

Writing allows
'mediocre people
who are patient
and industrious
to revise their
stupidity, to edit
themselves into
something like
intelligence'

Kurt Vonnegut

Landscape

- Writing is a craft skill ...
 - Writing is not talking
- ... & also a research skill: write better, think better
- Two levels to master:
 - Make things clear: **Plain English**
 - Make things fresh, rhythmic: **Classic Style**
- *Find your voice, change your thinking*

PLAIN ENGLISH

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BY
SIR ERNEST GOWERS

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to carry in your pocket, as I carry mine."

— Charles Osgood

The
ELEMENTS
of
STYLE

FOURTH EDITION

FOREWORD BY ROGER ANGELL

Principles

Make it as easy to read as possible

- Be clear. Remove ambiguity
- Be specific & precise
- Be concise, cut clutter

Nouns

Be Concrete, be Precise

- Don't say: **Crops were adversely affected by environmental conditions**
- Do say: **Drought led to crop losses**

Redundant Nouns

Drop needless, redundant words & phrases

- At a later date — just 'later'
- In order to — just 'to'
- In relation to — cut!
- It is important to note that... — cut!
- A study showed that ... — cut!

**Redundant
nouns:
*tagging***

- Crisis situation
- Livestock marketing system
- Climate context
- Staff resources
- Holiday period

Useless tags

Issue, Process, Situation, System
Approach, Basis, Condition,
Context
Exercises, Facilities, Framework
Pattern, Period, Resources

Adjectives

Strip out (useless) adjectives.

- *Rigorous* analysis
- *Robust* conclusions
- *Concrete* recommendations
- *Excellent* (almost anything)

Verbs

- Active verbs bring text to life
- Make agency clear: who is doing what?
- Beware passive voice
 - Has its uses, but not that many
- Reveal hidden verbs ['nominalisation']
 - For the maintenance of the engine, regular application of lubricant is recommended
 - To maintain the engine, lubricate it regularly

Sentences

- Limit sentences to a single point
- Prefer short sentences, beware long sentences
 - Risk of muddle, hard to read
- Default: stick to simple sentences: subject, verb, object, outcome
 - The Department distributed food vouchers to the refugees who bought maize and beans in local shops

Sentences, but ...

- Vary sentence length
- Short sentences to make point
- Longer ones to clarify, quantify, qualify, amplify, etc.
- When sentences must be long – some arguments are complicated -- guide reader by punctuation & conjunctions [pref. not 'and']
- Know strong and weak points in a sentence (later!)

Paragraphs

- A unit of thought, not length
- Prefer shorter to longer paragraphs
- Guide: 6 to 15 lines

PRACTICE

from a thesis about animal traction in a tropical country

Apart from being unsuitable for cultivation in root crop systems, animal diseases leading to reduced efficiency of draft animals increase production costs and hence reduce their comparative advantage in humid and sub-humid zones.

More academese

Female farmers form 44 percent of the cooperative membership across the four value chains. This is already very positive, yet gender equality should continue to be promoted systematically to ensure that women, including female youth, equally benefit from horticulture value chains and that gender transformational approaches are promoted along the value chain to sustainably keep gender equality standards.

From a leading think tank

The current development landscape is characterised by uncertainty on multiple levels. The fundamental geopolitical balance is changing as the G8 becomes the G20 and the emerging economies take their place increasingly as equals of the OECD members. 'North' and 'South' are ceasing to be useful categories for understanding the world order, as innovation, growth, social and political change are increasingly driven by countries in the southern hemisphere – particularly Brazil, China and India. Alongside these changes the imperative of responding to climate change with bold global action will over time fundamentally change the way economies and societies are structured. And the market volatility and global economic crisis of the last 2-3 years has removed much of the confidence which formerly prevailed about the predictability of global economic trends.

Subbed: now we can think

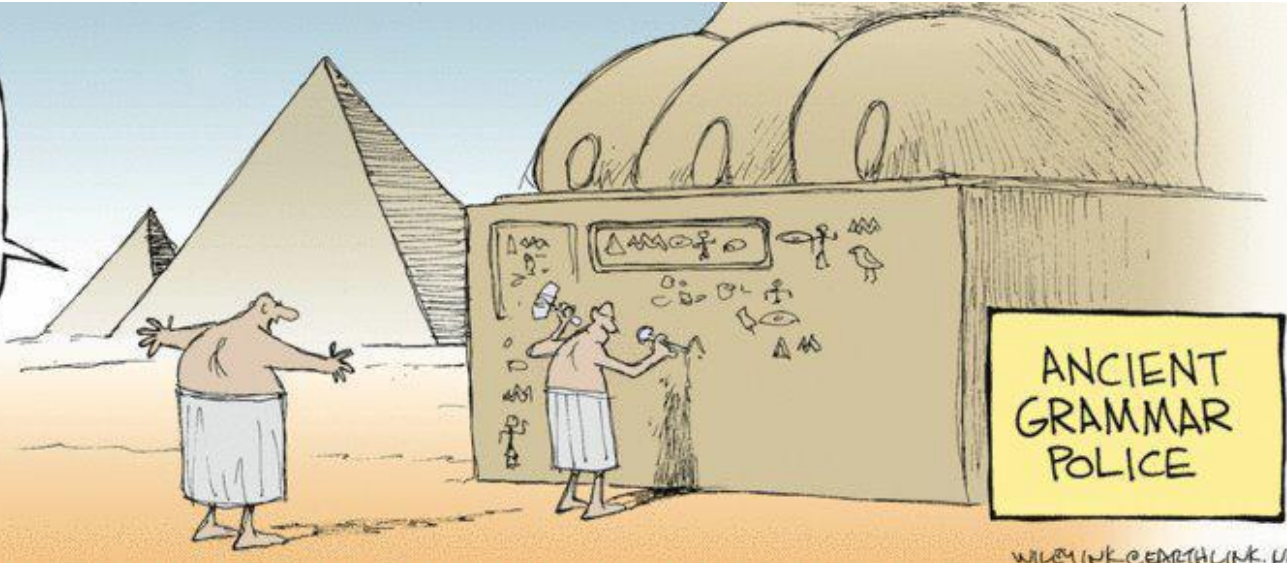
Uncertainty marks the development landscape. Volatile markets for money, fuel and food and the recent global economic crisis make it harder to predict economic trends.


Responding boldly to climate change will profoundly change economies and societies.

As the G8 becomes the G20, emerging economies increasingly debate as equals of OECD countries. 'North' and 'South' cease to be useful labels, as emerging economies — especially Brazil, China and India — increasingly drive innovation, growth, social and political change

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OH, FOR
CRYIN' OUT
LOUD... YOU
NEVER END
A SENTENCE
WITH A !



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A medieval-style illustration of a town. In the center, a man in a dark brown robe and blue hooded cloak sits on a yellow horse, facing left. To his left, a group of soldiers in colorful tunics and helmets stands near a wooden fence. To his right, a large formation of soldiers in dark armor is marching. In the background, there are stone buildings, a church with a tall spire, and a red brick wall with a white cross. Two speech bubbles are present: one on the left and one on the right.

FEWER!

I'd expected there to be less of you...

The pedant's revolt

**Plain
English: a
pedant's
charter?**

Anyone been told 'rules'?

- Know the rules, so you can break them!
- Free yourself

Session #2

**Building the
argument —
from Plain
English to
Classic Style**

Plain versus Classic

Plain:

- The early bird gets the worm

Classic

- The early bird gets the worm,
but the second mouse gets the
cheese


FIFTH EDITION

STYLE

*The Basics of
Clarity and Grace*

JOSEPH M. WILLIAMS
JOSEPH BIZUP

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

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William Zinsser

Let's look at

The Economist

in action

7 things to learn from

The Economist

#1 Get on with it

The predictions sounded like promises: in the future, working hours would be short and vacations long.

A lot can be learned about candidates from their speeches on the hustings: not what they say, but how they say it.

A 25-year-old American with a university degree can expect to live a decade longer than a contemporary who dropped out of high school.

#2 First sentence states, following sentences explain

Helps reader understand what's being argued,
focuses the writer on what next to say.

Imagine this to open a paragraph:

**Some think Africa's smallholders are
inefficient, but nothing could be further from
the truth**

#3 Prove it, point by point

The Economist's writers stack their supporting observations in one paragraph. This results in a more convincing essay: listing successive reasons why X is worth talking about increases the odds of believing so.

Ahmed Soliman

#4 Use precise, active, vivid language

That feat has since been repeated with getting on for 1m different samples of SARS-CoV-2 in the hunt for **fearsome** variants like the one **ravaging** Brazil.

#5 Colons make readers ask 'why?'

Colons can replace all these **clumsy** intro's:
due to the fact that,
as a result,
therefore,
for that reason,
accordingly,
because,

But spam is still a menace:
blocked at the e-mail inbox,
spammers post messages as
comments on websites and
increasingly on social
networks like Twitter and
Facebook.

The principle was absolutely
right: unless default is a
possibility, bond investors
have no reason to distinguish
between good and bad

#6 Get with the beat

Fall in love with rhythm ...

... & the joys of **parallelism**:

In the subsequent four months, Libra **has had a bruising time**. Many of its partner firms **have got cold feet**. Politicians and regulators around the world **have made disapproving noises**.

More on how
to bring
research to
life


Order in sentences: stress

How do we order these elements?

- Patel & Smith (2020)
- Widows
- Interviews in 2018
- Eastern DRC
- Cash transfers
- Used to pay medical bills

Stress: clause, sentence, para
Where is strong, where is weak?

The Queen, my Lord, is dead



The queen,
my lord, is
dead.

She should have died
hereafter. There
would have been a
time for such a word.

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

Stress, again

End on a bang, not a whimper:

- Lincoln's claim that the Civil War was God's punishment of both North and South for slavery appears in the last part of the speech.
- In the last part of his speech, Lincoln claims that God gave the Civil War to both North and South as a punishment for slavery.

Flow:

make it easy on reader

- Start: known, simple, straightforward, short
- Later: novel, difficult, complicated, lengthy

Make sentences flow from one to another —
to cohere —

- Start next sentence from where last sentence ended.

- **Before:**
- Some astonishing questions about the nature of the universe have been raised by scientists studying black holes in space. The collapse of a dead star into a point perhaps no larger than a marble creates a black hole. So much matter compressed into so little volume changes the fabric of space around it in puzzling ways.

- **After:**
- Some astonishing questions about the nature of the universe have been raised by scientists studying black holes in space. A black hole is created by the collapse of a dead star into a point perhaps no larger than a marble. So much matter compressed into so little volume changes the fabric of space around it in puzzling ways.

Clarity: first step towards coherence

- Make **introductions** to papers, chapters, sections & paragraphs clear; rest will follow
- How?
 - Short statements to introduce,
 - Clear, direct & striking

‘This paper will show that Russia’s invasion caused wheat prices to rise by no more than 5%.’
- After clear & succinct intro, reader can take on detail
 - with whatever complications & complexity apply.
- But do use **consistent terms**

The unimaginative, unproductive ‘and’

Coordination is not just about style and grammar, but also about thought.

- Watch how using ‘and’ makes it harder to follow what is being said here:

Grade inflation is a problem at many universities, and it leads to a devaluation of good grades earned by hard work and will not be solved simply by grading harder.

- Where’s the logic when we write ‘and’? Try ‘because’ in the first instance, and ‘but’ in the second.

Grade inflation is a problem at many universities, because it leads to a devaluation of good grades earned by hard work; but it will not be solved simply by grading harder.

Balance & Symmetry make Elegance

The national unity of a free people depends upon a sufficiently even balance of political power to make it impracticable for the administration to be arbitrary and for the opposition to be revolutionary and irreconcilable. Where that balance no longer exists, democracy perishes. For unless all the citizens of a state are forced by circumstances to compromise, unless they feel that they can affect policy but that no one can wholly dominate it, unless by habit and necessity they have to give and take, freedom cannot be maintained.

Walter Lippmann

Process & Outcome

Outcome:

- A text means only what a competent & careful reader makes of it:
- the author's intention is just that, an intention; if it's not well realised, careful readers can make of the text what they will.

Process:

- Don't think about writing when drafting
 - wait until you revise!

Zero Drafts are
Dross
Writing's
Revision



Slide dump

Clutter is the disease of American writing. We are a society strangling in unnecessary words, circular constructions, pompous frills and meaningless jargon.

...

But the secret of good writing is to strip every sentence to its cleanest components. Every word that serves no function, every long word that could be a short word, every adverb that carries the same meaning that's already in the verb, every passive construction that leaves the reader unsure of who is doing what—these are the thousand and one adulterants that weaken the strength of a sentence.

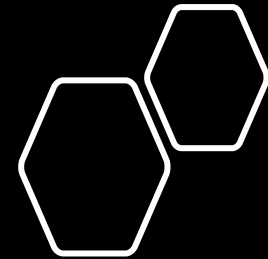
And they usually occur in proportion to education and rank.

SECOND EDITION

Writing with Clarity and Style

A Guide to Rhetorical Devices
for Contemporary Writers

Robert A. Harris



First You Write a Sentence.

'Any writer should read it'
Bee Wilson



The Elements of
Reading, Writing . . . and Life.

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Stylish Academic Writing

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