If one knows the dangers, one can then

PREFACE

avoid those dangers. Precision is not an end in itself, but it does help to make one less vulnerable and to assist one in communicating effectively.

A final word: the reader should realize that many of the rules cited throughout these pages are not absolute. There is no single standard, for instance, regarding the use of the comma, just as there is no invariable, universal standard regarding the principles of mechanics and usage. There are generally accepted conventions, but the rules for stylistic correctness are not graven in stone. Language is constantly changing, and the conventions change with the language. All one need do is read contemporary writing and one will see considerable variation in style; and certainly if one were to read even a paragraph from Dickens or Hawthorne, for instance, one would immediately see how much the principles of style have changed. We do need some generally accepted guidelines but, far more important, we should attempt to understand the reasons behind those guidelines. A mindless adherence to the rules can result in bad writing just as effectively as a complete ignorance of those rules. This is not to say that we are free to disregard the conventions at will, but it is to say that we should be willing to accept variations in style and that we should constantly be educating ourselves by noticing how writers, both good and bad, use the conventions. Our writing should be precise but at the same time it should be sensitive. The comma, for instance, is not an end in itself; it is a service to the reader. A dangling modifier is not intrinsically wrong; rather it leads to possible misinterpretation. And while one can still make one's point by using a plural verb after *neither*, doing so can distract the reader. It is such distraction and such misinterpretation that the "rules" help one to avoid, and it is the responsibility of the mature writer to use those rules but to do so with sensitivity and understanding, realizing that what may be appropriate in one context may not be appropriate in a different context.

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language

1

On Speaking

The type of language that we use varies with the person with whom we are speaking and the context in which we are speaking. We use one level of language when we talk to a child, another when we talk to a peer, and still another when we talk to a superior. We use one type of language when we write a letter to a friend and a different type when we write a letter to a potential employer. Our language differs in moments of recreation and moments of business.

Many labels have been attached to the different types of diction: slang, colloquial, regional, archaic, obsolete, poetic, British. Then there are the broader categories, such as formal, informal, general, standard, nonstandard, substandard, illiterate.

This book will make only three distinctions: formal, informal, and substandard.

Formal English is what we use when we engage in scholarly pursuits; college writing; term, research, and technical papers; letters to potential employers; professional correspondence; and so on. Formal English acknowledges all the conventions of grammar, sentence structure, punctuation, mechanics, and word usage. Informal English is what we use in most of our communication—in our discussions and conversations. Informal English acknowledges most of the conventions of grammar, style, and usage, but it is, as its name suggests, more relaxed than formal English. We may also use substandard English from time to time. Substandard language

1 ON SPEAKING

incorporates slang and vulgarity, and it frequently ignores the conventions of grammar and usage.

It is important to be aware of the different types and levels of diction, not because there is anything intrinsically important about these levels, but because we should realize that what is appropriate in one context may not be appropriate in another. We should be in sufficient control of our language to be able to switch levels of diction when the occasion demands it.

The introductory chapter of this book is devoted to informal—particularly spoken—English. It is fine for speech to be informal. At the same time, the purpose of speech is to communicate, and effective communication depends upon some degree of precision. There are dangers in being too informal; this chapter will try to explain some of those dangers. Certain sloppy habits have entered our speech, often without our realizing it, and we would profit from breaking those habits. Therefore, let us make an effort to deprogram ourselves:

From the use of crutch words:

you know like I mean right really sort of

The following account is not as close to parody as one might think:

I was sort of driving from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh, you know, and it was raining, I mean it was really raining, and like the roads were wet, and this guy—like he was really out of it—and he started to pass me, right! and like he lost control of the car, you know, and the next thing he was sort of over the guard rail. I mean, like I was scared!

One may defend the speaker of this passage by saying that this is merely a very colloquial form of discourse. Regardless, the speaker makes such a use of crutch words that many listeners will become distracted and put off. They may rightly or wrongly suspect that they are listen-

ing to an empty-headed person. Whether we like it or not, our speech often elicits a judgment from our audience, and if our speech is muddled, the judgment may be unfavorable.

1 B

From an indiscriminate use of adjectives and adverbs:

basically really amazing fantastic incredible
obviously nice good interesting just

Basically all I really want is to graduate with honors.

His pitching was fantastic.

The movie was amazing.

I just know that the weekend will be fabulous.

Amazing, fantastic, incredible and other such powerful adjectives should be reserved for truly extreme reactions and should not be used as synonyms for *good* or *better than usual*. Similarly, *good* should not be used as a euphemism for *satisfactory*.

If we are indiscriminate in our use of strong adjectives and adverbs, what will we say when we truly want to express an extreme reaction? Like the boy who cried wolf, excessive use of hyperbole will make true hyperbole impossible.

The use of *just* illustrated above often indicates vapid-ity masquerading as wisdom and often bespeaks sham sincerity.

Nice and *interesting* are almost meaningless in contemporary speech; in fact, they may suggest that the speaker doesn't know how to react and is reluctant to express an opinion:

X: What do you think of my new painting?

Y: Oh, I think it's very interesting.

Most likely speaker Y either doesn't understand the painting or else doesn't like it. Otherwise, he would have responded with more depth — or at least more precision.

1 ON SPEAKING

Obvious(ly) is often used dogmatically to camouflage an opinion or a generality:

Obviously President Carter was foolish for sponsoring and signing the Panama Canal treaty.

There is nothing obvious about this situation. It is a complex situation and deserves far more than a verbal curtsy. This statement parades as fact what is an opinion.

1 C From an indiscriminate use of adverbs of degree:

very quite rather somewhat extremely
These poems are somewhat unique.

Either they're unique or they're not.

I was rather happy to see Sarah.

Is the speaker suggesting that he or she was only somewhat happy to see Sarah, not wholeheartedly happy?

When we use these adverbs indiscriminately, we run the risk of distorting our true meaning.

1 D From using vague nouns and pronouns:

stuff things things like that
something whatever

I like math and things like that.

He said that he was tired or something.

You can go to a game or watch TV or whatever.

The problem with such expressions is that they suggest that the speaker himself is unsure of what he is talking about.

1 E From the indiscriminate use of the verb *love* and of verbs of *thinking*:

I love cashews.

I'd love to hear your opinions on this matter.

I'm sure that there's a gas station at the next exit.

I think that she should have come to the meeting.

I just know that he's the one who informed the boss.

Love describes an intense emotional experience, one hardly fitting for cashews, baseball games, or favorite record albums. The colloquial use of this word is indeed widespread, but it still bespeaks a lack of precision in describing one's feelings.

The verb *think* connotes a mental process. Too often it is used to express one's likes, dislikes, biases, prejudices, hopes, frustrations. When people use the expression *I think*, rarely have they actually done any thinking at all; usually they are merely reacting emotionally.

Perhaps it would be better to substitute the verb *suspect* or *feel* in situations like these. Unless we know for a fact that there is a gas station at the next exit or that he was in fact the one who informed the boss, we should not pretend to do so.

1 F From creating words in *-ize*:

| | | | |
|-------------------------------------|----------|------------|------------|
| optimize | maximize | culturize | radicalize |
| enablize | alienize | prioritize | finalize |
| summerize (as opposed to winterize) | | | |

We constantly hear these words on radio and television, and they constantly sound offensive. Words such as these are often used by speakers who have not thought out precisely what they want to say and hence resort to formulaic patterns to avoid careful thought.

1 G From the use of *fun* before a noun and from the use of *-wise* as a suffix:

1 ON SPEAKING

He had a fun time at the party.

He's not very good speedwise, but he's an excellent batter.

The comments relating to example 1 F also apply here.

George Orwell once asked writers to ask of themselves:
Have I said anything that is avoidably ugly?*

Words in *-ize* and *-wise* are avoidably ugly. Avoid them!

1 H From the use of contemporary clichés:

He's really *into* folk dancing. He thinks *that's where it's at*.
She's with it.

It took a while for us to be able to *communicate*, but I guess
that's what interpersonal relationships are all about.

Again, Orwell's comments are particularly apt:

If you use readymade phrases, you not only don't have to hunt about for words; you also don't have to bother with the rhythms of your sentences. . . . By using stale metaphors, similes, and idioms, you save much mental effort, at the cost of leaving your meaning vague, not only for your reader but for yourself.

1 I From verbal sloppiness:

a) *All's for all that*:

All's I can remember is that you were rude.

b) *A whole 'nother for another or completely different*:

There was a whole 'nother aspect to the situation.

c) Abuse of the exhortation *let's*:

Let's everyone pitch in to make this campaign a success.

*George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," in *Shooting an Elephant and Other Essays* by George Orwell, copyright 1945, 1946, 1949. Reprinted by permission of Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.

What the speaker should have said is:

Let everyone pitch in

or

I hope everyone will pitch in

d) Beginning a sentence with *plus*:

The mayor has fought for tax reform. Plus, he has improved the quality of our schools.

e) The illogical use of the conjunction *so*:

You'll recognize Bright Toothpaste by the snappy red box. So buy Bright.

f) The use of *and* instead of a word expressing consequence or instead of a mark of punctuation:

The cast has worked hard to make this play a good one, and we hope that you will all come.

Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett were famous lovers, and I'm going to read you some of their poems.

What the speakers meant was:

Since the cast has worked hard to make this play a good one, we hope that you will all come.

or

The cast has worked hard to make this play a good one; therefore, we hope that you will all come.

Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett were famous lovers. I'm going to read you some of their poems.

Words have meanings, and it is a responsibility of the speaker to honor those meanings. If we can use words to suit our fancy, we run the risk of inviting chaos reminiscent of Alice's world in *Through the Looking Glass*:

"When *I* use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master — that's all."