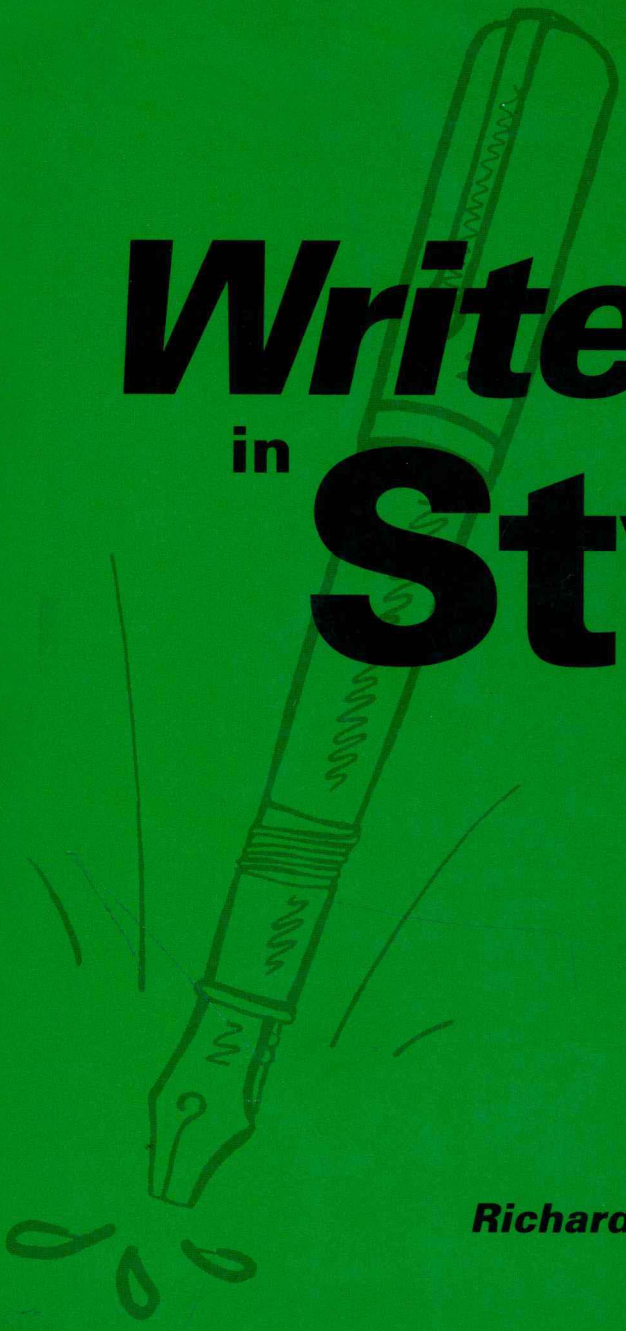
A guide to good English

Write in Style



Richard Palmer

E & FN SPON
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PREFACE

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.

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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

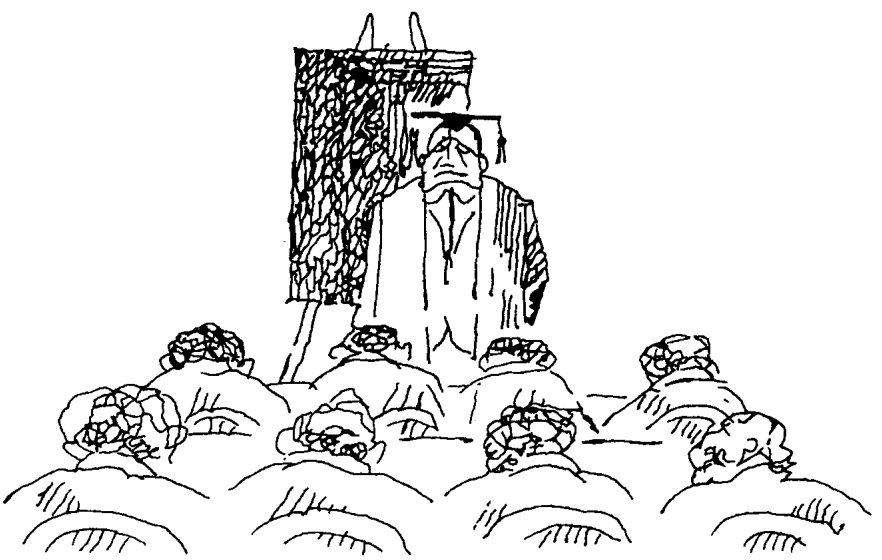

Figure 1. 'Dry and unpleasurable'.

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 plesasure – 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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CONTENTS

ENGAGE BRAIN AND EAR BEFORE WRITING

PART ONE

Figure 2. 'Engage brain and ear'.

DISASTERS 1

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.

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