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A WRITER'S COMPANION

Second Edition



RICHARD MARIUS

A Writer's Companion



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Richard Marius

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A Writer's Companion

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For
Willis C. Tucker
and
John Lain
Beloved Professors
The School of Journalism
of
The University of Tennessee



Preface



*T*he first edition of this book, published in 1985, met with success beyond my imagining. I have received more correspondence from readers about it than I have had from anything else I have ever written. It has turned up in unexpected places, and unexpectedly people in Europe, Asia, Africa, and Australia have written me about it—not to mention a host of people here in the United States. For this response I am deeply grateful. I hope readers continue to let me know what they think about the book, what they like and what they would change or add.

It is in the nature of writers to become dissatisfied with their creations. I have taught regularly out of the first edition, seeing several things I wanted to change. I have taken readers' suggestions very seriously. Steve Pensinger, the indefatigable editor of this and other writing books of mine, agreed that it was time for a second edition, and here it is.

I have rewritten the book from cover to cover—sometimes adding, sometimes subtracting, always aiming at greater clarity and usefulness. I have changed my mind about some things; my chapter on diction shows many surrenders to the flexible linguistic spirit of the times. I have thought through some matters anew; I hope my chapter on argument is now more complete and more in keeping with how our minds work. I have rearranged the order of the book, hoping to make it fit better with the expectations of readers familiar with other writing texts. Above all I have tried to be honest. What is American English today? How do published writers use it? What do students need to know about it? What rules should we observe as part of the courtesy that should inform all communication? What old rules in fact get in the way of effective writing?

The philosophy of the book is simple: we learn to write by writing essays and by thinking about what we have done. I



have never found any utility in grammar drills or in exercises where students write fragments of essays. I do my best teaching by having my students write drafts of whole essays. I comment on those drafts, trying to help the student writers discover what they want to say and then to say it well. I read as many drafts of papers as my students care to write during a term. I have to write things again and again before I get them right; I try to give my students that same opportunity, and I have written this book to help all of us along our way.

As the examples in the book show, I have tried to see how good writers—those widely read and appreciated by the community of educated men and women—achieve their effects. I have quoted many modern American writers, and I have included even a few writers from Great Britain. The first edition of this book was widely used with the second edition of *Modern American Prose*, an anthology of essays edited by John Clifford and Robert DiYanni (Random House, 1987). I have keyed part of this edition to that work so that those who choose to use the two books together can do so easily. But the examples stand on their own, and I am confident that the principles set forth in this book can be verified by consulting any anthology of modern English and American prose.

I owe debts to many friends and friendly readers. Steve Pensinger is not only a canny editor, but he is also fun. Willis C. Tucker, my patient and generous journalism professor emeritus from the University of Tennessee, went through the first edition line by line making multitudes of comments—as he used to do in our editorial writing class at the University of Tennessee when the world and I were young. Michael Hennessy, Southwest Texas State University; Barry M. Maid, University of Arkansas at Little Rock; and Thomas Recchio, the University of Connecticut reviewed the first draft of the manuscript for this edition and made dozens of thoughtful suggestions, most of which I have incorporated into the book. My colleagues in the Expository Writing Program at Harvard make me think hard every day about what we do and how we do it, and many of their thoughts have found their way into the following pages. I am especially grateful to Linda Simon, Nancy Sommers, Pat C. Hoy, and our former associate John Holdren.



Others from the past remain in beloved memory—my late and dear mother, a dauntless newspaper woman at a time when the profession was not thought ladylike, a woman who read her children the King James Version of the Bible every day and set its soaring cadences permanently in our hearts and minds; my high school Latin teacher Myron V. Harrison, who taught me how language holds together, Bill Bayne, editor of the *Lenoir City News*, who suffered my early prose and even paid me for it; John Lain who with Willis Tucker did his best to cut out the adjectives when I wrote for him in the University of Tennessee journalism school; the late Sydney Ahlstrom at Yale who valiantly tamed my prose for the academic world.

My wife Lanier Smythe and my sons Richard, Fred, and John sustain me by their laughter—sometimes at me. My brother John and my friends Ralph Norman and Milton Klein endure through the years.

Richard Marius

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Introduction



I have written this book as an informal and friendly guide for writers. Fiction writers may find parts of it useful, but my main audience will be those writers who must write essays that explain ideas, argue cases, or tell stories.

Writing requires an astonishing array of complex mental and physical acts, many going on simultaneously as the writer writes. Mysteriously and wonderfully, we learn to write, coordinating many impulses and motions much as we do when we dance or sing or talk or play baseball or ride a bicycle. In this book, I consider the elements separately in the same way that a batting coach might give special attention to a player's wrists in swinging the bat, without assuming that the rest of the body remains still while the wrists snap.

My advice is descriptive; that is, I show how professional writers create their effects. Writing has very few rules; however, it does have principles created by those who have written the English language over several centuries, and here I have tried to define some of those principles from my observation of writers who appeal to large, educated audiences today.

Why pay so much attention to the writing of others? The French critic Roland Barthes has said that we can never write without taking into account what has been written. Writing takes place within a community of writers and readers and as part of an unfolding tradition. We are always—to use a fine phrase of Saul Bellow's—breaking bread with the dead. Readers approach any text with expectations picked up from a lifetime of reading. They are frustrated when the expectations are not met. They may tolerate a few lapses—a long, swirling sentence here, a misspelled word there, a breakdown in diction in another place. Frustrate them too often, and they will give up. The writer's job is to create an audience and to keep that audience interested to the end.



Writing must *communicate*. Communication holds communities together; language helps to make us members of communities, allows us to influence other human beings, and enables us to achieve some sense of who we are within the group. Communication follows conventions concerning the meanings of words, the forms of sentences, the shapes of various kind of discourse, the standards for evidence, and so on.

All of us belong to several “discourse communities,” groups of shared knowledge and interests within which we communicate—communities wherein our language makes sense. The largest of these communities is the one that speaks English, especially American English. Within that large community are multitudes of subgroups—those who love computers, those who study the sixteenth century, those devoted to a sport such as baseball or a team such as the Boston Red Sox. Each community has its own language, its own patterns of communication.

We do not have to explain everything to readers in the discourse community for which we write or speak. If I write that the Red Sox beat the Yankees in the last of the ninth last night on a suicide squeeze, every serious fan knows exactly what I mean. But those outside the baseball discourse community will find the sentence opaque. Suicide squeeze? Did some Red Sox player kill himself so the team could win? The nonfan may wonder.

Fans understand the sentence. For starters, no Boston fan can imagine that any member of the Red Sox would make a personal sacrifice for the team. The sentence tells us rather that the teams were playing at Fenway Park in Boston, that the game was tied in the last of the ninth inning, that the Sox had a runner on third with no more than one out, that the manager ordered the batter to bunt, and that the runner on third started for home as soon as the pitcher went into his windup. If the batter had failed to bunt, the catcher would have easily tagged the runner out at the plate; but the batter made contact with the ball, hit it slowly along the ground in front of the plate, and the runner scored and the game was over. Can a nonfan understand even this explanation? Perhaps not. But any sports writer who set out to explain everything in every story would quickly lose his job on the newspaper. Writers assume a discourse community bringing knowledge to the writer’s text. They try to make sense within that community, using what readers already know (here the rules of the game) to report something new (how the game came out).

We use the language our community understands. How does a particular audience use words? Good writers think about that question every time they write. Yet the community of language users is so large that it never completely agrees upon what all words mean or



how they should be used. New words come into the language; old words pass away or change their meaning. How all this happens is mysterious. The task of the writer is to sort out effective usage from ineffective usage. I hesitate to say “good” usage or “bad” usage, for “good” and “bad” imply a moral judgment on language that I do not share. You are not a bad person if you say “ain’t,” and you are not bad if you say “between you and I.” But those usages do not conform to the expectations about language shared by multitudes of educated readers, and those people will be offended because in using the non-standard usages you seem not to be part of their group. Foolish? Perhaps. But that is the way groups are. Baseball fans would be annoyed if a TV announcer wondered if the home team might punt in the last half of the ninth. Such a statement would tell them that he is pretending to be a member of a group to which he does not belong, and the discourse community of fans would hoot.

“Ain’t” and “between you and I” are fairly obvious offenses against the discourse community of those who read and write; however, most questions of usage exist in a grey zone of uncertainty. No language is like the geometry of Euclid, which is a logical system based on unbreakable laws. Too many books and too many teachers have tyrannized beginning writers with the dictatorship of the rules. Many of these teachers are modern puritans, convinced that a corrupt world is about to topple and that only stern discipline can save us. In his angry book *Paradigms Lost* (the title is a heavy-handed play on Milton’s *Paradise Lost*), critic John Simon asks why language changes. His answer: “Language, for the most part, changes out of ignorance.”¹ Simon’s fierce pages burn with denunciations of the “permissiveness” that descriptive books like this one inculcate in the young, and in a typical passage he assaults the National Council of Teachers of English (an organization to which I belong) as “a body so shot through with irresponsible radicalism, guilt-ridden liberalism, and asinine trendiness as to be, in my opinion, one of the major culprits—right up there with television—in the sabotaging of linguistic standards.”²

For at least a couple of centuries doomsayers have predicted that civilization was about to collapse because the English language was dying; a grammatical Chicken Little somewhere is always proclaiming that the sky is falling. In *Grammar and Good Taste*, Dennis E. Baron tells us of the amusing frustration of the English grammarian Robert Lowth, who in 1762 wrote a book intended to provide a scientific understanding of good English style. Lowth conjured up a set of rules for writing—and then complained that Shakespeare, John Donne, John Milton, and the translators of the King James version of the Bible had violated them and had therefore fallen into poor writing!³



That is the trouble with the frantic quest for absolute, scientific standards in English! Look around just a bit, and you will find good writers who violate them. Like the Puritans of old, our latter-day linguistic puritans find evil everywhere, even in those known to be good. John Simon mentions several writers he considers exemplary—but then cannot resist the temptation to point out their errors. In the end his book portrays an author who cannot be satisfied and who must therefore be miserable every time he reads.

Language is an art, not a science. It has “standards,” but they change with life. Classical Greek and Latin do not change much; the people who used them are dead. They changed a great deal while the people who used them were alive. From Homer to Plato, the Greek language changed, and from Plato to the New Testament it changed yet again.

In our society the most important umpires of language are editors who decide what will be published and what not. Editors publish readable writing that others will buy. Editors who publish unreadable or uninteresting stuff get fired. Editors who can judge what the public will read keep publishing alive and themselves comfortable. Editors decide who will be our “professional writers”—writers who get paid for their work.

The flexible standard for this book is the work of professional writers published by editors. I call it “editors’ standard,” and I have tried to say what that standard is—or what it seems to be most of the time. Every writer occasionally breaks the rules. If your audience likes what you do and respects you for it when you break the rules, your risk has paid off. If you break too many rules, no editor will publish your work. The real “rules” of language are the expectations of readers.

Writing has always been difficult. The written words lie there, as Socrates told Phaedrus in a famous dialogue, without the help of a living person to explain them. They must speak for themselves. If we misunderstand them, no one speaks out of the writing to correct us. Words have histories; they have shades of meanings; they have contexts. Times change, and readers of different generations read into words thoughts that differ from what the writer may have intended. The same reader may see one thing in a text in youth, another in middle age, and yet another in old age—and all the interpretations may make sense.

All this makes communication difficult even when writers exercise great care. Readers have to make sense out of any text they read; the sense they make is an interpretation, and any text with enough thoughts in it gives rise to conflicting interpretations. English departments would die overnight if everyone agreed as to what all words mean. Writers must recognize the difficulty that the best writing gives



readers; the careful writer works hard to minimize the difficulty of reading. Writing takes so much effort that the percentage of people who write well is always small—and therefore the good writer is always in demand.

Speaking is easier than writing. Speakers can misuse words yet still be understood because of their tone of voice, their gestures, and their expressions. They can repeat themselves until we get the point. Speaking is a democratic art; nearly everyone does it well enough to communicate. It may not always be pretty or clear or efficient; but it is communication. The movies, radio, and television have inundated us with speaking by all sorts of people who might find it difficult or impossible to write an essay. We hear the words they use and the forms of their sentences. Often the words do not have their traditional meanings; often speakers gallop all over the place like untrained horses forced to carry loose burdens on their backs. The talk on, say, the Johnny Carson show may be chaotic. Even so, out of such talk we construct meanings.

Readers have to construct meanings from texts. Texts do not have body language and intonations. They must stand alone. Writing usually represents more extended and more complicated thought than the thought expressed in most conversations. The writer develops ideas, one on top of another. That adds difficulty, for the reader must remember what has come before, be aware of what is there now, and be anticipating what will come in the next paragraph or on the next page.

For these reasons, the written language must be much more precise and more carefully organized than the spoken language. Professional writers—writers paid to write—succeed in communicating with readers. The best writers make readers enjoy their writing. What do they do? Here are some principles to keep in mind.

1. Professional writers begin by trying to interest readers. They never start by saying, "How can I avoid making mistakes?" They ask themselves questions like these: What do I have to say? How can I make people pay attention to what I am saying and take my writing seriously? How can I make them keep reading? Of course good writers want to be correct—just as the pianist playing a Beethoven concerto wants to hit all the right notes. But professional writers—and professional pianists—never assume that being correct is enough.
2. Professional writers are economical with words. They use as few words as possible to say what they want to say. They use short words rather than long ones when the short words express their meaning as well. They get to the point quickly. A doctor complain-



ing about the obscurity of writing in specialized medical books and journals sent me the following example of prose that no editor of a popular magazine would allow to see print. The writer was trying to show how the treatment of cancer affects community hospitals.

The cancer burden and its financial ramifications have escalated to enormous proportions on the community level. Early diagnosis with open communication to the patient and cost containment are dominant in the perspective of community medicine. Bed space, operating room facilities, and therapy units are in desperate need of expansion but are curtailed by certificates of need. The burden of creative and imaginative utilization of existing advantages is projected back to the physician, and his personal role in directing a diagnostic maneuver, informing the patient of results, and accomplishing therapy is intensified.⁴

A professional writer would condense:

The burdens of cancer have become enormous for community medicine. We want to diagnose the disease early, communicate honestly with the patient, and contain costs. We are short on bed space, operating rooms, and therapy units, and we lack the money to expand. The physician must take responsibility for using what is available and possible for diagnosis, for telling the patient the results, and for directing the therapy.

In the second version, 91 words have been reduced to 70. I do not believe I have cut anything essential from the first version, although I cannot understand parts of it. (What does the writer mean by “certificates of need”?) Professional writers prune away the nonessential as they revise their early drafts.

3. Professional writers are direct. They begin most of their sentences with the subject and tell us quickly what the subject does—or what happens to the subject. They don’t write many long, looping dependent clauses between subjects and verbs. We read silently now, rather than aloud as people did until only a few centuries ago. We also read quickly. We can read faster if subjects are close to verbs and verbs close to direct objects.

In *The Philosophy of Composition*, E. D. Hirsch, Jr. illustrates the increasing directness of English style by giving several translations of the same text from Giovanni Boccaccio, the greatest of the fourteenth-century storytellers in Renaissance Italy. Hirsch shows that as the English translations come forward in time, they use sentences that are both shorter and more direct. Here is a version he gives from the sixteenth century: