GOOD ENGLISH

CHAPTER EIGHT

The essence of good style

As literacy became more widespread after the expansion of the middle classes from the time of the English Civil War onwards, and especially after the 1870 Education Act in Great Britain brought reading and writing to the children of the working classes, so a language whose form had been agreed by educated people began to mutate in a fashion that lay outside that agreement. Two types of offence provoked hostility – or snobbery, depending upon one's point of view – to this mutation. The first was the sheer misuse of words, and the abuse of grammar. The second, related to the first, was the difficulty in communicating effectively that these catachreses and solecisms caused. Some people were now being educated to a point where they learned not only how to use words that would once have been above their station, but to use them with something approaching grammatical propriety. However, they were often nonetheless verbose, particularly if they worked in any sort of petty officialdom. It was the sight of these offences that caused various learned men (and, at that point, they were almost exclusively men) to begin to write manuals telling the newly literate that, if they wished to use these precision tools of language, they had better use them according to the rules that those more experienced in them had always adopted.

The brothers Fowler, in 1906, opened their magisterial work *The King's English* with five rules about a writer's choice of words. To

generations of users of English these became a holy writ of literary fundamentalism. We should therefore note them here:

> Prefer the familiar word to the far-fetched.
> Prefer the concrete word to the abstract.
> Prefer the single word to the circumlocution.
> Prefer the short word to the long.
> Prefer the Saxon word to the Romance.

The Fowlers add that “these rules are given roughly in order of merit”, which one assumes is how *circumlocution* came to survive beyond the proof stage. The rules are the codification of the book’s first sentence, codified, one assumes, for the benefit of the hard of understanding: “Any one who wishes to become a good writer should endeavour, before he allows himself to be tempted by the more showy qualities, to be direct, simple, brief, vigorous and lucid.”[1] *Endeavour* is a synonym for *try*.

The Fowlers’ book is still in print more than 100 years after its first appearance and has sold hundreds of thousands of copies. Yet the message remained, and still remains, slow to sink in. That was why George Orwell, in *Politics and the English Language*, also set some rules for the struggling communicator:

> i. Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
> ii. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
> iii. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
> iv. Never use the passive where you can use the active.
> v. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
> vi. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.[2]

Another way of making the last of those points is Winston Churchill’s celebrated line about “this is the sort of English up with which I will not put”.

Everyone who writes a book about English usage will have his own rules, and presume to inflict them on his readers. I am no different. The Fowler/Orwell rules seem serviceable to me, given the importance of a writer's being understood and communicating a message or idea. Rather than outline rules, perhaps I may be allowed to outline the bones of a philosophy with which I approach English as a professional writer.

First, I see no reason for orthography to be varied, since we have had a completed standard dictionary for over 80 years. Second, I see no reason for grammar to be varied, since there has been general agreement among educated people about how it should work for even longer than we have had a dictionary. That agreement has been based on sound logical and historical principles. The grammar agreed upon is one that allows such a high degree of precision that it eliminates almost all ambiguities and is easily comprehensible. Perhaps the last important development in our grammar (as opposed to a change's being caused by deliberate neglect or abuse, as with the very useful subjunctive mood) was that of the passive voice as we now recognise it in the early 19th century. Jane Austen writes that "the house was building". Within a few decades this had become "the house was being built". This change in grammar seems to me defensible in that it imposed greater precision and removed scope for ambiguity. These must be the aims of any system of grammar.

Third, given that we have (according to the latest edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*) over 171,000 words in our language, plus another 47,000 classed as obsolete and 9,500 derived from existing words, I see no reason for a word to be used in other than its etymologically correct sense. I have given plenty of evidence for this in Chapter Five. This is not to be construed as an objection to new words' entering the language: only a fool would take such a view, since new concepts, objects and experiences occur all the time and a new word may be required to describe them accurately. Usually, those words will come about by a logical means, often by reference to a classical antecedent: it is why an era of invention gave us telephone, television, refrigerator and video. However, wilful misuse of a word to describe something for which plenty of other words already exist seems to me to be unpardonable, even if in some instances the dictionary has capitulated and admitted to a new meaning. It can also be confusing to those readers who have a careful appreciation of the meaning of words. I would refer readers who still harbour doubts about this to the observations I

have made in Chapter Five with regard to words such as *prevaricate* and *flout*, and to many others. We live in a harsh world, and one of its harshnesses is that we are sometimes judged by the way we use our language. One who uses a word wrongly may go undetected among his peers only to be snared at a crucial moment by someone he may be trying to impress. It is better, if one seeks to be taken seriously, not to run the risk of such humiliation.

My fourth and final prejudice, having expressed my strictness about grammar, spelling and vocabulary, is about concision in expression. There is little point in spelling correctly, having immaculate grammar and using each word in its correct sense if one is verbose. Most of us, when we read verbose writing, think of it as flannel. We lose respect for the writer and discount his opinions. One should strive not to have that effect on one's readers. Therefore, use the minimum number of words to say whatever you have to say.

Playing by the rules

The five rules of the Fowlers, or the six of Orwell, are the essence of how to develop a good style. What follows in this chapter amplifies and expands them, and reflects the prejudices of my own that I have just outlined. You may have noticed that the prescriptions of the Fowlers and Orwell to an extent overlap. That is hardly surprising, because there is relatively little to the art of writing well. It requires adherence to the rules of grammar and punctuation set out already; thoughtful and precise choice of words; brevity; and, in the use of imagery and metaphor, the pursuit of the original. Should you feel daunted by this, remember that, like anything, excellence comes with practice. Since you speak and possibly write English every day, the opportunity for practice is large. Seize it greedily, think about what you say or write so that you apply the rules, and your style will quickly improve.

I write books when I have the time and the opportunity, but I have earned my living for almost 30 years writing for newspapers and periodicals. One cannot overstate the discipline attached to such work. The marketplace in which these publications operate has always been fiercely

competitive. If a writer acquires a reputation for complexity or obscurity – in other words, for being hard for the reader to understand – then he will quickly be out of work. Those who wish to maintain a career in this line of business must communicate effectively. That entails doing precisely what is detailed above. Readers distracted by poor grammar, or confused by ambiguity, or estranged by pompous vocabulary, or bored by prolixity, or puzzled by vagueness, or who come to hold a writer in contempt for the use of cliché will be readers who do not come back. Journalism is, or tries to be, a precise trade for that reason. It is, perhaps, because readers expect high standards of writing in journalism that they complain with such ferocity when they find the opposite.

A good style is not one that shows off the vocabulary or the extensive reading of the writer. It is one that combines clarity of expression with ease of reading while conveying the maximum information, with every word essential to the task and used in the correct grammatical framework. Anyone unclear about what that is should re-read Chapter Four. Good style also includes words that are used in their accurate sense, such as described in Chapter Five. As has been noted before, the expansion of the literate class from the mid-19th to the mid-20th centuries resulted in many more people who knew how to read and write, but not necessarily how to write well. Achieving stylistic excellence was a matter for the individual's further study and application. Few could be bothered to do this, but many had jobs in which they had to communicate with the public – perhaps as minor functionaries in central or local government, or in other parts of the bureaucracy, or in clerical roles for great corporations. The ready availability of bad English in wide circulation that was the result helped provoke Orwell's statement that a "mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence is the most marked characteristic of modern English prose".[3]

Economy is the best policy

The most basic rule, put in different ways by the Fowlers, Orwell and almost every other commentator on the use of language, is to be brief. This does not just mean shorter documents. It means the most concise use of

expression within those documents. Why say “he fell asleep on the majority of occasions he went to work” when one can say “he fell asleep most times he went to work”? Why say (to use a popular horror) “at this moment in time” when one can say “now”? Why say “it is possible to go there” when one can say “I can go there”? Why say (to use another popular horror) “when all is said and done” when probably one need say nothing at all? Our speech tends to be full of fillers such as that. They become verbal tics, or they allow us a moment to mark time in our speech and think what we really want to say. They are tiresome in that context, but unpardonable in a considered piece of writing. Concision is the writer’s weapon against obscurity, and precision his shield against incomprehension. If a word is unnecessary, do not use it. Clarity of expression reflects clarity of thought, and helps a reader not just to understand, but to take seriously, what the writer is saying to him.

Some writers seem unaware of their use of redundant words. Why should someone say “the painting we bought was the best one in the gallery”, when the *one* is redundant? Another example of this pointlessness is “the restaurant we ate in was one known around the world”. There was a time when grammarians were united in their ridicule for the construction “prepared to…” as in “I am prepared to vouch for the fact that…”. The verbal construction is unnecessary and verbose: the test for this is that if the construction “to be prepared to” is removed and replaced by *will* or *shall*, the sense of the sentence remains unchanged. This, indeed, is the test for all writing; if a word or phrase can be removed from a clause or sentence without altering its meaning or rendering it more obscure, remove it. Our language, written and spoken, is littered with pointless words that are verbal tics or fillers: words and phrases such as *actually, really, in fact* or, perhaps most vacuous of all, *in actual fact*. Some people appear incapable of eliminating these in speech; it ought to be far easier to do so in writing.

Even apparently sharp writing may contain redundancies. One can often express things more concisely by using a verb instead of a noun. Why write “both examples are illustrations of the depravity of politicians” when you can write “both examples illustrate the depravity”? Depending upon the context, one might not even need the word *examples*. One cannot always do entirely without abstract nouns: but the fewer abstracts, the better. Another such is “these things are reminders of…” when one could without impairing the sense write “these remind us”; *things* is also all too often a word with no

point to it. Nouns (notably, again, abstract ones) in verbose constructions also sometimes take the place of simple adjectives. The teacher who says “there is too much noise in this class” would better say “this class is too noisy”.

Beware, too, of the pleonastic introductory phrase. How often does one read *it is obvious that, by and large, for the most part* or *as a matter of fact,* or some other piece of padding before a phrase such as “the economy is not getting any better”, when the sentence could just as easily start with that phrase itself. Another such phrase that also invites itself into the middle of sentences is *of course*. This is rarely necessary, because if something is *of course* one hardly needs to say so. Get straight to the point: most readers do not need an introduction to allow them time to collect their thoughts, even if the writer appears to.

When one hears verbose language, one may conclude that the verbosity is a way of killing time while the thought-processes of the speaker light up: or, it may be an indication that they are never going to light up. Whatever the reason, some people get into the habit of speaking badly, and then write badly. This applies as much to those who appear to be educated as to those with no such pretension. How often has one heard a senior bureaucrat, interviewed in the broadcast media, talk of something happening “on a daily basis”? What is the point of the words *on*, *a* and *basis* in that phrase? When one hears phrases such as “it was of an unfortunate character” or “it was not of a very agreeable nature”, one learns no more than if one had been told “it was unfortunate” or “it was disagreeable”. When somebody introduces a statement with the filler “at the end of the day”, is it ever necessary? Would it even be necessary if the statement were being made as the sun was setting, or midnight approaching, let alone if it were just after breakfast?

Gowers was also strict about abstract nouns such as *position* and *situation* being used to remove clarity from statements, and he was right to be so.[4] A desire for euphemism seems to trigger both usages. If someone is seriously ill one may as well say so, rather than observe that “the situation is serious”. If a company is broke it is better to say so, rather than to claim that “its position is serious”. In each example, the abstract nouns create distance; they are used to divorce the reality from the entity. No serious writer, unless briefed to deceive, should seek to do that. These terms are used sometimes where there is no attempt at euphemism. “I am writing to

enquire about your situation" can be paraphrased as "what are you doing?" just as "could you inform me as to your position on this matter" is "what do you think about it?" Jespersen, writing in his *Philosophy of Grammar*, demonstrated for other reasons the difference between the sentences "I doubt the Doctor's cleverness" and "I doubt that the doctor is clever".[5] One can see immediately that the former is euphemistic, the second more direct to the point of being insulting. While being rude is not always going to be the intention of a writer, avoiding the abstract wherever possible will always lead to the writer's communicating his meaning more directly.

Even when one uses only one word rather than several, it may be an unnecessarily long word. One such example that the Fowlers railed against was *provided*. "*Provided* is a small district in the kingdom of if," they wrote, in one of those entertaining observations that show the considerable charm of their supposedly pedantic book. "It can never be wrong to write *if* instead of *provided*; to write *provided* instead of *if* will generally be wrong, but now and then an improvement in precision."[6] A contemporary example shows the eternal truth of this rule. "You won't be caught for speeding provided you don't break the speed limit" loses nothing by having *provided* removed and replaced by *if*. Sometimes, however, as even the Fowlers conceded, *provided* is necessary, not least to avoid giving the wrong impression. I would re-frame their rule as follows: where *provided* describes a straightforward option or condition (as it normally will), replace it with *if* ; yet on the rare occasions that it describes an indispensable or essential condition, retain it. So "provided it is nice this afternoon, we shall go for a swim" becomes "if it is nice…"; but "I told him that I would look after him provided he resolved to mend his ways" is preferable to "…if he resolved" since the use of *provided* establishes that his mending his ways is not a casual option, but an important and indispensable condition of his being looked after.

There are some clichéd phrases including prepositions that have become tired and are verbose. They exemplify the failure of writers to think about the words they are using, and they radiate pomposity: "in respect of your letter of…" or "with regard to your letter". The officialese of these should be obvious at once; they have no place in humane communication, and may usually be cut out altogether. This is usually also true of the phrase *the case*; or, as I might just have written, "this is usually also the case with

the phrase *the case*". The phrase has become a filler and is used at the expense of a more precise word – *true* will often suffice.

When writing in reported speech about events destined for the future, use the form "after his successful debut, Smith would go on to open the batting for England" rather than "Smith was to go on to open the batting". Paring down one's sentences to the bare minimum is never a wasted exercise, for it gives the maximum help to readers.

In speech and writing to which too little thought has been given, too many words and phrases are simply padding or verbal tics, and inexact phrases often replace precise words. This was illustrated in Chapter Six by the example of *get* and *got* and it is also true of *do*. Some words seem to exist purely to provide a breathing space for both writer and reader. When, for example, you next read the word *overall*, note how you may almost always remove it from its sentence without affecting the meaning: such as in "he was in overall charge" (a tautology as well as a pleonasm), "overall, it made no difference", "there was an overall view that it shouldn't happen", "the overall case was made for keeping the rule" and so on. *Overall* has a legitimate function when describing something that really is over all: such as in politics, when to use the phrase *overall majority* conveys concisely and accurately the fact that in a legislature one party has more seats than all other parties combined, rather than just more than any individual party. It takes little time to weigh every word; and the need to weigh every word makes an important point about reading what one has written before letting anyone else see it.

Short, sharp sentences

Orwell, like most commentators on the language, makes the point that adherence to conventions is not reactionary: it is about maintaining clarity. What had passed for progress in some people's estimate of the language was, in his view, simply sloppiness of speech or of writing that betokened sloppiness of thought. It is axiomatic that if one doesn't know what one is trying to say, one will say it badly. This is most often revealed in the seemingly interminable sentence.

Fashion has changed on this point in the last century. In *The King's English* the Fowlers asserted that too much "full stopping", even when used correctly, was a "discomfort inflicted upon readers, who are perpetually being checked like a horse with a fidgety driver".[7] They added, for the avoidance of doubt, that "no sentence is to be condemned for mere length; a really skilful writer can fill a page with one and not tire his reader."[8] Even they conceded, however, that "a succession of long sentences without the relief of short ones interspersed is almost sure to be forbidding". It is not causing tiredness or being forbidding that seems to be the problem: it is preventing the sense of what is being communicated from being clearly received by the reader.

For those like the Fowlers who grew up in the Victorian age and were well-educated, the long sentence, upholstered with commas, semicolons and colons, was a delight. They luxuriated in its elegant phrasing and the juxtaposition of its clauses. It is now viewed as a barrier to clarity, in my view quite rightly. The change in fashion is almost certainly the fault of the rise of the mass media. It is not only broadcasters who speak concisely in order that their listeners may not lose the thread. Newspaper writers and those who write for the internet need to convey detail as quickly as possible, to prevent losing the attention of the reader and having him move on somewhere else. The more truncated style of sentence structure was taken up by such writers as Graham Greene (who had been a journalist), Evelyn Waugh and Aldous Huxley, all of whom came to prominence in the generation after the Fowlers. Modernists attacked the earlier style, as they did much that lingered on from Victorian times; Joyce parodied it extensively in *Ulysses*. The fashion shows no sign of altering again.

A mass of clauses, not always punctuated with the precision the Fowlers would have hoped for, helps the reader lose the point: that is, if he has found one in the first place. If one considers properly what one wants to say, one will think of a way of saying it concisely. Even the most complex ideas benefit from being broken down into constituent units. Commas or conjunctions can be replaced by full stops without very much – indeed, any – harm being caused. Having written a sentence, read it again and judge whether it needs to be the length it is. Is it easily divisible into smaller sentences? May conjunctions be removed and replaced by a fresh start? May a full stop be substituted for a semicolon?

One hesitates to imagine one could improve on the prose of such a master as Smollett, but this extract from *Roderick Random*, while clear in so many respects, is rather taxing for the reader:

> I rose and sat down, covered and uncovered my head twenty times between the acts; pulled out my watch, clapped it to my ear, wound it up, set it, gave it the hearing again; displayed my snuffbox, affected to take snuff, that I might have an opportunity of showing my brilliant, and wiped my nose with a perfumed handkerchief; then dangled my cane, and adjusted my sword-knot, and acted many more fooleries of the same kind, in hopes of obtaining the character of a pretty fellow, in the acquiring of which I found two considerable obstructions in my disposition, namely, a natural reserve and jealous sensibility.[9]

It is fine prose, its clarity not least guaranteed by the scarcity of adjectives, hardly any of which appear until the very end of this 106-word sentence. It is comic writing, so we may forgive Smollett this construction. It also well conveys the agitation and restlessness of the narrator, who is desperate to be noticed. However, such a framework, in the hands of an amateur, would be an invitation to disaster. Compare it with this passage from Orwell, the master of the short sentence, in which as much vividness is created, but of which any imitation would carry fewer dangers:

> He went on picking bluebells. It was the best thing to do. It might be the girl, or he might have been followed after all. To look round was to show guilt. He picked another and another. A hand fell lightly on his shoulder.
>
> He looked up. It was the girl.[10]

The Georgians and Victorians were hard put to understand the limits of comprehension of even the educated reader when faced with a sentence a hundred or so words long, or a paragraph that went over several pages. This could cause confusion where there were numerous subordinate clauses, where pronouns were used with increasing ambiguity, and where prepositions were sometimes lost altogether. Even where the writer’s grasp

of grammar was precise, a long sentence with numerous clauses could exhaust the reader before it reached its end. Hallam, writing in 1827 in his *Constitutional History* about the work of Hooker, presented this to the reader:

> He enquired into the nature and foundation of law itself as the rule of operation to all created beings, yielding thereto obedience by unconscious necessity, or sensitive appetite, or reasonable choice; reviewing especially those laws that regulate human agency, as they arise out of moral relations, common to our species, or the institutions of politic societies, or the inter-community of independent nations; and having thoroughly established the fundamental distinction between laws natural and positive, eternal and temporary, immutable and variable, he came with all this strength of moral philosophy to discriminate by the same criterion the various rules and precepts contained in the scriptures.[11]

A 104-word long sentence (by no means unusual or excessive for this writer, or for others of his era) might have been considered exemplary by the grammarians of the 19th century, but it looks abominable now.

Style is often about the reinforcement and observation of logic. For this reason, one sort of sentence that is always to be broken in two is the sort combining a statement and a question. This will usually occur only in rhetoric or first-person writing. “You must stop speaking to me in that tone, can’t you see it is hurtful?” is such an example. The question mark violates the sense of the first clause.

Breaking things up

Even short sentences can comprise two or three clauses; and where there are two or three clauses, or even just one, there is scope for ambiguity. In Chapter Three I considered the technical aspects of punctuation. Here I consider the stylistic ones. There are many simple examples of how a

comma here or there can change the meaning of a sentence, and of the how a supreme stylist will position his punctuation with the greatest care to ensure that the right information is communicated to the reader. Take this sentence: “she hit the thief who was escaping with her umbrella”. Now look at the various ways of punctuating it. “She hit the thief, who was escaping with her umbrella”, suggests that the thief was escaping with her umbrella, and she hit him. “She hit the thief, who was escaping, with her umbrella” suggests that as the thief was escaping (without her umbrella) she hit him with it. One could even have “she hit the thief who was escaping, with her umbrella”. That last sentence, which is eccentrically punctuated, has the same meaning as the one before it, but it opens up a different array of meanings. It suggests there was more than one thief; that there was one thief among them who was escaping; that she managed to hit that particular thief; and that it was worthy of note that she hit him with her umbrella. So, depending on the information one wants to convey, one punctuates accordingly.

It is clear from these simple examples that the wrong punctuation can and will convey quite the wrong meaning. It is also important to note that the first, unpunctuated sentence is susceptible of so many different meanings that it is a stylistic abomination. It defeats the first rule of writing, which is that one’s meaning should always be clear. It is also true that the final example should, to avoid any doubt, and to eliminate the bizarre punctuation and make its meaning precise, be recast as “she hit with her umbrella the thief who was escaping”. For reasons of emphasis that, too, can be punctuated in various ways, but no form of punctuation will alter this clear meaning. It may be punctuated as “she hit, with her umbrella, the thief who was escaping”, in which the writer feels that the important part of the sentence – the part that needs to be emphasised – is the part that refers to the weapon she used. Or, it may be punctuated “she hit with her umbrella the thief, who was escaping”, which emphasises not the weapon but the action the thief was taking. Finally, it may be punctuated “she hit, with her umbrella, the thief, who was escaping”, which emphasises both the weapon and the thief’s action. It also looks cluttered: the good stylist will want to stress only one part of any sentence.

Punctuation may also be used to create certain effects. A semicolon or colon will slow down a sentence more than a comma will, and writers use these punctuation marks to draw attention to clauses within sentences.

Butler does this to great effect in *The Way of All Flesh* when he is describing the plans Miss Pontifex has for distributing her estate: “She wanted those to have it who would be most likely to use it genially and sensibly, and whom it would thus be likely to make most happy; if she could find one such among her nephews and nieces, so much the better; it was worth taking a great deal of pains to see whether she could or could not; but if she failed, she must find an heir who was not related to her by blood.”[12] Modern writers would divide that up into several sentences. Butler would have considered, rightly at the time, that the use of one sentence was correct for one idea; and that its division by semicolons was radical at a time when the comma was so frequently used to break up long sentences.

The placement of commas in routine sentences is something many writers find difficult. There are five fundamental rules that solve most problems. The first is that commas should be used sparingly and logically. Some writers have a temptation to insert them after every few words, irrespective of the need for them or of the sense this punctuation then conveys. Commas are only required where to spare them would create problems of ambiguity or comprehension. In prose they are not respiratory guides.

Second, where commas are parenthetical, be sure to remember to end the parenthesis. One occasionally reads sentences such as “they went to the beach, which was crowded so they returned to the hotel”. A comma is required after *crowded* to separate that statement – an adjectival clause, for it describes the beach to us – from the rest of the sentence by completing the parenthesis. Remember, also, to use the correct relative pronoun when using a parenthesis: it will be *which* rather than *that* for abstracts or inanimate objects, as discussed in Chapter Four. Parentheses are often seen in sentences with adverbial phrases in them, such as in this example: “she closed the curtains and, with the deftest of movements, got into bed”. One can see the offences to logic and style of omitting the second comma and therefore of failing to complete the parenthesis, just as in adjectival clauses. The same applies to rhetorical parentheses, which often appear in dialogue or in oratory: the parenthesis must be completed. Therefore logic and style require “I ask you, members of the jury, to acquit my client”, and “where, I ask you, is my fountain pen?” The application of logic should be sufficient to avoid making mistakes with any sort of parenthesis, as the removal of the second comma from each of the examples just given will show. Another

rhetorical (though unparenthetical) use will normally only be found in dialogue – as in “I shall kill you, you swine”, or “I shall never leave you, not for a second”, where the comma is used to introduce a rhetorical emphasis.

The third rule is that in a list no comma is required before a final conjunction. When one reads “his wife was wearing a blue dress, necklace, high-heeled shoes, and a hat” one should see at once that the comma after *shoes* is superfluous. A comma may however be used in this position to remove an ambiguity, such as in this example: “he went to the bar and ordered three pints of beer, a sherry, a whisky, and water”, which indicates that the water was a separate drink from the whisky. Had the drink been mixed, the correct way to cast the sentence would have been “three pints of beer, a sherry and a whisky and water”, though a comma could for the same reasons of clarity be added after “sherry”. It is also correct to use commas in lists of adjectives – not that one seeks to encourage adjectival writing. “The room was dark, ugly, smelly, damp and filthy” requires commas in precisely those places. Where only two things or qualities are listed a conjunction and not a comma is needed: as in “the boy was clean and tidy” or “he resigned with dignity and good grace, and left the office”. The comma in that last example is required for reasons of good style, clarity and the avoidance of ambiguity; however, another after *dignity* would be redundant and confusing.

The fourth rule is that a comma should not separate a verb from its subject or object, unless that comma be the first of two forming a parenthesis. When one sees a sentence such as “the man knows, that his son will get a bad report”, or “the vicar said, we should all pray for deliverance” we can see the superfluity of the punctuation mark. Were the first sentence to read “the man knows, whatever his wife may tell him, that his son will get a bad report”, that use of the parenthetical commas would be entirely proper. The fifth, and final, rule is that in good style no comma is required before quotation marks. One either has no punctuation at all or the formality of a colon, but not a comma. “Smith said: ‘I have no intention of leaving’” is correct. So is “Smith said ‘I have no intention of leaving’”. However, “Smith said, ‘I have no intention of leaving’” is not. The fundamental point is this: the shorter one’s sentences, the harder it is to make mistakes with commas and other forms of punctuation.

In this sentence, published in 2009 in a newspaper and already mentioned in the section on word order in Chapter Four, one can see how the simple insertion of a comma will help stave off ambiguity, even if it cannot provide elegance (that could come only by recasting the sentence in the way suggested in Chapter Four; but for the purposes of showing what a difference a correctly-placed comma may make, this exercise is instructive). It was reported that "the Queen sent a letter of condolence to a pensioner whose dog died after he wrote to Buckingham Palace about the death". First, to be correct reported speech the auxiliary *had* needs to be inserted after *dog*; but then a comma needs to be inserted after *died*. Otherwise, it appears that the dog itself achieved the remarkable feat of writing to the Sovereign about its own demise before it happened, dying shortly thereafter. As remarkable was this sentence (also analysed in Chapter Four) about how "the body of a 45-year-old darts fan was recovered from beneath ice in a frozen lake in Frimley Green, Surrey, where he had been watching the darts world championships". The unfortunate man had not been watching the darts match under water. A comma would not be enough to save this statement from absurdity. One either changes the word order as suggested in Chapter Four, or divides the statement into two sentences such as: "The body of a 45-year-old darts fan was recovered from beneath ice in a frozen lake in Frimley Green, Surrey. He had been watching the darts world championships nearby."

In a more complex sentence commas must be used to avoid the danger of ambiguity or downright error. In a sentence such as "the chief executive, invited by the chairman to address the board, having arranged his notes did so", only one meaning is possible given this punctuation. Were the comma to move from after *board* to after *notes* the meaning would change. The chief executive would still be addressing the board, but the invitation would have come from the chairman to do so only once the notes were arranged: and there would be some doubt about who (either the chief executive or the chairman) was arranging the notes. Better still to divide up the sentence: "The chief executive was invited by the chairman to address the board. Having arranged his notes, he did so." This is also an instance where the use of the passive voice is excusable, since the *he* in the second sentence clearly refers to the chief executive in the first. Had the active voice been used – "the chairman invited the chief executive" – the pronoun would seem to refer back to the main subject, which would be wrong.

One could also end the first sentence with a colon, and make the second sentence a separate clause. The prejudice of this book (and of much modern English writing) in favour of short sentences does not sound the death knell for colons and semicolons, but it makes them rare species. Both punctuation marks continue to serve a purpose of allowing a distinct expression in a visibly separate clause to be presented without a main verb. This has rhetorical uses, notably when presenting a list of similar thoughts, where the items on the list are separated by semicolons. Churchill gave us a most memorable example: “In war, resolution; in defeat, defiance; in victory, magnanimity; in peace, goodwill.” In another speech he exhibited the ideal rhetorical use of the colon, in presenting a paratactic conclusion to a sentence: “Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts.” There is nothing wrong with using colons and semicolons provided they are used correctly, in the ways specified in Chapter Three. The 19th century deployment, of carving up into chunks sentences that would now be several paragraphs long, would now be considered unacceptable unless used by a parodist.

I also touched in Chapter Three on the occasional interchangeability of colons with dashes, and gave examples. From a stylistic point of view, the dash is likely to be more prevalent in dialogue or rhetoric. The colon will be more frequent in formal writing. The dash is by its nature dramatic and exclamatory and therefore will be an infrequent visitor to serious prose. I also explained earlier how, used parenthetically, it varies from the use of brackets. For stylistic reasons it is important to use these devices sparingly. They give prose the appearance of being cluttered, they can cause ambiguities and they can distract. Since the writer’s aim at all times should be to be understood precisely, these effects are undesirable. When a single dash is used for emphasis it may sometimes be almost an instruction to the reader to find what follows it either shocking, funny or remarkable. This too may be overdone, and suggests a lack of self-confidence on the part of the writer. It can also become bathetic if what follows the dash is something of an anti-climax. Take this sentence from Galsworthy: “All very well to determine that she would not torture Tony, would keep away from him and spare his senses, but without him – she would be dull and lonely.”[13] The sentence would also be improved if it contained a main verb.

As indicated in Chapter Three, only when making a parenthesis (which we may define as matter which, if removed, would not alter the

meaning of the sentence) should two dashes appear in the same sentence. A sentence that flouts this rule is stylistically difficult because it offends logic. For example: “neither of the men was prepared to admit the problem – that they had run out of money – entirely” is a mess. Remove what the reader initially takes to be the parenthetical matter and what is left is gibberish. Such a sentence always has to be recast.

It used to be deemed that paragraphs were scarce commodities, and a new one should only be opened to indicate a profound change in subject matter. That is why in the writings of some of the early Victorians one can find paragraphs that are several hundreds of words long, if not longer. Today, just as sentences have become shorter, so have paragraphs. The subject matter may, and usually does, remain the same. Each development in an argument on the same subject may command a new paragraph, and no harm is done for all that. It is the method used in writing this book.

The killer noun is better than the adjective

Adjectives get in the way. They are not always necessary. Enoch Powell, a stylist of Orwellian abilities, would call adjectives “very *Daily Mail*”, which he did not mean as a compliment to that great newspaper. Gowers makes the essential point about them when he writes: “Cultivate the habit of reserving adjectives and adverbs to make your meaning more precise, and suspect those that you find yourself using to make it more emphatic.”[14] A well-chosen noun can do away with the need for an adjective to precede it. They are, as descriptive words, sometimes loaded, and can distract from the clarity of the message rather than enhancing it. Reputable newspapers will often ban all but the most functional of adjectives from their news reporting, since they may wreck the objectivity that is supposed to be inherent in that genre of journalism. Adjectives fall into two categories in this respect. There are those that state facts – the *elderly* man, the *disabled* woman, the *fat* dog, the *large* majority, the *sick* child. These add value to a noun by giving the reader more information about the condition of the person or thing nominated.

The other class of adjectives does nothing of the sort. It expresses an opinion held by the writer. Adjectives from this class must be deployed with care. So an editor of a newspaper does not expect to see one of his reporters writing in the news pages about a *disgusting* man, a *beautiful* woman, a *smelly* dog, a *loathsome* politician or a *brilliant* child. It is for the reader to make such judgements according to the facts presented to him. If such sentiments appear in a piece of reporting, they should be in quotation marks as the opinions of a third party whom the reporter has interviewed. If they appear in a piece that is clearly in a newspaper's opinion pages, that is a different matter; such as it is if they appear in a work of fiction. Even in those contexts they can be overdone; for, as I said at the beginning, adjectives get in the way.

Some adjectives are instantly redundant. Consider the sentence: "he had slept with three different women". The women were *different* from what, or whom? *Different* is unnecessary; the sentence conveys just as much information without it. Adjectives may be a statement of the obvious – the *old* man, the *deep* river, the *cold* day. However, when they are expressions of opinion it is their subjectivity that makes them dangerous. The *stupid* child may be nothing of the sort. Nor may the *plain* woman (beauty being in the eye of the beholder), or the *sincere* man. Adjectives may often be avoided either because they are incipiently inaccurate, or because they add nothing to the meaning of the phrase, or because one chooses a noun with sufficient care to render them tautological or in some other way unnecessary. They do however exist, and exist far more in some sorts of writing than in others. It is well to be alert to their potency, their power to deceive, and to their dangers. Not the least of those dangers is that so many of them do not so much inform the reader as distract him.

One measure of bad writing is that it distracts rather than informs, which it will often do if it is laden with adjectives. Some writers, recognising this, choose their nouns in a way that removes the need for adjectives. An obvious case is the vocabulary of abuse or denigration. Of the nouns that do not cross the line into coarseness or vulgarity, those such as *idiot, shocker, lunatic, crook, whore, scum, imbecile, strumpet, filth, rat* and so on hardly require an adjective to amplify them, so loaded are the nouns themselves. Even away from such emotive subjects, a proper choice of noun renders an adjective pointless. Why call something a carefully-crafted and characterful object when you can call it a *gem*? Why say

something is one of one's prized possessions when one can call it a *jewel*? Notice that both the substitute nouns are metaphorical (and similar metaphors at that); some nouns used singly and metaphorically can be exceptionally powerful, but such powerful usages do not have to be metaphorical. A street of squalid houses may be accurately and evocatively described as a *slum*. A property at the opposite end of the scale may be vividly described as a *palace*. Who needs an adjective? When seeking to describe anything, do not immediately reach for the adjective: ask yourself whether the noun could be improved upon. It is, however, important not to be so vivid when choosing a noun that one exaggerates: a minor accident is not a *catastrophe*, a heavy fall of rain is not necessarily a *deluge* and a difference of opinion is not always a *row*. Nor is a sportsman who wins one important prize a *titan*. I deal with this sort of hyperbole below in the section on the language of the tabloid press.

Even without highly descriptive nouns, adjectives may be pointless because they are tautological. There is no point in saying an *established* convention or an *earlier* precedent, because all conventions are established and all precedents are earlier. Similarly, one need not talk of a *convicted* criminal – the libel laws of our country make it clear that to describe someone as a criminal without his having been convicted as such is to invite a demand for substantial damages – or of a *pair* of twins, since twins always are. *Global* pandemic is another example, and a newspaper article recently talked of *live* vivisection. Nor is tautology confined to adjectives and nouns. The solecism *revert back* is a tautology because *back* is the only way one can *revert*. There are other examples, not least *advance forward*, *dive down* and *mount up*.

One adjectival usage to be deployed with care is that of interposing the indefinite article between adjective and noun. There are certain, limited idioms in which this is permissible. They are mostly rhetorical and will therefore be rare in formal writing. "How appalling an injury!" and other such exclamatory uses are one. "She had never seen so appalling an injury" and other comparative uses are another. It can also be evaluative, as in "that depends upon how big a piece you want". A use such as "I believe he had no different an experience from that of his friends" is ugly and unnecessary. The gravest offence of all with adjectives is to lard them with an adverb; many such usages have become clichés: *severely beaten*, *heavily veiled*, *viciously attacked* and *supremely confident* are all familiar from the

columns of the poorer newspapers, and should be avoided by careful and sensitive writers. However, one should also be alert to usages that are not clichés but in which the adverb is rather more than is required. Sometimes these may be tautological (*badly damaged*, for example; it is hard to see how something can be *well* damaged, so if you wish to indicate a high degree of damage, use *very*).

Even if the phrase is not tautological, the adjective would do the job quite as well on its own ("a fully functioning car", for example – the adverb can be taken for granted in the adjective). It becomes apparent that just as nouns may be chosen with such precision that they require no adjective, so may verbs be chosen that require no adverb. If somebody *races* or *speeds* somewhere we hardly need be told that he did it *quickly* or *fast*; if somebody *gorges* on food or *binges* on drink we know already that he has consumed much of either commodity without needing a further expression of degree in an adverb such as *greedily* or *voraciously*; and so on.

A careful writer never forgets that the currency of potent words is devalued by overusing them.

Fewer repeats

One of the essentials of good style is a large vocabulary. This does not merely enable the writer to choose the word that exactly suits his purpose, it also gives him the discrimination to reject those that do not. There is a further use of a large vocabulary, and that is to help avoid **repetition**. A piece of writing that includes the same words or phrases over and over again is tedious to the reader. Words have a musical quality, even when not read aloud, and too many of the same note will jar. Repetition retards the process of communicating meaning and causes the reader to doubt the clarity of thought, and therefore intelligence, of the writer. In some writing it is impossible to avoid repeating certain words or phrases. A report may well require the frequent mention of a person's name. If that person has a job title, then his post may be varied with his name – "Mr Smith" or "the minister", for example. Personal pronouns may also be used, but this may

lead to vagueness or confusion if the report is about more than one person of the same gender.

There is no excuse, however, for repeating nouns, adjectives, verbs or adverbs that have synonyms. It is also wise to be sparing with conjunctions. A phrase such as “he argued that it was important that politicians should remember that their policies had a widespread effect that was not always obvious” is just shocking and thoughtless. The sentence should be recast, perhaps as follows: “he argued the importance of politicians’ remembering that their policies had a widespread, and not always obvious, effect”. The surviving *that* is important for the avoidance of ambiguity. It is not their policies that the politicians should remember, but the effect they have.

There will be some phrases in any piece of writing where it is legitimate to repeat a phrase not merely for emphasis, but for clarity. Such a device is common in speech-making: remember Churchill’s “we shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender”.[15] However, it also has its uses in normal prose-writing. Without repeating more than one word – the preposition *in* – Ruskin in this extract from *The Poetry of Architecture* repeats the form of a phrase but builds up a clear picture of an aspect of design that offends him: “…and the whole system becomes utterly and absolutely absurd, ugly in outline, worse than useless in application, unmeaning in design, and incongruous in association”.[16]

The most common form of repetition is of a substantive word, repeated for emphasis: “The satires are savage – perhaps satires should be; but Pope’s satires are sometimes what satires should never be – shrill.” This only just works, and one imagines that *satires* is repeated, and not replaced by a pronoun in a couple of instances, not for the avoidance of ambiguity, but to impress upon the reader that Pope’s works under that name are not what the writer nor the reader understands by the term.[17] Sometimes, humour is advanced by repeating whole phrases, as in this extract from *Martin Chuzzlewit* by Dickens: “These injuries having been comforted externally, with patches of pickled brown paper, and Mr Pecksniff having been comforted internally, with some stiff brandy-and-water, the eldest

Miss Pecksniff sat down to make the tea….”[18] As with any form of joke, joke by repetition can wear thin, so be sparing. The main stylistic argument against repetition is that it may be distracting to the reader. So too, however, may be the use of increasingly florid synonyms, so be thoughtful when using them.

A logical order of words

I have already dealt with this question at length in Chapter Four. I concentrated there on marshalling the order of words to convey the correct sense in a phrase or sentence, and stressed the care that must be taken with the positioning of adverbs. Here I am concerned not so much with sense as with what constitutes the best style – what it will be most pleasing for another to read, and what will make a piece of prose not just comprehensible, but most comprehensible. It is essential to put the words of any sentence into a logical order, to avoid ambiguity and also any charge of pretentiousness in diction: Keats might have been able to get away with “Much have I travelled in the realms of gold/And many goodly states and kingdoms seen…” but those writing prose should not attempt such a word order unless they wish to become objects of curiosity. There is an archaic, or pretentious, ring these days to sentences with inverted word order. Conventionally, a sentence proceeds as follows: subject, verb, object. So we say “the boy ate the pie” and not “eating the pie was the boy” or “the boy the pie ate”.

As can be seen from the last example, in our uninflected language there is scope for ambiguity when the word order is inverted. It could be that the pie ate the boy, but that is unlikely. In an inflected language such as Latin or Greek it would be obvious who was doing the eating, and what was eaten, because of different endings for nouns that are nominative and those that are accusative. English does not have that luxury except when certain pronouns are used. Some inversions of word order are more acceptable than others, and these are where the inversion helps provide an emphasis deemed necessary by the writer: such as “in my class at school were Smith, Jones and Brown” rather than “Smith, Jones and Brown were in my class at

school”. In that example, the writer has chosen to emphasise the common educational experience that he had with the three other men, rather than making the three other men the most important feature of his statement.

The Fowlers also illustrate the different principles of inversion in paratactic and syntactic clauses.[19] A paratactic clause, as I described in Chapter Two, is one that follows another without any connecting word that indicates the relation of the two clauses, or whether the second is co-ordinate with or subordinate to its predecessor. An example of parataxis is found in “his crimes were terrible: chief among them was the murder of Smith”, compared with “his crimes were terrible, chief among which was the murder of Smith”, the second part of the latter being a relative clause. The inverted word order of the paratactic clause is unnecessary: it could as easily read “the murder of Smith was chief among them”. However, where there clearly is a subordinate clause, the relative pronoun needs to precede the subject for the sentence to make sense.

It is also common to invert word order in sentences featuring negation. For the sake of emphasis one might write “never had I been so insulted” rather than “I had never been so insulted”. In some statements inversion is essential if they are to make sense: “by no measure can he be said to be the best batsman in their team” must be right, since “he can be said to be the best batsman in their team by no measure” sounds bizarre. The most frequent form of inversion is seen when asking questions: “would you help me?” is used as opposed to “you would help me”.

The importance in other contexts of using the right word order can be seen in this example, from a contemporary newspaper article: “a shop assistant was stabbed to death 11 times at a store in Thurmaston, Leics”. However, even altering the order of that sentence will not redeem it. It has to be rewritten as “a shop assistant at a store in Thurmaston, Leics, has died as a result of being stabbed 11 times”. It was also announced that “wisps of hair from Charles Darwin’s beard are to go on public display 200 years after he was born in a Natural History Museum exhibition”. In that case, simply altering the order of words would have resolved a doubt about the great evolutionist’s place of birth. It was also reported that a farmer had been out “shooting dead rabbits”. This seems a pointless exercise, until one realises that he had in fact been shooting rabbits dead.

As mentioned earlier in this book, accurate use of punctuation may, as much as word order, help avoid ambiguity in a sentence. However, in

some cases of ellipsis in sentences – the leaving out of words that, if included, might remove any hint of ambiguity, but which are left out for imagined reasons of elegance or felicity – punctuation is not enough. In a sentence such as “the boy ate the beefburger with relish” are we to suppose he ate it enthusiastically, or with the complement of some sauce? A comma after *beefburger* would lead most readers to suppose the former, but even that is not certain. Sentences such as that, where phrases may be either adjectival or adverbial, are better recast. “The boy ate the beefburger and relish” may mean only one thing; as may “with relish, the boy ate the beefburger”.

The placement of adverbs in phrases with auxiliary verbs used to cause grammarians great debate and worry. Some held that one should no more split an auxiliary from its verb than one would split an infinitive. So one would always write “never had I seen such a sight” rather than “I had never seen such a sight” or “I never had seen such a sight”. At this stage in the development of our language, the only remotely sane advice must be to do what appears most naturally idiomatic, and what best serves the purpose of the writer. It may be that in certain contexts to write “she had particularly wanted a diamond necklace” would be inadequately emphatic; and that the sense the writer wishes to convey would be better represented by “particularly, she had wanted a diamond necklace”. This would make sense had this sentence been preceded by one or several that listed this woman’s desires. The only rule in this matter is comprehensibility.

No showing off

Few things turn the stomach more when reading a passage of prose than detecting that the writer is showing off. Elaborate metaphors, flowery language, archaisms, the use of foreign tags where English phrases will serve the same purpose and be at once comprehensible, pretentious diction, coy little phrases – all of these, unless they are being used as part of some sustained parody or satire, prevent the reader from receiving a serious message (if there be one). Perhaps our most fundamental objection to such language is that it is unnatural: people simply do not speak like that in real

life. When they write in that fashion, therefore, their readers find them lacking credibility.

The Fowlers, and 40 years after them Orwell, touched on this when they argued in favour of the Anglo-Saxon word rather than the Romance or classical. Some people feel they have to use a long word where a short one will do. We have all seen writers do this out of a sense of insecurity: they feel that by saying *masticate* rather than *chew* they are confirming a superior intellect or status. The odd long word never harmed anyone: but if one uses a string of them, or lards one's prose with them from beginning to end, one becomes tiresome – even if the words are all so well-known that the reader does not need to pause after each one and look it up in a dictionary. If a writer has to send his readers – and they are intelligent readers – to the dictionary more than very occasionally, then he has failed. The journey should be necessary only if the prose is dealing with a specialist subject, and one is reading it specifically with a view to being educated in that subject. If the topic is of everyday interest, there is no excuse for dragging out words that even sophisticates will have to look up, other than that the writer has decided to try to draw attention to himself.

Most plain monosyllables have polysyllables longing to step into their shoes. Poor stylists cannot bear to use verbs such as *walk, try, wash, eat, tell, say, ask, see, use, start* or *show* when they may (at no extra cost except to their credibility) use *perambulate, essay, ablute, consume, communicate, demand, perceive, utilise, commence* or *demonstrate*. It is useful to have a store of synonyms to avoid repeating words within a few sentences of each other; but if there is no risk of repetition, stick to simple words. Some elaborate usages can also be confusing. If one hears a man say to his wife "I understand you are ill", is he telling her that he comprehends the nature of her predicament, or is he simply using the long word as a substitute for *hear*? It is probably the latter, but other instances of the use of the verb may be more deeply ambiguous.

It can never be right to use a long word where there is a perfectly legitimate short one crying out to be used instead. Take this example, from *The Sunday Times* of 27 December 2009, quoting Ed Balls, the Children's Secretary: "One of the big signifiers of whether children do well is if there are strong adult relationships in the home." Why did Mr Balls feel he had to say *signifier* when he could more easily have said *sign*? Is there a difference

between a sign and signifier, other than that the latter is a typically pompous word used unnecessarily by bureaucrats and politicians?

Show-offs also like foreign words, phrases or abbreviations. Even if used correctly, these alienate readers who do not have these rarities at their command. It is important for writers to know their audiences. The same applies to allusion. If one is alluding to books, events or people in one's writing, one risks confining understanding of one's meaning to those who have read the same books, experienced the same events or know the same people. Sometimes allusion is valuable and illuminating, but it may have to be explained. A balance must be struck, for if an allusion requires such explanation that outweighs the insight it conveys, then it is not worth alluding. If one is confining allusion to quotation, be sure to quote accurately and that the quotation means what you think it means. Milton did not, for example, write in *Lycidas* about "fresh fields and pastures new", nor Shakespeare that "all that glistens is not gold": though many subsequently have. "The exception that proves the rule" does not mean what most who use it think it means. It means a rule is only proved to be so by leaving out or ignoring something that might normally be held to be subject to it – that is what *exception* means in this case.

There are other dangers to the writer of showing off, notably using a word to mean something it does not, or using a phrase wrongly. Many examples of the former are given in Chapter Five. An egregious example of the latter is the phrase *begging the question*. Most people who use this term seem to think it means "inviting the question". It does nothing of the sort. Fowler gives a summary of the problem that cannot be bettered: he defines it as "the fallacy of founding a conclusion on a basis that as much needs to be proved as the conclusion itself".[20] So if one were to say "it is good to smoke because tobacco has health-giving properties", that would beg the question about the health-giving properties of tobacco. However, if one were to say in response to an assertion by another that all French men are philanderers that it "begged the question about the philandering of French men" it would in fact do nothing of the sort, since no other conclusion is being based on that questionable statement.

Certain spellings are now archaic, but so easily lapsed into that one should not condemn as show-offs those who use them. *Amongst* and *whilst* are relatively harmless. *The Times* used the spelling *connexion* until the 1980s, but that really has had its day.