

Revising Business prose

**SECOND
EDITION**

Richard A. Lanham



RICHARD A. LANHAM

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES
PRESIDENT, RHETORICA, INC.

**Revising
Business
Prose**

Second Edition

MACMILLAN PUBLISHING COMPANY
NEW YORK
COLLIER MACMILLAN PUBLISHERS
LONDON

Copyright © 1987, Richard A. Lanham

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the Publisher.

Earlier edition copyright © 1981 by Richard A. Lanham,
published by Charles Scribner's Sons.

Portions of this work appear in modified form in
Revising Prose, Second Edition, Copyright © 1987 by Richard A. Lanham.

Macmillan Publishing Company
866 Third Avenue, New York, New York 10022

Collier Macmillan Canada, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lanham, Richard A.

Revising business prose.

1. English language—Business English. 2. English
language—Style. 3. English language—Rhetoric.
4. Editing. I. Title.

PE1479.B87L36 1987

808'.066651

86-12691

ISBN 0-02-367430-X

Printing:

6 7

Year:

0 1 2 3

ISBN 0-02-367430-X

Preface

What should written communication in business be like? It ought to be fast, specific, and responsible. It should show someone acting, doing something to or for someone else. Business life offers few occasions for the descriptive set-piece. It chronicles history in the making, depicts someone acting on matter or on people. Abstractions occur in an applied context, form part of a problem. Business prose ought to be verb-style prose, lining up actor, action, and object in a chain of power and lining them up fast.

Increasingly, though, it is moving in just the opposite direction, toward a special language we might call the "Official Style." The Official Style is the language of bureaucracies, of large organizations; it is a noun-centered language, abstract, voiced always in the passive, and slow. Above all, it strives to disguise the actor, allow such action as cannot be quashed entirely to seep out in an impersonal construction—never "I decided" but always "It has been decided that. . . ."

It isn't hard to see why the Official Style threatens to inherit the business world as it has done the government. We are all bureaucrats these days, or shortly will be, whether we work for the government directly or work in the private sector and get our government money through grants, contracts, or subsidies. And even if—especially if—we belong to that shrinking part of the private sector that remains really private, we'll be for certain filling out government forms, having OSHA for lunch whether we invited her or not.

Thus we all have to do business in the Official Style—Federalese, Bureaucratese, Sociologese, Educationese, Doublespeak, or only our firm's "company style." And to do

REVISING BUSINESS PROSE

business in it, we will often—though not always—want to translate it into English. If “initiation of the termination process is now considered appropriate” *re* us, we have to know that it’s time to be looking for another job. And some of us may also practice this kind of translation in the name of business efficiency, verbal aesthetics, or plain cultural sanity.

People think this “plague” of bureaucratic writing is hard to cure. Not so. Nothing is easier—if you want to cure it. The Paramedic Method suggested here provides just the emergency therapy needed—a quick, self-teaching method of revision for people who want to translate the Official Style, their own or someone else’s, into plain English. But it is just that—a first aid kit. It’s not the art of medicine. As with paramedicine in underdeveloped countries, it does not attempt to teach a full body of knowledge but only to diagnose and cure the epidemic disease. It won’t answer, though at the end it addresses, the big question: having the cure, how do you know when, or if, you should take it? For this you need the art of medicine, and for prose style this means a mature training in verbal self-awareness, coupled with wide reading and continued writing. The second edition of *Revising Business Prose* offers something considerably less ambitious, not a liberal education or even a businesslike Muse, but only a specific method for a specific problem.

We’ll begin with some nuts-and-bolts details of sentence shape, rhythm, and emphasis, and then try to focus the Official Style as a whole, ask what it is and does and why it came about. Next, we’ll work through a case study that shows the perils of prose revision in a bureaucratic context like that in which so many of us work. Finally, we’ll consider briefly the central question—when to use the Official Style and when to leave it alone. And, as a concluding note, I’ll glance at the electronic revolution now sweeping over business communication of all sorts.

I’m trying to make you hyperconscious about the Official Style. After all, you can’t hit what you can’t see. Since people no longer seem to know much grammar, I’ve included the

PREFACE

basic terms in an Appendix. All the prose examples, by the way—the “Jim kicks Bill” paradigm excepted—come from real writing in what, with some exaggeration, we call “the real world.”

A word on the Paramedic Method—(PM). It works only if you *follow* it rather than *argue* with it. When it tells you to get rid of the prepositional phrases, get rid of them. Don’t go into a “but, well, in this case, given my style, really I need to . . .” bob and weave. You’ll never learn anything that way. The PM constitutes the center of this book. Use it. It’s printed in full on page xii; clip it out and tack it above your desk for easy reference.

R. A. L.

Note: A half-hour video cassette, also called *Revising Business Prose*, is available for use with this book. Through digital videographics, it shows the Paramedic Method at work in color and sound.

The Paramedic Method

1. Circle the prepositions.
2. Circle the “is” forms.
3. Ask “Who is kicking who?”
4. Put this “kicking” action in a simple (not compound) active verb.
5. Start fast—no mindless introductions.
6. Write out each sentence on a blank sheet of paper and mark off its basic rhythmic units with a “/”.
7. Read the passage aloud with emphasis and feeling.
8. Mark off sentence lengths in the passage with a “/”.

Contents

CHAPTER 1		
	Who's Kicking Who?	1
CHAPTER 2		
	Sentences and Shopping Bags	17
CHAPTER 3		
	Voicing, Sentence Length, Rhythm, and Sound	39
CHAPTER 4		
	The Official Style	59
CHAPTER 5		
	The Perils of Revision	81
CHAPTER 6		
	Why Bother?	97
CHAPTER 7		
	A Note on the Electronic Word	105
APPENDIX		
	Terms	109

Who's Kicking Who?

No responsible business person these days would feel comfortable writing simply "Jim kicks Bill." The system seems to require something like "One can easily see that a kicking situation is being implemented between Bill and Jim." Or, "This is the kind of situation in which Jim is a kicker and Bill is a kickee." Jim cannot enjoy kicking Bill; no, for official use, it must be "Kicking Bill is an ongoing activity hugely enjoyed by Jim." Absurdly contrived examples? Here are some real ones:

This office is in need of a dynamic manager of sales.

After reviewing the research and in light of the relevant information found within the context of the conclusions, we feel that there is definite need for some additional research to more specifically pinpoint our advertising and marketing strategies.

Ms. Jones is attempting to reduce the number of personnel attending meetings with the goal of sending only one representative to any given meeting. If decisions are expected to result from the meeting, the cognizant decision maker attends the meeting. This eliminates the requirement to further recommunicate facts necessary for making the decision.

REVISING BUSINESS PROSE

See what they have in common? They are like our Bill and Jim examples, assembled from strings of prepositional phrases glued together by that all-purpose epoxy "is." In each case the sentence's verbal force has been shunted into a noun and for a verb we make do with "is," the neutral copulative, the weakest verb in the language. Such sentences project no life, no vigor. They just "are." And the "is" generates those strings of prepositional phrases fore and aft. It's so easy to fix. Look for the real action. Ask yourself, who's kicking who? (Yes, I know, it should be *whom*, but doesn't it sound stilted?)

In "This office is in need of a dynamic manager of sales," the action obviously lies in "need." And so, "This office needs a dynamic sales manager." The needless prepositional phrase, "in need of," simply disappears once we see who's kicking who. The sentence, animated by a real verb, comes alive, and in seven words instead of eleven. (If you've not paid attention to your own writing before, think of a lard factor [LF] of one-third to one-half as normal and don't stop revising until you've removed it.) The lard factor is found by dividing the difference between the number of words in the original and the revision by the number of words in the original—in this case:

$$11 - 7 = 4 \div 11 = 0.36 \text{ or } 36\%$$

We now have the beginnings of the Paramedic Method (PM):

1. Circle the prepositions.
2. Circle the "is" forms.
3. Ask "Who is kicking who?"
4. Put this "kicking" action in a simple (not compound) active verb.

What about the second example?

After reviewing the research and (in)light (of) the relevant information found (within) the context (of) the conclusions,

we feel that there is definite need for some additional research to more specifically pinpoint our advertising and marketing strategies.

The standard formula: “is” + prepositional phrases fore and aft. Who’s kicking who here? Well, the kicker is obviously “we.” And the action? “Needing,” just as in the previous example, and here buried in “there is definite need for.” So the core of the sentence emerges as “We need more research.” Let’s revise what comes before and after this central statement.

of previous suggest that
~~After reviewing the research and in light of the relevant~~
~~information found within the context of the conclusions,~~
~~we feel that there is definite need for some additional~~
^{more}
~~research to more specifically pinpoint our advertising and~~
~~marketing strategies.~~

The completed revision then reads:

The conclusions of previous research suggest that we need more research to pinpoint our advertising and marketing strategies.

Eighteen words instead of 38—LF 53%. Not bad—but wait a minute. How about “the conclusions of”? Do we really need it? Why not just:

Previous research suggests that we need more research to pinpoint our advertising and marketing strategies. (LF 60%)

And this revision, as so often happens, suggests a further and more daring one:

REVISING BUSINESS PROSE

Previous research ~~suggests that we need more research to~~ ^{has failed} pinpoint our advertising and marketing strategies. (LF 71%)

By now, of course, we've changed kicker and kickee and, to an extent, the meaning. But isn't the new meaning what the writer really wanted to say in the first place? A previous failure has generated a subsequent need? And the new version *sounds* better, too. The awkward repetition of "research" has been avoided and we've finally found the real first kicker, "Previous research," and found out what it was doing—it "failed." We can now bring in the second kicker in an emphatic second sentence:

Previous research has failed to pinpoint our advertising and marketing strategies. *We need to know more.*

No "is," no prepositional phrases, an LF of 58%, and the two actors and actions clearly sorted out.

The drill for this problem stands clear. Circle every form of "to be" (e.g., "is," "was," "will be," "seems to be") and every prepositional phrase. Then find out who's kicking who and start rebuilding the sentence with that action. Two prepositional phrases in a row turn on the warning light, three make a problem, and four invite disaster.

With a little practice, sentences like

The role of markets is easily observed and understood when dealing with a simple commodity such as potatoes.

will turn into

Examining a simple commodity like potatoes shows clearly how markets work. (LF 39%)

You will see more quickly how to infuse our third example

with some life and vigor. The opening sentence shows the typical "is" plus-prepositional-phrases form:

Ms. Jones *is attempting*
to reduce the number
of personnel attending meetings
with the goal
of sending only one representative
to any given meeting.

I've cheated a little by putting the infinitive phrase "to reduce" in the prepositional phrase list, but here, as so often, it works structurally in just the same way as the prepositional phrases, making the sentence look and read like a laundry list. Try reading it aloud. Hear the list-like monotony? What can we do to break up this pattern?

First, substitute a single emphatic verb for the compound "is attempting." "Ms. Jones *wants . . .*" The next element—"to reduce the number of personnel attending meetings with the goal of sending only one representative"—says the same thing twice. Once is enough: "Ms. Jones wants to send only one person to each meeting." We have reduced 23 words to 11, made the sentence half as long and twice as clear. The second sentence needs an active verb instead of a passive one; when you supply it, you see a form waiting to emerge:

ORIGINAL

If decisions are expected to result from the meeting, the cognizant decision maker attends the meeting.

REVISION

If the meeting is going to make decisions, the decision maker should attend.

Usually, you can collapse "is going to make decisions" into "decide something," and thus satisfy the PM rule that asks for a simple rather than a compound verb—"decide" rather than

REVISING BUSINESS PROSE

"make decisions." But here I am trying to let a classical verbal shape emerge, one called *chiasmus*, in which an initial A:B sequence is matched later, for symmetry and balance, by a B:A sequence: "make decisions" and "decision-maker." Chiasmus draws the two elements of the sentence together into a tighter structure, yokes the verb phrase ("makes decisions") and the noun ("decision-maker") together. Shapes like these are fun to see and read because the shape and sound reinforce the meaning, and make the sentence easier to understand by drawing the related elements more closely together.

And what of the third sentence? You could add it to the second: "If the meeting is going to make decisions, the decision maker should attend herself, and not hear about it secondhand." But do you really need the third sentence at all? Isn't it implied by the second? Doesn't this writer, as we saw in the first sentence, spell things out too much? I think we can eliminate it. And so we have:

ORIGINAL

Ms. Jones is attempting to reduce the number of personnel attending meetings with the goal of sending only one representative to any given meeting. If decisions are expected to result from the meeting, the cognizant decision maker attends the meeting. This eliminates the requirement to further recommunicate facts necessary for making the decision.

REVISION

Ms. Jones wants to send only one person to each meeting. If the meeting is going to make decisions, the decision maker attends.

We have reduced 53 words to 23, a lard factor of 57%. And it is much more than twice as clear. The "Official Style" is not only long-winded; it is hard to read.

The Official Style can be found in all kinds of writing.

Look at these "of" strings from a communications theorist, a literary critic, and a popular gourmet:

It is the totality *of* the interrelation *of* the various components *of* language and the other communication systems which is the basis for referential memory.

These examples *of* unusual appropriateness *of* the sense *of* adequacy to the situation suggest the primary signification *of* rhyme in the usual run *of* lyric poetry.

Frozen breads and frozen pastry completed the process *of* depriving the American woman *of* the pleasure *of* boasting *of* her baking.

These "of" strings are the worst. They remind you of a child pulling a gob of bubble gum out into a long string. When you try to revise them, you can feel how fatally easy the "is and of" formulation can be for expository prose. And how fatally confusing, too, since to find an active, transitive verb for "is" means, often, adding a specificity the writer has not provided. So, in the first example, what does "is the basis for" really mean? And does the writer mean that language's components interact with "other communication systems," or is he talking about "components" of "other communication systems" as well? The "of" phrases refer back to those going before in so general a way that you can't keep straight what really modifies what. So revision here, alas, is partly a guess.

ORIGINAL

It is the totality of the interrelation of the various components of language and the other communication systems which is the basis for referential meaning.

REVISION 1

Referential meaning emerges when the components of language interact with other communication systems.

REVISING BUSINESS PROSE

Or the sentence might mean:

REVISION 2

Referential meaning emerges when the components of language interact with the components of other communications systems.

Do you see the writer's problem? He has tried to be more specific than he needs to be, to build his sentence on a noun ("totality") that demands a string of "of's" to qualify it. Ask where the action is, build the sentence on a *verb*, and the "totality" follows as an implication.

The second example shows even more clearly how an "of" string can blur what goes with what. Do the first two prepositional phrases ("of the sense of adequacy") form a unit that refers back to "appropriateness"? That is, something like this:

of the sense of adequacy,

These examples of unusual appropriateness to the situation suggest . . .

Or are we to take all three prepositional phrases as a subunit that refers back to "appropriateness"? Something like this:

of the sense of adequacy to the situation,

These examples of unusual appropriateness suggest . . .

No way to tell, and the irresolution between the two blurs our vision. Taking such a sentence out of context doesn't help, of course, but even in context we'd stop and blink to clear our eyes. Here's the original again and my best guess for a revision:

ORIGINAL

These examples of unusual appropriateness of the sense of adequacy to the situation suggest the primary signification of rhyme in the usual run of lyrical poetry.

REVISION

These examples, where adequacy to the situation seems unusually appropriate, suggest how rhyme usually works in lyric poetry.

The third passage is much easier to fix:

ORIGINAL

Frozen breads and frozen pastry completed the process of depriving the American woman of the pleasure of boasting of her baking.

REVISION

No longer, after frozen breads and pastry, could the American woman boast about her baking.

In asking who's kicking who, a couple of mechanical tricks come in handy. Besides getting rid of the "is's" and changing every passive voice ("is defended by") to an active voice ("defends"), you can squeeze the compound verbs hard, make every "are able to" turn into a "can," every "seems to succeed in creating" into "creates," every "cognize the fact that" (no, I didn't make it up) into "think," every "am hopeful that" into "hope," every "provides us with an example of" into "exemplifies," every "seeks to reveal" into "shows," and every "there is the inclusion of" into "includes."

And you can amputate those mindless introductory phrases, "The fact of the matter is that" and "The nature of the case is that." Start fast and then, as they say in the movies, "Cut to the chase." Instead of "The answer is in the negative," you'll find yourself saying "No."

We now can add a rule to the Paramedic Method (PM):

1. Circle the prepositions.
2. Circle the "is" forms.
3. Ask "Who is kicking who?"