

Style

Ten

Lessons in

Clarity and

Grace

Joseph M. Williams



Fifth Edition



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Joseph M. Williams
The University of Chicago



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Preface

*Most people won't realize that writing is a craft.
You have to take your apprenticeship in it like anything else.*

KATHERINE ANNE PORTER

WHAT'S THE SAME IN THIS EDITION

Most of you require no convincing that the ability to write clearly is important, especially those of you who have to struggle daily with the prose of those who never learned how. Unfortunately, people who haven't learned to write clearly don't get much help from the standard advice about writing better, because it consists mostly of truisms like "Make a plan" or trivia like "Don't begin a sentence with *and* or end it with *up*." Getting beyond the trivia and behind the self-evident has been the object of every edition of this book, so this fifth edition still aims at answering these same three questions:

- What features *in* a sentence determine how readers judge its clarity?
- How can you diagnose your own prose to anticipate their judgments?
- How can you revise your prose so that your readers will think well of it?

WHAT'S NEW

This fifth edition, however, differs from earlier ones in ways that I think are important. (As I always say, you can't write a book too often; eventually you might get it right.)

First, I have reshuffled the lessons into three larger and more coherent parts.

- The first two original lessons are now in an introductory part called "Style as Choice."

- Five lessons on agent/action, cohesion, and emphasis are now in a single unified part called “Clarity.”
- Three lessons on the finer points of style—concision, managing long sentences, and elegance—are now grouped into a final part called “Grace.”

This organization gives the book a structure far more coherent than any of the prior editions.

Second, a new page design has improved a format so cramped that it made earlier editions a pain in the eyes to read. Moreover, important principles are now boxed and shaded to make them easier to identify and review. And I have indicated which of two paired sentences or passages to take as the model.

Third, to make room for a new lesson carved out of material on cohesion and coherence, I have moved the section on punctuation into an Appendix. (Actually, I wanted to avoid the subtitle, *Eleven Lessons in Clarity and Grace*.)

Fourth, I have added new material to almost every lesson. In Lesson Two on correctness, I have added some advice that some might think too conservative (a sign of aging?) but that I intend as purely objective predictions about the way some especially careful readers read. In Lessons Three and Four, I have added new material on nominalizations and characters. In Lesson Six, I offer a long analysis of another of our “sacred secular texts,” Abraham Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address. This goes along with the analyses of the Declaration of Independence and the Gettysburg Address in earlier editions. In Lesson Eight, I have added new material on metadiscourse, hedging, and emphasizing. In Lesson Nine, I suggest what I think is a generally reliable new principle about constructing long but shapely sentences. And in Lesson 10, I discuss an element of self-conscious grace observed by especially elegant writers: chiasmus. There is more added throughout.

Fifth, I have slowed the pace of the explanations a bit further, unpacking the density that made some of the analysis of nominalizations and topics perhaps more demanding than necessary.

And sixth, I have recast the (now) Appendix on punctuation from the point of view of the reader, something I now realize I should have done in the first edition. Live and learn.

THE IMPORTANCE OF REVISION

Despite those changes, this book is still not about writing; it is about *rewriting*. If I knew reliable principles that would help you *write* better, that is, help you put words down on paper or up on the screen that were right the first time—I would offer them cheerfully. But most advice specifically about drafting consists of more banalities: “Don’t stop to edit,” “Think of your audience,” and so on. It is also advice that most of us ignore as we wrestle our ideas out onto the page for the first time. As I first drafted this paragraph, I wasn’t thinking about you; I was struggling to get my own ideas straight; I had no plan for it, much less the next one; and the first time I wrote this sentence, I stopped to edit it several times before I finished it.

What I did know was that I would go back to that paragraph again and again, and that I could rely on a few principles that would help me know whether I was revising it in the right direction. It was only then—as I was revising—that I could think about you, the reader; that I could find a plan that fit my draft. I also knew that as I did so, there were a few good principles that I could rely on. This book is about those principles.

PREDICTIONS, NOT PRESCRIPTIONS

Those principles may seem to some readers prescriptive. That is not how I intend them. What I offer here are not rules for writing, but principles that will help you read your prose so that you can predict how your readers will, and then *choose* whether to revise it, depending on how you want your readers to respond. If you choose to write in ways that your readers will think obscure, so be it. It’s a free country.

In fact, to get the most out of this book, you should be ready to write against the principles just to see what happens. Try writing in the bureaucratic style, just to get the feel of it (something that you will, in fact, be asked to do). Try creating a passage in a style elegant beyond your needs, just to see whether you can pull it off. Or try writing the longest sentence you can, just so that you can stretch it to its breaking point. Do not let habits of style box you in, even good habits.

You may find that at first you are writing more slowly. That’s inevitable. Anytime you reflect on what you are doing *as you do*

it, you become self-conscious, sometimes to the point of paralysis. It will pass. But in fact, you can avoid the paralysis, even the slowdown, if you remember that the principles offered here have little to do with how you *write*, but with how you *rewrite*. In fact, the first principle of drafting is to forget the principles for diagnosing and revising.

SOME DEMANDS ON YOUR TIME

To revise efficiently, though, you have to know a few things and learn a few more:

- You have to know a few grammatical terms: *SUBJECT*, *VERB*, *NOUN*, *ACTIVE*, *PASSIVE*, *CLAUSE*, *PREPOSITION*, and *COORDINATION*. They are defined the first time they appear or are defined in the Glossary (it defines all capitalized words).
- You will have to learn new meanings for two familiar words: *TOPIC* and *STRESS*.
- You will have to learn five terms that you may never have heard. Two are important: *NOMINALIZATION* and *METADISCOURSE*; three are useful: *RESUMPTIVE MODIFIER*, *SUMMATIVE MODIFIER*, and *FREE MODIFIER*.

Some students complain at having to learn new words, an understandable complaint from those who want to learn nothing new. But anyone who expects to learn new ideas has to learn new words. Style is new for many of you: it has a vocabulary of its own. But just knowing how to define a noun or verb won't help you write more clearly. To do that, you must develop a sense of how nouns and verbs differ and what they do in a sentence and to a sentence, and most important what they do to readers. Only then will you understand why some writing seems clear and other writing does not. And *that* will help you rewrite more quickly.

Some students also wonder that since they see so much unclear writing in print, a clear style must be less important than good ideas. But the truth is that even good ideas need all the help they can get, especially when you have to communicate them to readers who have neither the time nor the patience to dig them out of muddy prose. Indeed, whenever professionals are asked what they wish they had studied more diligently, first or second on the list is always communication, especially writing. In any field, the person who can deliver a clear and readable document quickly has an invaluable skill.

If you are reading this book on your own, go slowly. It is not an amiable essay that you can read in a sitting or two. Take the lessons a section at a time, up to the exercises. Do the exercises, edit someone else's writing, then edit some of your own that you wrote a while ago. You will be surprised at how much its quality has declined. Then look hard at what you've written today, first for elements addressed by the current lesson, then for another point, and if you have the time, for others.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

So many of you have provided support that I cannot thank you all. But I again begin with my English 194 students, who too many years ago put up with faintly dittoed pages (that tells you how many years) and with a teacher who at times was as puzzled as they. I remain grateful to you all.

In more recent years, I have learned much from those undergraduates, graduate and professional students, and post-docs who have gone through the Little Red Schoolhouse writing program here at the University of Chicago (a.k.a. Advanced Academic and Professional Writing). I am equally grateful to the graduate students who have taught these principles and offered important feedback. They all have encouraged us that this way of thinking about writing and of teaching it continues to pay off long after they leave the university, and perhaps most of all to those who have taught it.

I have debts to those who broke ground in psycholinguistics, text linguistics, and functional sentence perspective. Those who keep up with such matters will recognize the influence of Charles Filmore, Jan Firbas, Nils Enkvist, Michael Halliday, Noam Chomsky, Thomas Bever, Vic Yngve, and others. More recently, the work of Eleanor Rosch has provided a rich explanation for why verbs *should* be actions and characters *should* be subjects. Her work in prototype semantics is a powerful theoretical account for the kind of style urged here.

I am indebted to colleagues who have taken time to read the work of another. For reading earlier versions of this book, I must thank in particular Randy Berlin, Ken Bruffee, Douglas Butturff, Donald Byker, Bruce Campbell, Elaine Chaika, Avon Crismore, Constance Gefvert, Maxine Hairston, George Hoffman, Ted Lowe, Susan Miller, Neil Nakadate, Mike Pownall, Peter Priest, Margaret Shaklee, Nancy Sommers, Mary Taylor, and Stephen Witte.

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The editors of Addison Wesley Longman have saved me from more than a few gaffes. I remain in the debt of the editor who first urged me to write this book, Harriett Prentiss, and my current editor, Anne Smith, who has more than restored my faith in the competence of editors, and to her assistant Matt Rohrer (who is also quite a good poet). And to Stephanie Magean, copyeditor, and Susan Free, coordinator for York Production Services, who, with great skill and tact, have guided the manuscript to what you now hold in your hands. And finally, my thanks to my always reliable and careful assistant, James Donato, who helped proof the galleys and assemble the index.

For several years, I have had the good fortune to work with two people who have been both good colleagues and good friends and whose careful thinking has helped me think better about many matters, both professional and personal: Greg Colomb and Don Freeman. Don's careful readings have saved me from more than a few howlers, and I am indebted to him for the quote from William Blake in Lesson Nine. It has been a pleasure and a privilege to work and hang out with them for almost 20 years now. Until three years ago, Frank Kinahan made us four. We are diminished by his death; I have almost forgiven him for that.

And again, the five who have contributed more to the quality of my life than I have probably let them know: Chris, Megan, Oliver, Dave, and Joe. And at the beginning and end still, Joan, whose depths of patience and good judgment I have not yet plumbed.

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Part One

Style as Choice



Essentially style resembles good manners. It comes of endeavouring to understand others, of thinking for them rather than yourself—or thinking, that is, with the heart as well as the head.

SIR ARTHUR QUILLER-COUCH

Lesson One

Understanding Style

Style is the physiognomy of the mind.

ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER

Have something to say, and say it as clearly as you can.

That is the only secret of style.

MATTHEW ARNOLD

*To me, style is just the outside of content, and content the inside of style,
like the outside and inside of the human body—both go together, they
can't be separated.*

JEAN-LUC GODARD

The great enemy of clear language is insincerity.

GEORGE ORWELL

In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing.

OSCAR WILDE

PRINCIPLES AND AIMS

This book rests on two principles: It's good to write clearly, and anyone can. That first principle is self-evident, especially to those who regularly have to deal with prose like this:

Better evaluation of responses to treatment modalities depends on the standardization of an index allowing accurate descriptions of learning disorder behaviors.

But that second principle may seem optimistic to those writers who hide their ideas not only from their readers, but sometimes even from themselves. Hard as they struggle, they can't get close to this:

We could better evaluate how those with learning disorders respond to treatment if we could standardize an index that accurately describes how they behave.

We might say that such writers have a problem with their style, but they don't, because they have no style, if by style we mean how we choose to arrange our words to the best effect: They do not *choose* how to write, any more than they choose to put *the* before *dog* rather than after. But choice is at the heart of clear writing, because to meet the needs of different readers, we always have to choose between this word and that, between this order of words and some other order that helps a reader get from the beginning of a sentence to its end without feeling she is slogging through a field of wet mud.

Our writing can fail for reasons more serious than its style, of course. We bewilder our readers when we cannot organize new and complex ideas in a way that seems coherent to them. We lose any chance of gaining their assent when we ignore their predictable questions and objections. As important as those issues are, this book addresses a different matter: Once we've assembled our materials, formulated our claims, supported them with good reasons, and organized our text coherently, we still have to express ourselves in a way that our readers think is readable. Before our readers can accept our claims, they have to understand them.

That's the aim of this book: to explain how to overcome a problem that has afflicted generations of writers—a style that,

instead of revealing ideas, hides them. When we read that kind of writing in government regulations, we call it *bureaucratese*; when we find it in contracts and judicial pronouncements, *legalese*; in scholarly articles and books that inflate modest ideas into gassy abstractions, *academese*. Intended or not, it is the style of pretension and intimidation, a kind of exclusionary language that a democratic society cannot tolerate as its standard of civic discourse. Unfortunately, it is also a style so common that it seems to bespeak institutional success, and so inexperienced writers adopt it not because they have anything to hide, but because by reading so much of it, they cannot resist imitating it. They feel they have no choice. It is a problem with a long history.

A SHORT HISTORY OF UNCLEAR WRITING

The Past

It was not until the late sixteenth century that English writers finally decided that their language was sufficiently eloquent to replace Latin and French in intellectual discourse, but their first choice toward elegance was a style complex beyond the needs of their readers:

If use and custom, having the help of so long time and continuance wherein to [re]fine our tongue, of so great learning and experience which furnish matter for the [re]fining, of so good wits and judgments which can tell how to refine, have griped at nothing in all that time, with all that cunning, by all those wits which they will not let go but hold for most certain in the right of our writing, that then our tongue has no certainty to trust to, but write all at random.

—Richard Mulcaster, *The First Part of the Elementary*, 1582

Within a century, this inflated style had spread to scientific prose. As one critic of that style complained,

Of all the studies of men, nothing may sooner be obtained than this vicious abundance of phrase, this trick of metaphors, this volubility of tongue which makes so great a noise in the world.

—Thomas Sprat, *History of the Royal Society*, 1667

When the New World was settled, American writers had an opportunity to choose a new prose style, one not viciously voluble, but lean and direct. In 1776, Thomas Paine wrote *Common*

Sense, a pamphlet whose plain language helped rouse American colonists to a revolution. It was a good start—a style that was deliberately clear, direct, unselfconsciously straightforward:

In the following pages I offer nothing more than simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense; and have no other preliminaries to settle with the reader, than that he will divest himself of prejudice.

His plain arguments helped spark a revolution in our form of government but not, sad to say, in the style of our prose.

By the early nineteenth century, James Fenimore Cooper was complaining that “the common faults of American language were an ambition of effect, a want of simplicity, and a turgid abuse of terms”:

The love of turgid expressions is gaining ground, and ought to be corrected. One of the most certain evidences of a man of high breeding, is his simplicity of speech: a simplicity that is equally removed from vulgarity and exaggeration. . . . He does not say, in speaking of a dance, that “the attire of the ladies was exceedingly elegant and peculiarly becoming at the late assembly,” but that “the women were well dressed at the last ball”; nor is he apt to remark, “that the Rev. Mr. G—gave us an elegant and searching discourse the past sabbath,” but that “the parson preached a good sermon last sunday.”

The utterance of a gentleman ought to be deliberate and clear, without being measured. . . . Simplicity should be the firm aim, after one is removed from vulgarity, and let the finer shades of accomplishment be acquired as they can be attained. In no case, however, can one who aims at turgid language, exaggerated sentiments, or pedantic utterances, lay claim to be either a man or a woman of the world.

—James Fenimore Cooper, *The American Democrat*, 1838

Unfortunately, Cooper could not resist abusing his own terms, for he adopted that turgid style in the act of condemning it. He criticizes the *attire of the ladies was elegant*, but in his next sentence echoes it: *The utterance of a gentleman ought to be deliberate*. Had he followed his own advice, he might chosen to write this:

We should discourage writers who love turgid language. A well-bred person speaks simply, in a way that is neither vulgar nor ex-

aggerated. We should not measure our words, but speak them clearly and deliberately. After we rid our language of vulgarity, we should aim at simplicity, and then as we can, acquire the finer shades of accomplishment. No one can claim to be a man or woman of the world who exaggerates sentiments or deliberately speaks in language that is turgid or pedantic.

About 50 years later, Mark Twain wrote what we now like to think is classic American prose—clear, concise, direct, emphatic:

There have been daring people in the world who claimed that Cooper could write English, but they are all dead now—all dead but Lounsbury [an academic who praised Cooper's writing]. I don't remember that Lounsbury makes the claim in so many words, still he makes it, for he says that *Deerslayer* is a "pure work of art." Pure, in that connection, means faultless—faultless in all details—and language is a detail. If Mr. Lounsbury had only compared Cooper's English with the English which he writes himself—but it is plain that he didn't; and so it is likely that he imagines until this day that Cooper's [style] is as clean and compact as his own. Now I feel sure, deep down in my heart, that Cooper wrote about the poorest English that exists in our language, and that the English of *Deerslayer* is the very worst tha[t] even Cooper ever wrote.

Everyone admires Twain's easy directness; few choose to emulate it.

The Present

In the best-known essay on English style, "Politics and the English Language," George Orwell anatomized the inflated language of twentieth-century politicians, bureaucrats, and other chronic dodgers of responsibility:

The keynote [of a pretentious style] is the elimination of simple verbs. Instead of being a single word, such as *break*, *stop*, *spoil*, *mend*, *kill*, a verb becomes a *phrase*, made up of a noun or adjective tacked on to some general-purposes verb such as *prove*, *serve*, *form*, *play*, *render*. In addition, the passive voice is wherever possible used in preference to the active, and noun constructions are used instead of gerunds (*by examination of* instead of *by examining*). The range of verbs is further cut down by means of the *-ize* and *de-*formations, and the banal statements are given an appearance of profundity by means of the *not un-*formation.