

Style

Toward Clarity and Grace

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Joseph M. Williams

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Toward Clarity and Grace

With two chapters coauthored by

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Preface

This book originated as *Style*, first published as a textbook by Scott Foresman in 1981 and then in two more editions in 1985 and 1989. I wrote it for four reasons. First, the standard books on style don't go much beyond high mindedness. They are all for accuracy, brevity, clarity, and so forth, but beyond offering good and bad examples, none of them explains how to achieve those ends. Second, the standard books gesture toward audiences, but none of them explains in detail how a writer must anticipate what readers look for as they make their way through complex, usually unfamiliar material. Third, the standard books seem wholly innocent of recent work done in the cognitive sciences, much of it centrally relevant to understanding the problems that readers have to solve every time they begin a new sentence. And fourth, the standard handbooks mainly address belletristic or journalistic writing. None of them reflects sustained experience working with writers in areas other than literature or journalism. In *Style*, I tried to integrate research into the ways that readers read with my experience working with professional writing in a variety of fields, in order to create a system of principles that would simultaneously diagnose the quality of writing and, if necessary, suggest ways to improve it.

In 1988 the University of Chicago Press inquired whether *Style* might be revised for use outside a classroom. Since many readers had reported learning a good deal from reading *Style* on their own, a new version specifically for such an audience seemed to be a good idea.

The objective of this book remains the same: to explain how writers can improve the style and the structure of their reports, analyses, articles, memoranda, proposals, monographs, books. In Chapter 5 and 6, Gregory Colomb and I go beyond matters of sentence style to discuss larger matters of form and organization.

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We do not directly address the kind of prose that some might call “imaginative” or “expressive.” At some level, of course, all writers express feelings, all writers imagine, no sensible writer deliberately avoids turning a graceful phrase, no matter how banal the subject. Aesthetic pleasure and clarity are by no means mutually exclusive; indeed, they are usually part of the same experience. But the object of our attention is writing whose success we measure not primarily by the pleasure we derive from it, but by how well it does a job of work. If it also gives us a tingle of pleasure, so much the better.

Except for a page or two at the end of Chapter 6, we discuss neither how to prepare for nor how to produce a first draft. There is folk wisdom about what we ought to do—brainstorm, take notes, make a scratch outline, analyze objectives, define audiences; then as we draft, keep on writing, don’t stop to revise minute details of punctuation, spelling, etc., let the act of writing generate ideas. When we create a first draft, we should be most concerned with getting onto the page something that reflects what we had in mind when we began to write and, if we are lucky, something new that we didn’t.

But once we have made clear to ourselves what ideas, points, and arguments might be available, we then have to reshape that first draft to provide what our readers need. We write a first draft for ourselves; the drafts thereafter increasingly for the reader. That is the central objective of this book: to show how a writer quickly and efficiently transforms a rough first draft into a version crafted for the reader.

Two More Objectives

We set for ourselves two more objectives, because seeming clarity in professional writing is a matter that depends on more than merely a writer’s level of skill. First, mature writers can write badly for different reasons—confusion about a subject, insufficient time to revise, carelessness, entrenched bad habits, sheer incompetence. But to casual readers, these causes may result in what seems to be the same kind of tangled prose. Those who experience problems with their writing have to understand that they must approach different causes of bad writing in different ways. That understanding is even more crucial to those who have to deal with the writing of others. So we explain how bad

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writing results from different causes and how writers can diagnose different problems and overcome them.

There is a second general objective: It is important for everyone—those who write professional prose and those who have to read it—to understand not only its social origins but its social consequences. When a piece of writing confuses us, we often assume that we are not up to its demands. Difficult a passage may be, but its complexity is often more seeming than substantial. We have seen hundreds of students experience relief from doubts about their own competence when they realize that if they are unable to understand an article or monograph, it is not necessarily because they are incompetent, but because its author couldn't write clearly. That liberation is a valuable experience.

Whether we are readers or writers, teachers or editors, all of us in professional communities must understand three things about complex writing:

- it may precisely reflect complex ideas,
- it may gratuitously complicate complex ideas,
- it may gratuitously complicate simple ideas.

Here is an example of the second kind of complexity:

Similarities may develop in the social organization of societies at similar levels of economic development because there are "imperatives" built into the socio-technical system they adopt which drive them to similar responses to common problems. This model, therefore, places great emphasis on the level of economic development of nations to account for movement towards common forms of social organization. Alternatively, convergence may result from simple borrowing, so that a model of the diffusion of innovation becomes appropriate. Where such borrowing occurs levels of development may be less relevant than integration in networks of influence through which ideas and social forms are diffused. Economic development may, of course, set limits on the capacity of a nation to institute systems available to be copied, and the propensities to copy may enable nations to install convergent patterns more rapidly than one would have predicted from knowledge of their level of economic development.¹

This means,

Societies at similar levels of economic development may converge because "imperatives" in their sociotechnical system cause them to respond to similar problems in similar ways. To explain this,

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the model emphasizes economic development. But societies may also converge because they borrow, so a model would have to explain how ideas and social forms diffuse through networks of influence. Of course, a society at a low level of development may be unable to copy features of some systems. But a society with a strong propensity to copy may do so more rapidly than predicted.

Here is an example of the third kind of complexity,

The absence from this dictionary of a handful of old, well-known vulgate terms for sexual and excretory organs and functions is not due to a lack of citations for these words from current literature. On the contrary, the profusion of such citations in recent years would suggest that the terms in question are so well known as to require no explanation. The decision to eliminate them as part of the extensive culling process that is the inevitable task of the lexicographer was made on the practical grounds that there is still objection in many quarters to the appearance of these terms in print and that to risk keeping this dictionary out of the hands of some students by introducing several terms that require little if any elucidation would be unwise.

—From the foreword, *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language*¹

This means,

We excluded vulgar words for sex and excretion not because we could not find them. We excluded them because many people object to seeing them. Had we included them, some teachers and schoolboards would have refused to let this dictionary be used by their students, who in any event already know what those words mean.

It is not always easy to distinguish these kinds of complexity. When we are not experts in a subject, we tend to doubt our own competence before we doubt a writer's. And so we defer to what seems difficult, often mistakenly. The immediate objective of this book is to help those who write about complex matters; its larger objective is to help those of us who have to read what they write.

Some Encouragement, Caveats, and Disclaimers

We believe that you will find here much that is familiar. What will seem new is the language we offer to articulate what you al-

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ready know. That language will require some work. If you are nostalgically confident about having mastered the skills of parsing and diagramming, you should know that we have given some old terms new meanings. Moreover, a few readers comfortable with that traditional vocabulary may be disconcerted to find that they must learn new terms for new concepts. Many believe that new terms about language and style are unnecessary jargon, that unlike those in other fields such as psychology, economics, or chemistry, those of us concerned with mere writing ought to be able to make do with the good old terms learned in ninth-grade English. Those traditional terms won't suffice here; any more than traditional terms have sufficed in other lively fields of study. You will have to learn the meaning of a few new words like *nominalization*, *topic*, *thematic string*, and *resumptive modifier*. All told, there are fewer than a dozen new terms.

Some of these terms will be more familiar to those conversant with linguistic studies of the last quarter century. But even if you do recognize them, do not assume that we have kept their common meanings. We have had to rework both traditional and contemporary accounts of English specifically to make it possible to explain, not how sentences work within some system of grammatical theory, but the way contemporary readers work on sentences in the real world.

And finally, you should understand that this book is not an easy afternoon read. We offer detailed ways to put into specific practice the clichés of style: "Be clear," "Omit unnecessary words," "Devise a plan and stick to it." We suggest you read this book a short section at a time, then look at your own writing or the writing of others. If you think the writing is unclear in the ways we describe, revise it using the principle in question. If you think it is clear, revise it by reversing the principles and make the passage worse. Nothing highlights what counts as clear and direct better than seeing it in contrast with what is not. Under no circumstances try to devour this book in a sitting.

We readily acknowledge that not every writer will find our approach congenial. Many teachers and editors are certain that to write well, we must first read and absorb the style of the best prose writers. Then when writing, we first think through the problem at hand to understand our point clearly, then write sincerely, as if we were talking to a good friend about a serious subject. No doubt, many good writers have learned to write that way.

On the other hand, we have found that many other writers are comfortable with a more analytical account of writing, an approach that begins not with sincerity and good intentions, but with the principles behind the skilled construction of sentences and paragraphs, with the logic behind the thoughtful and deliberate ordering of ideas, with the ways one can use formal devices of style even to generate ideas—in short, an approach that concentrates not on the ambience of clear writing but on its craft. In no sense do we dismiss the importance of the writer's disposition toward the task. But we have worked with legions of writers who were thoughtful, sincere, well-intentioned, and very well-read, yet who could not write a clear, much less graceful, paragraph. We have also worked with legions of editors, teachers, and supervisors who have endlessly urged writers to be sincere, thoughtful, committed, etc., and have found that it did little good. Many have found in the approach that we offer here much that is useful and congenial. We also know that not every reader will.

Diagnostic Principles vs. Rigid Rules

Do not take what we offer here as draconian rules of composition, but rather as diagnostic principles of interpretation. We offer these principles as the basis for questions that allow a writer or editor to anticipate how readers are likely to respond to a piece of prose, a species of knowledge usually unavailable to writers when they unreflectively re-read their own writing. We are our own worst editors because we know too much about our subject to experience vicariously how a reader largely innocent of our knowledge will read. And to a reader-editor who must deal with the problems of someone else's writing, these questions will suggest ways to interpret the discomfort they often feel, to locate its source quickly, and to suggest ways to revise the prose that causes it.

Some teachers and writers resist principles of any kind as inimical to individual creativity. To them, the first six chapters in particular may seem to encourage stylistic homogeneity. Such a concern is, we believe, unfounded. The principles that characterize clear prose allow so many options within options that it is inconceivable we would find among the millions of writers in the

English-speaking world even a few who created sentences so alike that they would seem to have identical styles. These principles offer not prescriptions, but choices.

Prior Knowledge and Perceived Clarity

We also know that a particular passage of prose may seem not to reflect these principles, and yet to some readers will still seem entirely clear. That experience does not invalidate the principles we offer. The reason is this: What counts most in comprehending a text is how much we already know about its content. If we know a lot about viruses, we will be able to understand a badly written account of viruses better than someone who knows relatively little. We measure the quality of writing not just by what is objectively on a page, but by the way we feel as we construct new knowledge out of our experience with the words on the page. That feeling—good or bad—depends substantially on what we bring to that page.

The importance of prior knowledge suggests two points: First, since a competent writer usually knows his subject matter very well, perhaps too well, he is systematically handicapped in anticipating how easily readers will make sense of his text. Second, since a writer usually overestimates how much readers know, a writer should give readers more help than he thinks they need. This book lays out principles that help a writer predict how easily a reader will comprehend complex and unfamiliar material when that reader is not deeply versed in it. If the writer finds that his prose may hinder his intended reader, he can use these principles to suggest ways to revise it.

Some Intellectual Debts

The theory that lurks behind most of the views here is indebted to Noam Chomsky, Charles Fillmore, Jan Firbas, František Daneš, Nils Enkvist, Vic Yngve, among others. There are new debts. In Chapter 2, when I explicitly analogize the clearest style to narrative prose, I draw on some of the insights arising from recent work in two areas of cognitive psychology. One is schema theory, the other prototype semantics, particularly as developed by Eleanor Rosch.

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The organization of each chapter reflects a familiar pedagogical principle supported by some recent work in educational psychology, a principle that most good teachers have long observed: When presenting complex new knowledge, first sketch a schematic structure that is too simple to reflect the complex reality of the subject; only then qualify, elaborate, and modify it. We have found that it is not effective to present new knowledge about language and style as a series of detailed, qualified, exception-laden observations. We may hope that out of that complexity students will construct a coherent whole faithful to the complex truth of things.

There are risks in both pedagogies. In the first way—a schematic structure that we then modify and qualify—we risk appearing to be superficial before we have a chance to qualify and elaborate. We also risk the possibility that the learner will learn only the simple structure and then caricature it. But the second way—teaching a structure of knowledge by simultaneously describing, qualifying, elaborating, complicating every detail—risks conceptual clutter. We assume that experience will modify and make more complex whatever simple structures we offer, but that experience only makes early confusion worse.

And Some Personal Debts

We must both acknowledge the help of colleagues who have regularly shared with us their insights about language and its complexities—Frank Kinahan, Don Freeman, George Gopen, Elizabeth Francis, Larry McEnerney. We must also thank the scores of graduate students who every year work to master these ideas and many others, in the blind faith that when it came time to teach them, it would all come together on opening night, as it always has. Several readers have generously offered their criticisms and suggestions. We, of course, are wholly responsible for what remains unclear.

By Gregory G. Colomb: Of my personal debts, the greatest is undoubtedly to my father, a man of business whose example helped me understand the truth in my favorite poet's maxim, that those "to whom Heav'n in Wit has been profuse," are obliged "to turn it to its use." Of course the largest burden fell on my family—

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Sandra, BB, Karen, and the Beave, whose loving forbearance was too often tested but was always up to the mark.

By Joseph M. Williams: To my family—always amiably patient with my distractedness. Christopher, David, Joe, Megan, and Oliver—thanks for your love and good humor. And Joan, for your apparently bottomless well of patience and love.

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1

Causes

Three Objectives

This is a book about writing clearly. I wish it could be short and simple like some others more widely known, but I want to do more than just urge writers to "Omit Needless Words" or "Be clear." Telling me to "Be clear" is like telling me to "Hit the ball squarely." I know that. What I don't know is how to do it. To explain how to write clearly, I have to go beyond platitudes.

But I want to do more than just help you write clearly. I also want you to understand this matter—to understand why some prose seems clear, other prose not, and why two readers might disagree about it; why a passive verb can be a better choice than an active verb; why so many truisms about style are either incomplete or wrong. More important, I want that understanding to consist not of anecdotal bits and pieces, but of a coherent system of principles more useful than "Write short sentences."

Now there is a lively debate about whether action and understanding have anything to do with each other, whether those who want to write clearly ought to study principles of language at all. You may write well, yet can't distinguish a subject from a verb, or you may understand everything from retained objects to the subjunctive pluperfect progressive, and still write badly. From this apparent contradiction many have concluded that we don't have to understand principles of grammar to write well. Writing well, they believe, has to do with being sincere, or writing how they speak, or finding their authentic voices, or just being born with the knack. Others devoutly believe that they learned to write well only because they studied Latin and diagrammed sentences beyond number.

The truth will disconcert those of both persuasions. Nostalgic anecdotes aside, the best evidence suggests that students who

spend a lot of time studying grammar improve their writing not one bit. In fact, they seem to get worse. On the other hand, there is good evidence that mature writers can change the way they write once they grasp a principled way of thinking about language, but one that is rather different from the kind of grammar some of us may dimly remember mastering—or being mastered by. The principles of style offered here will not describe sentences in a vocabulary that fifteenth-century students of Latin would still recognize, but in terms that help you understand how readers of modern English read; in terms that will help us understand why readers might describe the first sentence below as turgid and confusing, the second as clearer, more readable. But most important, in terms that also make it clear how to revise one into the other.

- 1a. The Committee proposal would provide for biogenetic industry certification of the safety to human health for new substances in requests for exemption from Federal rules.
- 1b. The Committee proposes that when the biogenetic industry requests the Agency to exempt new substances from Federal rules, the industry will certify that the substances are safe.

So if our first objective is doing, our second objective is understanding.

But however well a writer understands principles, it is not enough for those who also want to articulate that understanding to others, who want to explain why most readers prefer the style of (1b), and if necessary to persuade (or coerce) those others into writing in the same style. Whatever else a well-educated person can do, that person should be able to write clearly and to understand what it means to do that. But we judge as liberally educated the person who can articulate that understanding in ways that go beyond the ability to define subjects and verbs and explain their disagreements, certainly beyond self-evident truisms like "Be specific." This book provides a vocabulary that will let you explain these matters in ways that go beyond impressionism and banality.

A Very Short History of Bad Writing

Now, anyone familiar with the history of English prose might wonder whether anything we do here will substantially improve

its future. Since the earliest times, many writers have graced us with much good writing. But others have afflicted us with much that is bad. Some of the reasons for the bad writing are rooted in history, others in personal experience.

In the last seven hundred years, English writers have responded to three influences on our language. Two are historical, one is cultural. These influences have helped make English a language flexible and precise enough to use with subjects ranging from the most concrete and mundane to the most abstract and elevated. But ironically, the very influences that have created this flexibility and precision have also allowed—indeed encouraged—many writers to produce prose that is quite bad. One of the two historical influences was the Norman Conquest in 1066, an event that led us to acquire a vocabulary qualitatively different from the Anglo-Saxon wordhord we've inherited from Bede, Alfred, and Aelfric. The second influence occurred in the sixteenth century, when Renaissance scholars struggling to translate Greek and Latin texts found themselves working at a lexical disadvantage.

After the Norman Conquest, those responsible for institutional, scholarly, and religious affairs wrote in Latin and later Norman French. In the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, increasing numbers of writers began using English again for matters of state, commercial, and social life. But since the native vocabulary for these matters had long since disappeared (or had never come into being), English writers were able to write about them in the only vocabulary available, in words borrowed from Latin, but particularly from French. By the sixteenth century, French and Latin had disappeared from most institutional affairs, but writers were still using their words to refer to institutional concepts. As a result, the foundations were laid for a two-tiered vocabulary: one consisting of words common to daily life, the other of words having more special application.

Conspiring with that influence on our vocabulary was a second one, the Renaissance. In the sixteenth century, as England was increasingly influenced by classical writers, scholars began translating into English large numbers of Greek and Latin texts. But as one early writer put it "there ys many wordes in Latyn that we have no propre Englysh accordynge thereto," and so translators simply "Englished" foreign words, thereby providing us with another set of borrowings, many from Greek but most

from Latin, and almost all of them more formal than either our native English vocabulary or the Anglicized words from French.

As a consequence of these two influences, our vocabulary is the most varied of any modern European language. Of the thousand words we use most frequently, over 80 percent descend from Anglo-Saxon. But most of them are the single syllable labor-intensive words: the articles *the, this, that, a*, etc.; most of the prepositions and pronouns: *in, on, of, by, at, with, you, we, it, I*, etc.; the most common verbs and most of the common nouns: *be, have, do, make, will, go, see, hand, head, mother, father, sun, man, woman*, etc. (Many words borrowed from French have lost any sense of formality: *people, (be)cause, use, just, really, very, sort, different, number, place*.)

When we refer to specific matters of our intellectual and artistic life, however, we use almost three times as many French and Latin content words as native English. Compare how I might have been obliged to write the paragraph before last, had on Hastings Field in 1066 a Norman arrow not mortally wounded Harold, the Anglo-Saxon King:

Togetherworking with the outcome of the Norman Greatwin was the Newbirth. In the sixteenth yearhundred, as England was more shaped by the longread writers, the learned began turning into English many of the books of Athens and Rome, but as one early writer put it, "There ys many wordes in Latyn that we have no right Englysh withgoing thereto." So those who tongueturned works written in Latin and French into English only "Englished" outland words, thereby giving us yet more borrowed words, many from Greek but most from Latin, and almost all of them rather higher than the hereborn words or the words Englished from French.

Of course, if Harold had won the Battle of Hastings I wouldn't have written that at all, but he didn't, and as a result we now have a lexical resource that has endowed us with a stylistic flexibility largely unavailable to other modern languages. To express the precise shade of meaning and connotation, we can choose from among words borrowed from French—*bravery, mettle, valor, endurance, courage*; from Latin—*tenacity, fortitude, and* from words inherited from native English—*fearlessness, guts*.

But this flexibility has come with a price. Since the language of political, cultural, scientific, and economic affairs is based largely