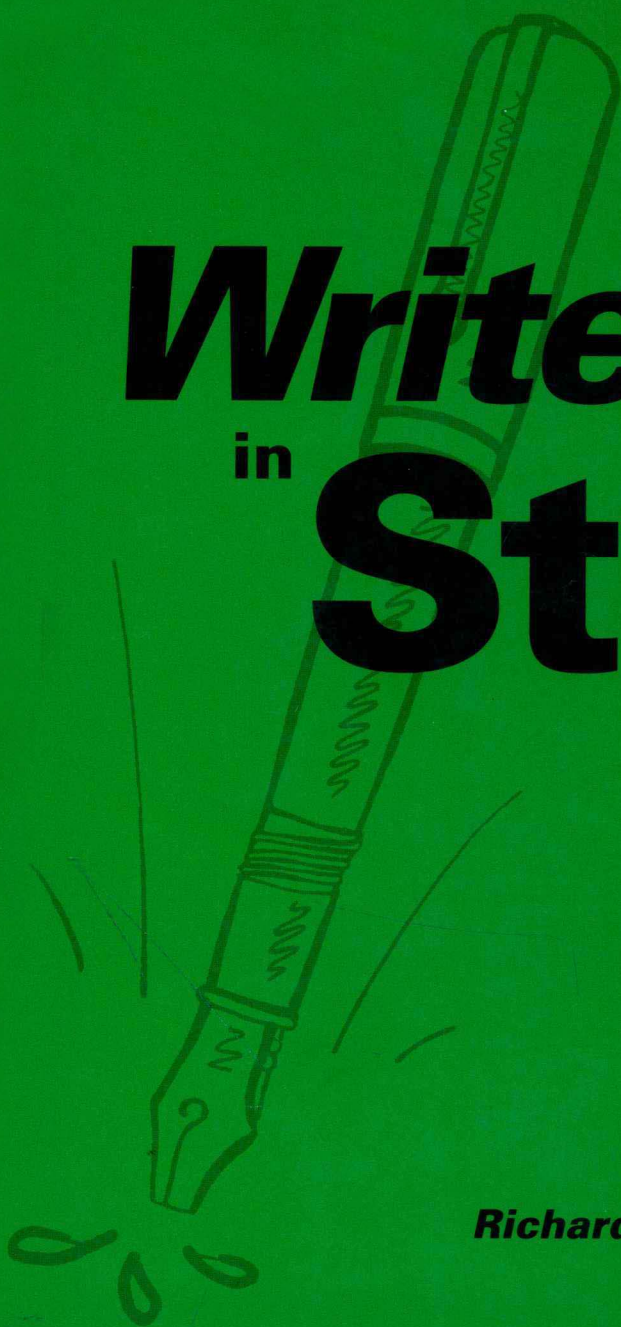


**A  
guide  
to  
good  
English**

# **Write in Style**



**Richard Palmer**



**E & FN SPON**  
An Imprint of Chapman & Hall

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A guide to good English

Richard Palmer

Head of English  
Bedford School



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# PREFACE

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## THE PLEASURE PRINCIPLE AND THE WORK ETHIC

We put our love where we have put our labour.

*Ralph Waldo Emerson*

When work is a pleasure, life is a joy. When work is a duty, life is slavery.

*Maxim Gorky*

Men seldom give pleasure when they are not pleased themselves.

*Samuel Johnson*

The Kingman Report into the learning and teaching of English was published in 1988. Reviewing it in a leading article\*, *The Guardian* assumed as a proven fact that there are two extreme factions in the English teaching profession. One is characterized by a 'yearning for more learning by rote' and a 'return to traditional grammar lessons'; the other is distinguished by its 'belief that rules should not be taught but absorbed'.

The editorial went on mildly to berate Kingman for steering a timid course between those extremes. Yet it was itself remarkably indecisive. It scoffed at the notion of 'learning by osmosis', but was also certain that 'a return to traditional grammar lessons would not raise standards'. Not only did it fail to supply the answers it found absent in the Report: it seemed to accept that one must be 'for creativity' or 'for accuracy' – that the controlling emphasis must fall **either** on enjoyment and pleasurable absorption **or** on discipline and earned knowledge.

I found this puzzling then, and I continue to do so now. Surely it is not a question of **either/or** but of **both/and**?

It is doubly wrong to reject learning by osmosis on the one hand and direct grammatical training on the other. Both are essential; both can be made pleasurable and productive; each complements the other without being enough on its own.

It is incorrect to assume that no effective learning can be achieved by

\* *The Guardian*, April 30, 1988, p. 18.

osmosis – that is, through a process of absorption. Children become fluent in their native tongue by the age of four or five, without any formal training or conceptual understanding of the structures they employ. Later on they become competent in reading, an activity that self-evidently depends upon absorption. And this ‘absorption’ operates in two ways, signalled by the two separate applications of that word. ‘To absorb’ means to soak up, to take in fully; but we also regularly speak of being absorbed in an activity – captivated by it, lost in concentrated attention and wonder. In sum: ‘absorption’ involves profound pleasure as well as assimilation of knowledge. It is a truism that reading is one of life’s great pleasures: my point here is that pleasure brings not only its own reward but a lot of other ones too. It is both fun and instructive.

Nevertheless, it is perfectly absurd to claim that you can master all English skills and requirements solely by osmosis. No one can master anything in such a way. You cannot become a competent pianist just by listening to Vladimir Ashkenazy or Oscar Peterson: you’ve got to do a lot of active work as well, starting with learning the notes and how to get your fingers to manipulate them accurately and pleasingly. Nor can you become a good cook just by watching someone else prepare a succulent meal. The modish phrase ‘hands-on experience’ describes the position very well: everyone needs direct practical involvement to become accomplished at anything. That includes the use of language.

Grammar teaching got a bad name some thirty-five years ago, through being carried out in a dry and unpleasurable way. Those who dislike the



**Figure 1.** ‘Dry and unpleasurable’.

prospect of reviving it do so, I suspect, because they confuse **content** with the **methods** they remember from their own schooldays. But there is no reason why learning grammar cannot be fun, even exciting. Most people enjoy learning about how things work; why should language be any different? Moreover, since language is common to us all, something we use virtually all the time, finding out how it works should be especially rewarding.

Bernard Levin has suggested that the English language is the greatest work of art that the human species has yet produced. One of the chief purposes of a work of art is to stimulate pleasure – so there is no reason why mastering a language should be dull or merely hard work. Indeed, I would argue that mastery – of anything – is impossible under such arid conditions. The range of skills involved in becoming an accomplished writer and speaker means that care, discipline and concentration are always necessary; but these qualities can and must be accompanied by a sense of pleasure. There are many kinds of good writing, and many different ways in which one can write well; all are nevertheless characterized by the delight in words they both take and communicate.

Fun is an essential requirement, then. But so is skill – the ability to apply knowledge in a precise and effective way. For those who remain unconvinced that a spirited interest in how language works is fundamental to truly accomplished writing, I would offer two crisp quotations. The first is a remark made by Eddie ‘Lockjaw’ Davis, a superb tenor saxophonist who chose to spend a period of his career away from the bandstand, working as a booking agent and band manager. When he later resumed playing, he maintained that his time away made him a better player and a more fully-rounded man, saying

**The better he knows the product, the better the salesman.**

The analogy is telling: the better you know how language operates, the better you’ll be able to ‘sell’ it – and yourself – when writing.

The advice given by Artemus Ward is much more peremptory:

**A writer who can’t write in a grammarly manner better shut up shop.**

Anyone who thinks that the conventions and rules of English don’t matter is not going to get very far as a writer, no matter how modest his or her goals. Without a working knowledge of how the signals and structures of language operate and an understanding of why they have been agreed, you are most unlikely to communicate what you might imagine you’re saying.

It takes time to acquire the kind of confidence whereby one looks forward to writing as a source of delight rather than as a forbidding

task or chore. But it can be done – and one of the better ways is to go back to that time when the magic of words first strikes us – childhood. Charles Baudelaire defined ‘genius’ as ‘childhood recaptured at will’ and while genius is beyond the scope of most of us, we will still benefit enormously if we can invest adult activity with the fresh excitement that distinguishes childhood pursuits. Of course, very young writers have many limitations: I am not advocating a return to ‘the cat sat on the mat’ practice! But young children embody in their use of language two qualities that older writers forget at their peril: they have a clear idea of what they want to say and a pleasure-based verve in the way they say it.

My aim is therefore twofold. Naturally, I want to be helpfully instructive, enabling you to write with confidence and clarity. The tasks, techniques and skills this book explores are many and wide-ranging, and I hope its advice contains something of value to all writers of fifteen years and above, whatever their particular needs. But I also want you to enjoy yourself while reading the material and, perhaps, attempting some of the exercises I include. I am convinced that students – of any age or ability – learn faster and better if they have a good time while they work, which is why the host of examples are designed to give pleasure as well as instruction. The combination of absorbed amusement and challenging work has rarely had other than a successful outcome. And what better way to start than to have some undemanding but illuminating fun at someone else’s expense?



# LIST OF EXERCISES

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Exercise	Page	Description
1	3	Ambiguity/loose use of pronouns. Rewrite passage.
2	7	10 'Colemanballs': identify why they fail and rewrite to make clear, non-comic sense.
3	19	Distinguishing sentences from clauses.
4	25	Passage with too many short sentences. Rewrite it.
5	26	Over-intricate sentence. Rewrite it.
–	27	Read aloud a passage from <i>Other People</i> by Martin Amis.
6	30	Faulty punctuation. Rewrite sentence.
7	31	Comma-abuse; rewrite passage with correct punctuation.
8	32	under-punctuated passage; re-cast it.
9	33	Chronic comma-abuse; rewrite passage.
10	41	6 sentences with faulty punctuation. Correct all mistakes.
11	45	How the apostrophe can change meaning; explain the differences in three pairs of sentences.
12	47	Apostrophe abuse; identify mistakes.
13	51	Over-frequent paragraphing; re-design passage.
14	52	Badly designed paragraph. Identify flaws.
15	53	Over-long paragraph. Identify flaws and rectify them.
16	73	Redundant words; tighten up sentences.
17	88	Paraphrase 120-word passage in 40 words.

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| 18 | 93     | Euphemisms: 'decode' and rewrite.  |
| 19 | 98     | Revision exercise covering ten separate flaws, including 'mixed metaphor'.   |
| 20 | 113    | Passage from <i>Mansfield Park</i> by Jane Austen: make detailed note of reactions, especially concerning tone and <i>voice</i> .                                |
| 21 | 114–15 | Passage from <i>Middlemarch</i> by George Eliot. Procedure as for Exercise 20.   |
| 22 | 116–17 | Passage from Shakespeare's <i>Julius Cæsar</i> , delivered by Brutus. Procedure as for Exercise 20.  |
| 23 | 120    | Identify main features of eight different kinds of everyday speech encounters.   |
| 24 | 126–7  | Compare and contrast two passages on a similar theme; state preference.  |
| 25 | 128–9  | Evaluate a 1945 piece of reportage on the dropping of the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Which phrases have the most and the least impact? And what is missing? |
| 26 | 131    | Follow up to Exercise 22: Antony's reply. Compare and contrast Passages 22 and 26.   |
| –  | 157–8  | Two business letters on the same theme; state preference.  |
| 27 | 165    | Two essay questions on the same theme; what's the difference?  |
| 28 | 169    | Three essay introductions: what's wrong with them?   |
| 29 | 215    | Précis (short; easy-ish). 72 words down to 25.   |
| 30 | 215–16 | Summary (longer passage, but not hard). 600+ words down to 50.   |
| 31 | 216–17 | Précis (similar length to Exercise 30, but harder). 800+ words down to about 275.  |
| 32 | 218–19 | Summary (difficult). 600 words down to 100.  |
| 33 | 220–22 | Précis (very difficulty). 1100 words down to 300.  |
| 34 | 222–4  | Précis (exceptionally difficult). 900 words down to 250.   |

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| 35 | 236    | 10 sentences: identify the verbs.   |
| 36 | 238    | 8 sentences: identify subject, very and (if applicable) object.   |
| 37 | 247–8  | A: identify verbs, and also whether they are transitive or intransitive.<br>B: put verbs into tense designated.<br>C: identify verbs' mood. |
| 38 | 248    | 4-part exercise on mood, participles and difference in meaning/effect.  |
| 39 | 255    | Nouns. Identify types; identify noun phrases and noun clauses.  |
| 40 | 258    | Pronoun abuse. Correct the mistakes.  |
| 41 | 267    | 4-part exercise on pronouns, adjectives and relative clauses.   |
| 42 | 285    | 6-part exercise on verb tenses, plurals, prefixes and suffixes, and common errors.  |
| 43 | 288    | Syntax: distinguish sentences from mere phrases.  |
| 44 | 312–13 | 6-part exercise on syntax, reported speech, count/noncount nouns, types of adverb clause, and nuances of meaning.                           |
| –  | 329–39 | Two separate spelling lists.  |

# CONTENTS

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Acknowledgements	xi
Preface: The pleasure principle and the work ethic	xiii
List of exercises	xvii
 PART ONE: ENGAGE BRAIN AND EAR BEFORE WRITING	 1
1. DISASTERS	3
2. TRIUMPHS	9
Summary	12
 PART TWO: FOUNDATIONS	 13
3. INTRODUCTION	15
4. BONE STRUCTURE	16
4.1 What is a sentence?	16
4.2 Sentence and clause: what's the difference?	18
4.3 Big bones or little bones: how long should a sentence be?	20
5. JOINTS	28
5.1 Punctuation: weight-training	28
5.2 'Punk-tuation' (I): the yob's comma	36
5.3 'Punk-tuation' (II): the apostrophe – an endangered species	42
5.4 Paragraphing: art or science?	49
Afterword	63
 PART THREE: STYLE	 65
6. INTRODUCTION: STYLE VERSUS FASHION	67
7. FIGHT THE FLAB	70
7.1 Waffle and padding	70
Surplus fat	71
Tautology	72
Useless or unwise qualifiers	73
Leaden lead-ins	76
Unnecessary complexity	77
Clichés	78
Proverbs	79

Lifeless similes	81
Summary	82
Redundant qualifiers	82
Summary	84
Deliberate fleshiness	85
7.2 Publishing for vanity's sake	96
7.3 Phoney rules and fake formalism	102
Phoney rules	102
Fake formalism	105
8. VOICE	109
 PART FOUR: TAILOR-MADE	 139
9. INTRODUCTION	141
10. LETTERS	142
11. ESSAYS	161
12. ARTICLES	189
13. REVIEWS	192
14. REPORTS	194
15. MINUTES	199
16. PRÉCIS AND SUMMARY	203
17. REPORTAGE	225
 PART FIVE: GRAMMAR PRIMER	 229
18. GRAMMAR PRIMER	231
An outline menu	232
18.1 Parts of speech	232
18.2 Verbs	235
18.3 Nouns	249
18.4 Pronouns	256
18.5 Adjectives	260
18.6 Adverbs	267
18.7 Prepositions	271
18.8 Conjunctions	271
18.9 Interjections	272
19. INFLECTIONS	274
20. SYNTAX	286
21. PARTS OF SPEECH (ADVANCED)	294
21.1 Verbs	294
21.2 Nouns	304
21.3 Adjectives and adverbs	309
21.4 The indirect object	314
22. PUNCTUATION IN SPEECH AND QUOTATION	315
23. SPELLING AND CONFUSIBLES	327

Appendix: Answers to exercises	343
Further Reading	355
Authors, sources and named references	359
Index	361

ENGAGE BRAIN  
AND EAR  
BEFORE WRITING

**P  
A  
R  
T  
  
O  
N  
E**



**Figure 2.** 'Engage brain and ear'.



Troubles hurt the most when they prove self-inflicted.

*Sophocles, Oedipus Rex*



Destructive criticism is one of life's great pleasures, and a seriously undervalued one. As we grow up, we are often brainwashed into thinking that the only reputable type of criticism is 'constructive' – that is, essentially admiring but containing some suggestions as to how what has been done could be made even better. But when something is awful, why not say so? Children do; maybe that's why they have so much fun, and embarrass po-faced adults so often! So let's take an enjoyable look at four passages that turned out rather less well than their authors intended.

1. In this set of instructions the writer gets into a hilarious mess through not thinking clearly or 'hearing' the words.

When feeding the baby with a bottle, it must be held at a steep angle with the bottom tilted up and the neck held firmly down, otherwise an air-bubble will form in the neck. Do not allow the baby to drink all the feed at once, but give it a rest sometimes so that it can get the wind up. Finally, when the baby has finished the bottle, place it under the tap straight away, or allow it to soak in a mild solution of Milton, to prevent infection. If the baby does not thrive on fresh milk it should be powdered or boiled.

A formal analysis of why this goes wrong would show that the loose use of pronouns sets up a farcical ambiguity. But a simpler explanation is that the writer is lazy. There has been no attempt to imagine how the words will 'sound', how they will affect the reader. Given that the passage is instructional, presumably intended to assist an inexperienced parent, that is a severe fault.

## Exercise 1

Rewrite the above passage so that it makes clear and uncomical sense. You'll find my suggested version in the Appendix.