3

Openers

It is in the hard, hard, rock-pile labor of seeking to win, hold, or deserve a reader's interest that the pleasant agony of writing again comes in.

—John Mason Brown

What gets my interest is the sense that a writer is speaking honestly and fully of what he knows well.

—Wendell Berry

Say you're at the doctor's, and you've just picked up a copy of *Newsweek*. You idly browse its pages. With your mind on automatic pilot, your eye checks out one article after another, searching for anything intriguing. Since you're hungry for something good, and you're expecting your name to be called, you're ruthless. You give each story maybe three sentences to prove itself, and that's all, but experience—or impatience—has convinced you it's enough. In that brief span your mind answers probably all of these questions:

"Does this story attract me?"
"Enough to read on?"
"Is the writing easy, or will I have to work here?"
"Is the style fresh or just so-so?"
"Does the writer seem smart? well-informed? spirited?"

So it goes with everything you read. The problem is, though, you as a writer are subject to the very same testing. You, too, will generally be given only three or four sentences to prove yourself. Granted, if you're writing a school essay, your reader—your instructor—will finish the piece regardless of its merits; but if you have convinced her in your opener that this means *work*, you've probably lost her, just as she'd lose you if the roles were reversed. She's only human, after all, and first impressions prove hard to shake. Instead of looking for the good, she'll look for the bad, if only to justify her initial impression. Besides, she'll know from experience, like you, that the quality of an opener tends to forecast what follows. If, at the very outset, a writer seems bored, unwilling to use his imagination, indifferent to his reader, and unclear in his thinking, he's apt to remain that way. But if his opener reveals passion, a clear, perceptive mind, and a flair for drawing in the reader, the odds are he'll stay true to form.

From the reader's standpoint, then, your opener is critical. But it's equally important to *you*, for openers have a way of governing how the rest of the piece gets written. A good opener gives you momentum, confidence, and an extra incentive to make the remaining paragraphs worthy of the first. There's also a practical explanation. A good opener normally includes a good thesis—bold, fresh, clearly focused. And a good thesis tends to argue itself because it has a built-in forward thrust. It's like a good comedy situation: it ignites.

One way to test an opener is for *directness of approach.* An essay, like a house, can be entered by the front door or the back door. Were you to check the opening paragraphs of a random set of undergraduate papers, you'd find that the most skilled writers usually elect what I call the *front-door approach.* They march into their subject with breathtaking assurance, clearly eager to share their opinions. And you can see why. They know what they think—and why they think it. Let me illustrate. Here's the opener from a super undergraduate essay on Prince Hal in Shakespeare's *I Henry IV:*°

> Prince Hal is as hard to crack as a walnut. "I know you all," he says of Falstaff & Co. in his soliloquy ending I.ii, but what friend—what reader even—can speak with equal confidence about Hal himself? His true nature seems finally to be as riddling as Hamlet's or Cleopatra's; indeed, he seems

°In this chapter, and in the chapters on "Middles" and "Closers" that follow, my examples of student writing all deal with Shakespeare's plays. I chose these examples partly for their eloquence, partly because Shakespeare is our most universal author, and partly for purposes of continuity.

at times to be a hybrid of those two characters: infinitely various, theatrical, cunning past man's thought, loving, brutal, equivocal—the list goes on. It's little wonder that Hotspur, so childishly open and simple, often surpasses Hal as the reader's favorite. It's also little wonder that we are hard pressed to decide whether Hal is actually likable or merely admirable.

Less experienced writers, on the other hand, choose the *back-door approach,* the long way in—like this:

> In the second scene of the first Act of William Shakespeare's *The First Part of King Henry the Fourth,* Prince Hal presents a soliloquy which serves as a crux of this play. Although this play would appear by the title to tell of King Henry IV, actually the principal character is the King's son, Hal. The play reveals what seems to be a remarkable change in character for the Prince and follows his exploits in a civil war waged against his father. . . .

This opening paragraph—essentially a plot summary—continues for another four sentences. Would you be eager to read on? Would you even be awake to read on?

It's clear why writers like this one elect the back-door approach:

- They haven't taken the trouble to formulate a point of view, so they have little to argue, hence little reason to argue it. What's the point of coming to the point when you don't *have* a point?
- Because they have little to say, they fear their reader. They know he's apt to expose their bluff. So they instinctively delay a confrontation with him as long as possible—often right down to the last sentence.
- They haven't yet learned to value their reader's time. In fact, they haven't learned even to *consider* their reader, at least in any systematic way, for they're still preoccupied with merely getting ideas on paper.
- They have a vague notion that they're supposed to be writing for the World, not for a well-informed reader. And even though common sense tells them otherwise, they cling to that notion since it lets them rationalize flagrant padding. In the opener above, for instance, our writer gives us the full name of the author (instead of just "Shakespeare"), the unwieldy complete play title (instead of just *I Henry IV*), and the Act and scene laboriously written out (instead of just "I.ii").

Below is another example of the back-door approach, but this one is more sophisticated, more adroit, in its use of a smoke screen. The writer begins with some cautious reconnoitering of the surrounding terrain—a gambit known as Establishing the Large Critical Overview—but unfortunately

discovers only mists and goblins known as Grand Generalizations. This student grasps how the thing is supposed to *sound,* certainly, but having zero to say, she must content herself with an empty gush—lovely, for sure, but still empty. It's The Art of Saying Nothing Profoundly:

> Shakespeare's *Hamlet,* admired for its poetic style and intriguing characters, has remained a classic for over three centuries. The character of Hamlet is probably one of Shakespeare's most perplexing and most pleasing. He is easily identified with because of his multi-faceted personality and his realistic problems.

When the student came in for a conference, I helped her to read her opener from the reader's perspective. The experience was eye-opening. Gradually she began to realize that an essay is only as good as its thesis, that the first four or five sentences are make-or-break, that a back-door approach is transparently evasive, and that it's a delightful challenge to wake up your reader. She proved an apt learner. Her very next paper showed it. Instead of rewriting the piece on Hamlet, which now sickened her, she decided to start afresh on another character in the play, King Claudius, whom she found interestingly problematic. This is how her new essay began:

> He killed his brother. He married his brother's wife. He stole his brother's crown. A cold-hearted murderer, he is described by his brother's ghost as "that incestuous, that adulterate beast" (I.v.42). The bare facts appear to stamp him an utter moral outlaw. Nonetheless, as his soliloquies and anguished asides reveal, no person in *Hamlet* demonstrates so mixed a true nature as Claudius, the newly made King of Denmark.

Below are some more good openers, all by this student's classmates, most of them written well into the semester after the class had begun to discover what makes an opener click. Note the directness in each case—the front-door approach. Note, too, the concrete detail, the sense that the writer knows precisely where he or she is going, and the salesmanship—the *verve*—in the phrasing. I'll quote the entire first opener, but to conserve space I'll quote only the initial sentences of the other two:

> In *The Taming of the Shrew,* the servant is really a lord, and the lord's wife is really a page, and the schoolmaster is really a suitor, and the crazy suitor is really a wise old fox, and the perfect beauty is really a shrew, and the shrew is really a perfect wife, and things are not as they seem.

Even the play itself pretends not to be a play by putting on a production within a production. In it, three characters are being duped by this rampant role-playing. By the examples of Sly, Kate, and Bianca, Shakespeare acquaints us with the effects of wealth, love, and power, respectively, and shows how the emergence of an inner (perhaps truer) character can be said to have been tamed. However, the "taming" occurs only as a result of the manipulation of the supposers by the posers. Moreover, while things are not as they seem because of the dual-roled characters, neither does the "taming" suggested by the title ever really take place.

The occult element leavens Shakespeare's works with a pinch of the unknown and an implication that it should remain so. His artful but often annoying ambiguity seldom allows more than a fleeting glimpse at a forbidden terrain before it is bulldozed out of sight by convenient rationales. Several examples of Shakespeare's significant use of the occult immediately come to mind: the witches in Macbeth, the antics of Titania and Oberon in *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* the Ghost in *Hamlet,* and the figure of Owen Glendower in *I Henry IV.*

"He that walketh with wise men shall be wise; But the companions of fools shall smart for it." King Solomon's proverb appears reversed in *King Lear* for it is a wise Fool who accompanies and counsels a seemingly foolish king. In the play, the Fool assumes myriad roles—that of teacher, loyal servant, comedian, and often the punitive voice of Lear's own conscience.

Don't you know these writers had fun?

So much for examples. Now here are a few tips to run your eye over as you sit down to write your next opener. Keep in mind, as you read them, that openers are a challenge for *everybody,* and that even skilled writers will sometimes spend as much as a third of their writing time tweaking their opener into proper shape.

1. Before starting to write, do two things. *First,* ensure that you have a strong thesis. There's a good way to tell if you have one, but it takes courage. Write on some notepaper, "I contend that—" and complete the sentence. Now study what you've written. If somebody else's essay were arguing the same thesis, would *you* be intrigued by it? Is it complex enough, or controversial enough, to allow for lengthy exposition? Have you really stuck your neck out, or are you pussyfooting? *Second,* have on hand a list of concrete details and apt quotations, and be ready to use them. Remember, if you lead off with a string of abstract generalizations, your

reader may impatiently mutter "Sheesh" and tune you out. But if you lead off with concrete details, your reader will think, "Hey, this person has really done their homework. What an eye for detail!"

2. Like most writers, you may choke at the very thought of beginning, for writing involves confronting, head on, all of one's verbal and mental inadequacies. You may, as a result, find yourself making a dozen false starts. If so, try doing what a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter once advised me to do. "Pull yourself back from your desk," he said, "take a deep breath, and say to yourself, 'OK, now, what is it I'm *really* trying to say?' Then simply say it—*talk* it. I got that tip from an old hand when I was a cub reporter many years ago. It works."
3. If you follow this procedure and still feel discouraged with your opener, let it stand as it is, roughed out (if even that), and return to it after you've finished the first draft. There's no rule that says you must write every paragraph sequentially. Remember, writing involves discovery. Once the first draft is finished, you'll probably have found several points that deserve top billing. You may even discover—as I have demonstrated to many a student through the years—that your *second* paragraph is your real opener.
4. Use the front-door approach. Idle chat will destroy your credibility.
5. Use natural, simple prose—the simpler the better. You can come back later and add grace notes if you have a mind to ("punitive" in the *Lear* example above was doubtless one such afterthought), but initially keep it *simple.* Simple prose is clear prose. And simple prose, if smooth and rhythmical, is readable prose. Let your ideas alone do the impressing. If they look banal to you, there's only one remedy: *upgrade them.* Don't try to camouflage their weakness with razzle-dazzle rhetoric. You'll razzle-dazzle yourself right into a bog of bull.
6. Unless you have good reason to do otherwise, make your opener full-bodied. If it's splinter-sized—a mere two or three sentences long—and lacking point, your reader may conclude that you're short on ideas and are only going through the motions. Experience will have taught her, as it's probably taught you, that those conclusions are usually dead on. (Of course there's always the glorious exception that makes a dictum like this look silly.) On the other hand, if your opener is barnlike, your reader may conclude that you lack a sense of proportion. You can just hear her groan: "Has the author no mercy? Why put *everything* in the first paragraph?"
7. Consider opening with a dramatically brief sentence—say, four or five words long. It will compel you to begin with a bold assertion, give your grateful reader a handle on the sentences that follow, and offer her the enchantment of surprise, since most opening sentences run considerably longer—in the neighborhood of 15 to 25 words.

8. If possible, organize your opening paragraph so that the biggest punch—the strongest statement of your thesis—comes at the *end.* (Note the *Taming of the Shrew* example above.) Such an organization has three advantages: it lets you build toward a climax; it gives you a great entry into your next paragraph, because of the springboard effect; and it saves you from repeating yourself.

4

Middles

My style of writing is chiefly grounded upon an early enthusiasm for [Thomas H.] Huxley, the greatest of all masters of orderly exposition. He taught me the importance of giving to every argument a simple structure.

—H.L. Mencken

When you embark on an essay, you may know exactly what you're supposed to do and how best to do it. If so, you're fortunate. Most people don't. The entire concept of essay writing is fuzzy to them. This chapter is for the bewildered majority. It's an attempt to bring into focus the *what* and the *how* of the business. The *what* of it I'll explain with an analogy. The *how* of it is rather more complicated because it involves the very process itself. For the next few minutes we're going to follow an imaginary student right through the stages of writing an essay, and then I'll show you a model short essay written by a former student, Danny Robbins, now a professional sportswriter, so you can see what the finished product might look like.

What, you may ask, has all this to do with "middles"? Well, you're about to see that the middle section of an essay is inseparable from the opening, since it explains and develops the thesis. And you will see that the middle is also inseparable from the process by which the thesis is arrived at, since it amounts to a coherent retelling of that process.

First, the *what* of it. When you write a term paper, a final examination, or even a lab report, you're engaged in what's called "expository" writing. Expository writing is *informative* writing. Its primary goal is to *explain*.*

Implicit in most expository writing, however, is a second goal: to *persuade*. The two goals almost invariably go together since it's hard to explain something—a political issue, a historical event, a novel, a philosophy—without taking a position on it; and once you take a position, you naturally want others to accept it as sound. That gets you into the realm of reasoning—the realm of persuasion. The whole point, finally, is to have your reader respond: "Yes, I understand now. You've convinced me."

Your situation as an expository writer closely resembles that of a prosecuting attorney, society's professional skeptic-persuader. Let's develop that analogy, for once you grasp it, you'll understand the gist of essay writing.

The Analogy

Even before the trial gets underway, our prosecutor is already going about her important first business—sizing up her audience, the motley jury (analogous to your *readers*). How sophisticated are they? What are their interests, their prejudices, their intellectual capacities? Are they a solemn bunch, or do they smile at her droll witticisms? The answers to those questions will determine the delivery she uses—even, to some extent, the evidence she presents. She lost many decisions in her younger years simply by ignoring the character of the jury, but she's naive no longer. She now takes this preliminary testing-and-probing period very seriously. (You as a writer, of course, must rely on intuition, the laws of probability, and guesswork, making your task more speculative but certainly no less important.)

Now she's ready to begin her presentation to the jury. She could spend six months in Nassau each year if she could simply announce: "Ladies and gentlemen, the defendant, Ivan Isor, is guilty. You can tell it from the mad glint in his eye. The State rests." Unfortunately, the jury will oblige her

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*Most of the world's prose falls under the heading of "expository writing." All newspapers, popular magazines, nonfiction books, letters, academic articles, speeches, guidebooks, legal briefs, court opinions, office memoranda—all this and more is expository writing. But poetry, fiction, plays—that's all termed "creative writing," even though it's sometimes far less creative than good expository writing.

to *prove* Mr. Isor's guilt, and only facts plus cogent argumentation can prove anything. So she begins by stating the essence of her case (the *thesis*) in carefully formulated language: "The State will prove that the defendant, Ivan Isor, with malice aforethought, attempted to level City Hall with a tank." Then the prosecutor spends the bulk of her remaining time calling forth witnesses (the *evidence*) to prove her case, saving her star exhibit (the tank itself) for last so the impact will be greatest. All the while, though, she's achieving many other important things: foxily anticipating and defusing the contentions of the defendant's lawyer; demonstrating her own mastery of the facts of the case; clarifying what's really at issue and what's not; defining her exotic legal terms so the jury can grasp them; supporting each new charge with a wealth of factual proof; quoting authorities either to buttress her case or to freshen her eloquence; underscoring the logical sequence of her evidence; and providing the spellbound jurors with a running summary of how the pieces of the case interconnect.

Finally, she makes a closing appeal to the jurors (the *conclusion*) in which she neatly recaps the high points of her case—she knows they have short memories—and explains in the clearest possible way why her version of the case is the only one a reasonable person could accept. She ends on a note of triumph: "And last, ladies and gentlemen, you have Ivan Isor's stolen tank before you, his fingerprints on its wheel, the plaster of City Hall still clogging its treads, and 'Down With All Burocrats' blazoned on its sides—misspelled *exactly* the way he always misspelled it!" The prosecutor has followed the age-old formula of debaters: "Tell 'em what you're going to tell 'em, tell it to 'em, and then tell 'em what you've told 'em."° By following this formula, she has not only made it easy for the jury to grasp her argument, she has made it almost impossible for them not to.

The Checklist

Virtually everything our prosecutor did finds an exact correspondence in successful essay writing. I'll stress only the major points.

At the top of the list is *a sure sense of the audience*. If you ignore the special character of your audience—your jury—you might as well not even begin. It would be like telling a locker-room joke to your grandmother.

° The formula works, or course, only when it's kept discreetly veiled. The trick is to follow it without appearing to; otherwise your presentation sounds mechanical.

After a sure sense of audience come five other essentials, which I recommend you memorize. You'll find them in every successful essay:

1. A well-defined thesis
2. A clear strategy
3. Strong evidence
4. A clean narrative line
5. A persuasive closing

To understand their importance, you must see them in action, so let's now follow our imaginary student through the stages of writing an essay. This will give you the added advantage of seeing the kind of preparatory work out of which strong openers and middles are born.

The Hypothetical Case

Suppose the student's assignment is: "Write a 1,500-word essay discussing your views on capital punishment." What position should he take? Well, this particular student thinks he already knows—he happens to be against it*—but since he is now an experienced college senior, he resolves to suppress his notions until he has thoroughly researched the subject.

It's partly a matter of pride: he doesn't want the facts to end up embarrassing his intelligence. In addition, though, he wants his essay to reflect that he has open-mindedly investigated the issues—the pros as well as the cons. He knows that if he doesn't do this, he won't be able to anticipate and defuse his reader's objections to his contentions—a crucial element in persuasive writing, just as it is in the courtroom.

So he studies the subject, *recording all the evidence* he discovers: examples, statistics, quotations from authorities, arguments. That's step one. Step two is to *organize his facts*. For this he uses lists. Eventually he comes up with some 20 arguments favoring the abolition of capital punishment and another 20 favoring its retention. Having done the necessary homework, he now arrives at step three: *weighing* these arguments. This

* The views and arguments I'll attribute to the student are "his," not mine. I've never researched this particular subject myself, so my own views on it are as unformed as they are uninformed. Unfortunately, the poor student may suffer the consequences of my ignorance. The whole point of this fictional re-creation, though, is to show how an essay might be generated and structured. The arguments themselves are irrelevant.

enables him finally to decide which of the two positions is most convincing to him.

That decision, though, is still mainly intuitive and unconscious rather than rational. While he's now convinced that the case against capital punishment is the stronger one, the actual proof of that position hasn't yet crystallized in his mind. And there's the rub. Until he can prove it to himself, using a coherent line of reasoning, he knows he won't be able to prove it to his reader. The shotgun approach—a blast of unconnected reasons—is out of the question. His essay must be able to say, in effect, "Here's my position, and this is why any sensible person would accept it." In practical terms, this means showing precisely *how* he reached his position, step by step.

So he goes back to his list of arguments to work out a blueprint. The arguments are already roughly organized, but now he must *classify them into major groups*—moral reasons, economic reasons, political reasons, legal reasons—and analyze how they all add up, how they interconnect. This is a crucial part of the writing process, he knows, for his reader will expect the proof of his thesis sorted into neat, logically developing *stages*, and this is precisely what he is doing now.

A related task, while he's classifying his arguments, is to decide the *sequence* in which to present them. This is a tactical decision. Some of the reasons, he realizes, are clearly more persuasive than others. Should the most persuasive ones all come first, or should he build his arguments from least persuasive to most persuasive, or should he mix them? Or would he be wiser to eliminate most of the marginally persuasive reasons and go for quality rather than quantity? He puts himself in the reader's shoes and decides that if *he* were reading this essay cold, he'd be most convinced by quality, not quantity, and also by an increasingly persuasive order of arguments. Such an order would be agreeably climactic.

He's ready, he thinks, to begin writing now. He's got the *arguments* he needs, the *support* for these arguments, the *coherent grouping* of them, and the most *tactical sequence* in which to present them. In addition, during the ordering process he has weeded out (he hopes) all that is either irrelevant or marginally persuasive, so that what he is now going to give the reader is a trim digest of his case.

One important thing remains, however, and that is to get clear in his mind *the nature of his audience*.

Two years ago it never occurred to him to size up his audience, for two years ago he wasn't writing expressly for his reader; he was writing simply

for himself. Now, though, persuasion is vital to him, so it's become part of his standard procedure to second-guess his reader's needs, taste, and level of sophistication. He knows that this will determine, among other things, his choice of *tone* (serious, bantering, ironic, indignant), his *diction* (elegant, informal, tempered, blunt), his *sentence structure* (complex, occasionally complex, simple), and his *mode of argument* (technical, nontechnical, objective, subjective). All these decisions are crucial, for they define the "voice" and posture he thinks are most appropriate for the occasion.

In this case his audience is well defined: it will consist solely of Professor Buckley, a bright, amiable fellow who is always warning his students, "Be polemical, but be practical."

With Professor Buckley clearly before him in his imagination,* our student finally starts writing.

He opens with a brief, fascinating history of capital punishment and its relevance as a social issue. This consumes most of two paragraphs. Then he ends his introduction with a firm position statement:

> This gradual trend toward the abolition of capital punishment reflects a growing awareness that such extreme punishment doesn't make sense—economically, morally, or pragmatically.

This thesis sentence provides him (and his reader) with an immaculately simple structure for his essay. It lets him plunge right into explaining the economic reasons in his next paragraph:

> Considered from a coldly economic point of view, capital punishment is a waste of human resources. Instead of killing a man, society should take advantage of his ability to work and pay restitution.

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* A clarification here: I am *not* endorsing the practice of "writing for the teacher"—i.e., giving the teacher (or any reader, for that matter) what you presume he wants to hear at the expense of what you genuinely believe. That's a sellout. I *am* recommending, though, that the writer remember who his reader is in order to communicate with him in a manner that is likely to be understandable and winning to him. For example, you don't talk to a three-year-old the way you talk to an adult, although you may be saying essentially the same thing to both. You use language that the child can understand; you work from where his head is, not yours. Similarly, a lawyer doesn't argue a case before a rural jury the way she'd argue it before the Supreme Court. That's not dishonesty; it's common sense and good manners (consideration). The argument remains the same, but the presentation changes to suit the audience.

The next sentences in this paragraph develop support for that contention—part of the support being an example of a country that has tried this plan successfully. His next paragraph develops other economic reasons buttressing this one, with the strongest reserved for last:

> Nor let us overlook the staggering court costs. With capital punishment, a single, speedy trial is unheard of. Almost invariably a case will be retried repeatedly as the condemned person exhausts every possible appeal and delay.

He ends the section with a brief summary of his arguments up to that point.

With this stage of his argument completed, he moves on to the next, the moral reasons. These, he knows, are stronger. New paragraph:

> But beyond the mere economics of the issue, capital punishment is a moral outrage. First, it is a basic violation of the Judeo-Christian ethic, the cornerstone of our democratic society.

He supports this contention by quoting authorities such as Jesus, Clarence Darrow, and George Bernard Shaw, all of whom argue that compassion rather than merciless revenge is the most civilized form of justice. (Here he takes the opportunity to counter a probable objection—the Old Testament notion that "an eye for an eye" is just—with the Old Testament commandment superseding it: "Thou shalt not kill.") Then, in a new paragraph, he moves on to his second argument in this group:

> Furthermore, capital punishment—which is essentially a lynch mob by proxy—lowers the standards of public morality. In effect, it encourages barbarism by the state—indeed, it brings society down to the level of a ruthless murderer. Once the state has the power to murder with the grace of the statute book, historically it loses all sense of proportion. We have seen this happen in Great Britain in the 18th century, when even the pettiest crimes were thought fit for punishment at the gallows.

After developing this point, he's ready for his third and strongest moral argument, which he sets off in another new paragraph:

> Finally and most seriously, capital punishment strikes at the very basis of morality itself. Morality rests upon the fact that we are mortals, frail and imperfect in our understanding, not infallible. By contrast, capital

punishment presumes that man can set himself up as God, and that juries never make mistakes. The moral presumption in this is surely as great as that of the criminal who takes the life of his victim.

Now he begins his main attack—the pragmatic reasons. With the gusto of Churchill on D-Day he opens a new paragraph:

> Both economically and morally, then, capital punishment simply doesn't make sense. But the most damaging indictment against the practice is pragmatic: it fails to achieve its purpose, which is the deterrence of crime. Now why does it not deter a criminal? Because it rests upon a false assumption: that murder or rape, for example, is committed consciously, is premeditated. But this is patently not so. Most capital crimes are crimes of passion, committed unthinkingly in the heat of the moment. The criminal never considers punishment.

To support that reasoning, he cites statistics to show that the vast majority of murders are committed within the family, and that murder rates in states with the death penalty are no lower than in states without it. He also cites once more the example of Great Britain, where public execution of pickpockets did not prevent the spectators from being deprived of their wallets.

Moving to a new paragraph, he next argues:

> So capital punishment doesn't work. But when we try to force it to work, we find that we can't even administer it fairly. First, there is the economic bias: the rich can always pay their way out, while the poor will die. Second, the meting out of the death penalty often depends upon *whom* you kill, for human life is not valued equally.

Here he gives examples of criminals who were executed for killing public figures, while fellow criminals who killed people of lesser renown were paroled in three years.

This brings him to his conclusion. He succinctly recapitulates his chief arguments and draws out their full implications—and perhaps especially the implications of *ignoring* them. He's saying, in essence, "Here's what follows if you don't buy these arguments." Then he ends with a sentence neatly summarizing his case:

> The evidence all in, the conclusions are inescapable: economically the proponent of capital punishment is a waster, morally he is a bankrupt, and pragmatically he is a fool.

The Model

What follows now is an actual essay written by a student named Danny Robbins, who was a college junior at the time. It's a splendid example of all five points on our earlier checklist, but especially of #2: a clear strategy. This is about as well organized an essay as you are likely to see. It also illustrates the truth of George Bernard Shaw's observation: "Effectiveness of assertion is the Alpha and Omega of style. He who has nothing to assert has no style and can have none; he who has something to assert will go as far in power of style as its momentousness and his conviction will carry him."

The Character and Purpose of Caesar

Octavius Caesar in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* embodies all the ideals of ancient Rome. His pursuit of world power at any cost is consistent with the militaristic, male-oriented society of which he is a part. The Roman spirit, it seems, is so deeply ingrained within Caesar that there is absolutely nothing else in the world of any importance to him besides strength and conquest. In fact, he seems so one-dimensional a character that he may not be a true character at all. I think he is merely a symbol—a voice that recurs in the play not to capture the imagination or make one learn something about human nature but rather to provide a measuring stick by which one can calculate change in Mark Antony.

Certainly there are aspects of Caesar's character that cry out for further development by Shakespeare. He is so young, yet acts so old. And nowhere does Caesar show the sensitivity, curiosity, or frivolity one might expect from a 23-year-old. It seems that if Shakespeare really wanted to make Caesar a provocative character, he could have done something with these qualities. But he doesn't. It appears that Caesar is so type-cast, so stereotyped as a Roman, that the reader or spectator must view him for what he stands for rather than for what happens to him in the play. No matter what the situation, his actions are perfectly Roman. And in this manner, it appears that his function is like that of a "constant" in a mathematical equation, a figure of never-changing value. Antony would be the "variable" in the equation. He is changed by the passion of Cleopatra, and Caesar's function is to provide contrast for this. Caesar, then, must not change. Three instances, covering the entire time span of the play, bring this out.

In Act I, Caesar criticizes Antony behind his back for the good times Antony has in Egypt. The play has just begun, and Caesar is already telling Lepidus that

> From Alexandria
> This is the news: he fishes, drinks, and wastes
> The lamps of night in revel; is not more manlike
> Than Cleopatra, nor the queen of Ptolemy . . . .
> You shall find there
> A man who is the abstract of all faults
> That all men follow. (I.4.3–10)

This is Caesar's very first speech, and in it one finds a 23-year-old man condemning pleasure. Caesar cannot understand why Antony does not take up arms with the triumvirate, why pleasure comes before duty. This opening speech is a clear disclosure of Caesar's personality. But perhaps more importantly, Antony's values are being compared to Caesar's. Not only do we see the things that Caesar values—masculinity, work, ambition—but it is significant that Antony is the subject of Caesar's first lines. In the total scope of the play Antony is the "subject" of all of them, whether he is mentioned by name or not.

Then in Act II there is another, more telling glimpse into Caesar's character. He and Antony are trying to patch up their damaged relationship, but Caesar pursues reconciliation in a purely utilitarian manner. He is a Roman first, a friend second. Caesar acts purely as a soldier. And he is concerned with Antony as merely a once-famous soldier who can help him defeat Pompey. Caesar is so wrapped up in his quest for world power that he will sell his sister "whom no brother / Did ever love so dearly" (II.2.150–151) to Antony to get Antony's support. Antony seems to go along with Caesar to appease him for the moment and end the conversation. Nevertheless, the end result is that the shallowness of Caesar's nature is exposed again. He, unlike Antony, shows no regard for the beauty of human relationships. He is concerned only with using people to advance his military goals. The fact that Caesar shows no love or compassion—not even for his sister—highlights the relationship between Antony and Cleopatra.

Caesar acts no differently in the final Act of the play. In fact, he appears more ruthless. After Antony's death, Cleopatra seeks mercy from Caesar. Caesar—who in the war against Antony has just slaughtered many men in his own self-interest—says:

> She [Cleopatra] shall soon know of us . . .
> How honorable and how kindly we
> Determine for her. For Caesar cannot live
> To be ungentle. (V.1.58–61)

This is, of course, a joke. Caesar has murdered Pompey, Lepidus, and Antony. The "mercy" Caesar plans for Cleopatra is to use her as a public display of his "generous heart." Proculeius lets slip this notion: "let the world see / His nobleness well acted" (V.2.44–45). For the first time Caesar is making an outward show of pity and kindness and, true to his nature, he is sincere about none of it. Furthermore, the sparing of Cleopatra's life has a military purpose—to make him look good in the eyes of his subjects—just like everything else he does.

Thus Caesar's character never changes from beginning to end. He is not to be pitied or even contemplated to any great extent by the audience. Caesar acts simply as a standard by which one can study the effects of Cleopatra's love on Antony. Shakespeare seems to be using Caesar as a symbol of Roman society, a yardstick by which Antony's deviance from Roman ideas can be measured. There is nothing deep or stimulating about the man. His traits are negative and obvious, so obvious that I think Shakespeare made them this way on purpose. Caesar is supposed to be a model Roman, whereas Antony is supposed to be—and is—a richly complex human being.

The Model Analyzed

To help you consolidate what you've learned so far, I'll critique this essay in terms of the five-point checklist:

1. *A well-defined thesis:* Like our earlier imaginary student, Danny did the necessary headwork before actually beginning to write. All that preparation gives him two advantages: he can write boldly, because he really knows his stuff; and he can set forth his arguments lucidly, because he understands exactly how they interconnect. The opening paragraph illustrates both advantages.

His thesis is clear and deliciously controversial:

> I think he is merely a symbol—a voice that recurs in the play not to capture the imagination or make one learn something about human nature

but rather to provide a measuring stick by which one can calculate change in Mark Antony.

It's also placed right where it ought to be for greatest effect—at the climactic end of the opening paragraph. He leads into it with *I think*, which primes us for a major assertion (this is the first appearance of *I*) and which also discreetly implies his recognition that the assertion may be considered debatable by the reader. We are to know, in other words, that he isn't arrogantly advancing this notion as a statement of fact, but rather as an opinion. Nonetheless, it's a firmly held opinion, and we admire his courage for stating it so unequivocally. He's not waffling with us; instead, he's boldly crawling out on an interpretive limb, just as I'll advise you to do in Chapter 9. The entire opening paragraph, in fact, is refreshingly direct in manner—another example of the front-door approach in action.

2. *A clear strategy:* Basically the opening paragraph is asserting three things, each one leading to the next:

A. Caesar embodies the Roman ideal.
B. In fact, he is *nothing but* the Roman ideal—that is, he is one-dimensional, a walking symbol.
C. From *B* we must infer that his dramatic function is to serve as a yardstick by which we can measure the change in his fellow Roman, Mark Antony.

Danny knows that if he can prove points *A* and *B*, he can persuade us that his thesis (*C*) is, at the very least, probably valid.

In the second paragraph, he contents himself largely with amplifying on points *A* and *B* (chiefly *B*). But when he says, "No matter what the situation, his actions are perfectly Roman," we can feel ourselves being primed to *view* these concrete situations, for this is where the proof obviously lies. And, sure enough, here it comes: "Caesar, then, must not change. Three instances, covering the entire time span of the play, bring this out."

The plan of attack could hardly be more explicit—or more beautifully simple: three major examples, one per paragraph. This is what Mencken had in mind when he spoke of "the importance of giving to every argument a simple structure." Note, too, the fine positioning of this curtain-raising sentence. Like the earlier thesis sentence, it rounds off its paragraph, thus providing its own transition directly into the proof (paragraphs 3–5). Not a word is wasted.

Danny's parallel structure in the opening sentence of each of his three supporting paragraphs makes his strategy even more transparent:

a. "In Act I, Caesar criticizes Antony . . ."
b. "Then in Act II there is another, more telling glimpse . . ."
c. "Caesar acts no differently in the final Act of the play. In fact, he appears more ruthless."

What reader isn't grateful for such clear signposting of the argument? We notice, too, a progression in the persuasiveness of the examples. Each is stronger than the last, thus building toward an intellectually and aesthetically satisfying climax.

3. *Strong evidence:* Danny has chosen representative examples "covering the entire time span of the play." He quietly draws this to our attention to defuse the possible objection that the evidence is stacked (for example, all from the first half of the play). In addition, on four occasions he has quoted actual lines, which greatly enhances the concreteness of the examples. Many students would simply argue by generalization, assuming that the reader will supply the appropriate textual support. Danny properly does the supporting himself. All the reader need do is read and enjoy.

4. *A clean narrative line:* There are no bumps in this essay. Each sentence, each paragraph, is hinged on the one that precedes it. Danny was able to achieve this fine continuity because he had a clear plan of attack: he knew what he wanted to say and what he had to prove. When you know precisely where your essay has to go, you can "tell" your argument as simply and coherently as if it were a story, which in a sense it is.

But the continuity is also the result of careful craftsmanship. Note, for instance, all the parallel structuring: the way paragraph 2 repeats the pattern of paragraph 1; the way each of those paragraphs ends with a key sentence; the way paragraphs 3–5 all begin alike; the way the closing paragraph looks back to the opening paragraph, and so forth. We have *patterns* here. They organize the ideas for us; they silently tell us how the pieces of the argument relate to one another.

5. *A persuasive closing:* The final paragraph is a beautiful wrap-up: succinct, bold, and complete enough to gather in all the major points the essay has been making. We feel them now fixed in our memory.

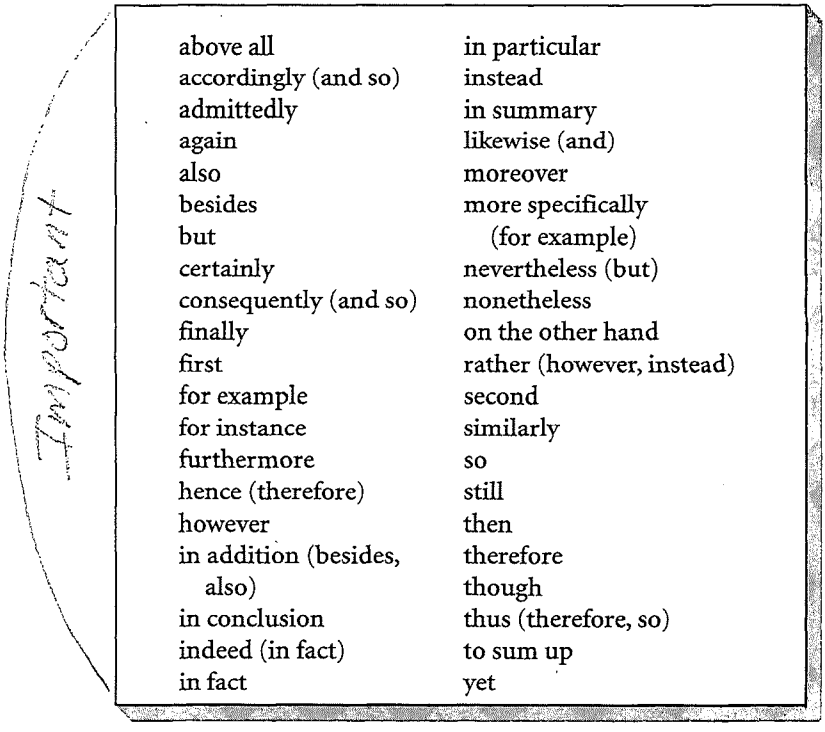
The Importance of Continuity

What follows is really part of the "Final Tips" section that concludes this chapter, but since it's both lengthy and vitally important, I want to discuss it separately.

> **Good writers are sticklers for continuity. They won't let themselves write a sentence that isn't clearly connected to the ones immediately preceding and following it. They want their prose to flow, and they know this is the only way to achieve that beautiful effect.**

But how are these connections to be made? The better the writer, the less need he has for mechanical means of connecting his ideas, too many of which tend to clutter an argument. Instead, he relies chiefly on a coherent understanding of what he wants to say, a simple style, the occasional repetition of key words, and the careful use of pronouns such as *this* and *that*. In manner he resembles a furniture maker who uses interlocking tongues and grooves to do the work of nails and screws.

Sometimes, though, a situation will require a more explicit connective—such as when the direction of the argument is turning or when an idea is to be paralleled or contrasted with an earlier idea. In these situations, the writer will call upon a conjunctive adverb or brief transitional phrase to signal the kind of thought that's coming next. I call this "signposting" an argument. Here he has choices within choices. As Rudolf Flesch points out in *The Art of Plain Talk*, some conjunctive adverbs are bookish—that is, used chiefly in print—whereas others are conversational and for that reason less stuffy. In the list below, the bookish ones are followed in parentheses by their conversational equivalents. Keep in mind, though, that the equivalence in each case is approximate, not perfect. Note, too, that the bookish adverbs can afford you greater variety *and* precision of meaning—which is doubtless why we encounter them more often in books than in conversation:



It's a rather overwhelming list, isn't it? (And it's only a partial one.) But the sheer number of transitional words indicates, among other things, just how important signposting an argument really is. Continuity doesn't magically happen; it's *created*. The surest way your reader will know how your ideas connect is by your telling her. These are the words you tell her with. I suggest you keep the list propped up before you the next few times you write an essay. It will remind you to give your reader the directional signals she needs; it will save you word-hunting; and (a nice bonus) it will suggest an occasional new avenue of thought simply by tempting your mind to explore other directions of argument—a "nevertheless" thought, perhaps, or a "consequently," or a "for example."

Final Tips

1. *"Well, what does it finally add up to?"* This is the reader's invariable question. Your essay is the reply: *"It finally adds up to this, in my opinion. . . ."* Don't begin writing a final draft (there may be more than one!) until you have asked yourself the reader's question and understand clearly your intended reply. If your reply contains an original perception, if it's debatable, and if you've been able to state it in one sentence, it's a good thesis. Now go ahead and prove it.

2. Think of yourself as a prosecuting attorney, think of your essay as a case, and think of your reader as a highly skeptical jury.

3. To prove your case, you'll generally have to substantiate several things. The prosecutor, for example, must substantiate that the defendant had the motive, the means, and the opportunity to commit the crime. So determine what things you must substantiate, classify your evidence according to those things, and then substantiate them, *one at a time*. This is called "dividing up the proof." If you follow this procedure, you'll find that structuring your essay is relatively simple.

4. Signpost your argument every step of the way. If you have three important pieces of evidence to support a particular contention, *tell* your reader so she can understand precisely where you're going. For instance: "Three examples will bear this out. First, the original treaty of 1923 . . . ." Similarly, if you have three arguments and if one is stronger than the others, save it for last and *label* it as the strongest. For instance: "Finally and most seriously, capital punishment strikes at the very basis of morality itself."

5. Assertions are fine, but unless you prove them with hard evidence, they remain simply assertions. So, assert, *then support*; assert, *then support*; assert, *then support*—and so on throughout your essay. Remember, *examples* and *facts* are the meat of it. They do the actual convincing; they also have their own eloquence.

6. Some paragraphs, like transitional and one-sentence paragraphs, are special-occasion devices and follow their own rules. (I'll be speaking more about them later.) The normal paragraph, though, resembles a good essay: it has unity by virtue of being organized around a single major point. Several examples may be brought in to support that point, and several ideas to qualify it, and several sentences to illuminate its implications, but there's still only a *single major point.* "One main contention per paragraph"—it's a sensible guideline to follow. If you don't follow it, your points will tend to get lost, and so will your reader.

7. Instead of viewing the opening sentence of each paragraph as a topic sentence, as you've probably been taught to do, try this:

> **View each paragraph opener as a *bridge sentence* aimed at smoothing our way into the new paragraph.**

More than one student has said that's the single best tip they've carried away from their writing conferences with me. I say this only to underscore the difference it can make in your prose style. Below are a number of paragraph openers from a famous *Atlantic Monthly* article by Bergen Evans called "But What's a Dictionary For?"—a review of Merriam-Webster's revolutionary *Third New International Dictionary*. They will illustrate the bridging technique graphically:

a. What underlines all this sound and fury?
b. So monstrous a discrepancy in evaluation requires us to examine basic principles.
c. Yet wild wails arose.
d. More subtly, but persuasively, it has changed under the influence of mass education and the growth of democracy.
e. And the papers have no choice.
f. And so back to our questions: what's a dictionary for, and how, in 1962, can it best do what it ought to do?
g. Even in so settled a matter as spelling, a dictionary cannot always be absolute.
h. Has he been betrayed?
i. Under these circumstances, what is a dictionary to do?
j. An illustration is furnished by an editorial in the Washington *Post* (January 17, 1962).
k. In part, the trouble is due to the fact that there is no standard for standard.

Even out of context, these sentences suggest how skillfully Evans is guiding his readers—building bridges for us, persuading us. We never come to a new paragraph wondering, "Where am I? How did I get here?" To repeat a point I made a few moments ago: Continuity doesn't magically happen; it's *created*.

5

Closers

The most emphatic place in a clause or sentence is the end. This is the climax; and during the momentary pause that follows, that last word continues, as it were, to reverberate in the reader's mind. It has, in fact, the last word. One should therefore think twice about what one puts at a sentence-end.

—F.L. Lucas

What's going on in the mind of a skilled writer as he approaches his final paragraph? Let's revisit our capital-punishment student just as he reaches that juncture. Perhaps we can listen in . . .

Oh-oh, he looks bad—eyes glazed, body leaden. We appear to be catching him at a very low moment:

"This is ridiculous—my brain's turning to mush. Maybe I'll just stop here. The piece is virtually done anyway—I've made my main points. Besides, who's going to know the difference?"

(Enter Conscience and Common Sense. They beat back Fatigue.)

"No, I guess I can't quit yet. Buckley wouldn't accept an argument that merely stops. He'll want to see the thing *end*, to enjoy a sense of closure. He once said that's a basic aesthetic desire in all of us. 'Every reader wants his final reward . . .'

"Then, of course, there's the matter of what he'll be able to recall. Since *my* memory certainly has its limits, I'm sure his does, too . . . If that's the case, his sense of this piece is bound to be colored by the last sentences he reads. My opener may have disposed him to read eagerly,

and my middle paragraphs may have sustained his interest, but my final graf may well be the chief thing he carries away with him. That's certainly the way it is with the last minute of a basketball game, or the last kiss at the door. Hmm. I can see that I *have* to make it memorable—as powerful as my opener, if I can.

"But I wonder how I should slant it toward him? I suppose, if he's anything like me, by the time he's gotten this far, he'll be tired. He's bound to welcome a final gathering up of my argument in a form that can be grasped handily. This would also leave him feeling that my argument really does hang together. He mustn't have any doubts on that score. I want him utterly convinced.

"But I imagine he'll be bored if my closer simply recaps earlier points, and especially if I repeat my earlier phrasing. He'll feel I'm merely going through the motions. He'll also feel that he's stopped learning things. I've *got* to keep him hooked to the very end. I've got to leave him convinced that my mind is still blazing with ideas."

The closer our student finally devises is half-summary, half-conclusion, similar to a prosecutor's closing appeal to the jury. He neatly sums up the high points of his evidence, re-explaining why his argument is reasonable. He also takes care to point out its important implications, so that the reader will be convinced that the argument is substantial. He makes the whole paragraph self-contained and packed so that it could serve as a fair substitute for the essay itself, as indeed it may in his reader's overworked memory. And he finishes off with a sentence that has such satisfying finality that his last period feels unncessary.

For a long paper—say, ten pages or more—this formula for a closer is ideal. In fact, it's obligatory, since you will have given your reader a volume of ideas to digest. Unless your presentation has been unusually coherent, he's apt to be left seeing trees but no forest. He really *needs* a systematic wrap-up.

With shorter papers, though, you should take liberties with this formula, particularly if your next-to-last paragraph has already gathered up many of the threads of your argument. You certainly don't want to insult your reader's intelligence.

There remain, however, three imperatives, no matter how brief your essay.

1. Focus on your main point (which may be your final point).
2. Gratify us with at least one last new twist or phrase to make your point memorable.
3. End with emotional impact.

The four closers quoted below satisfy these imperatives beautifully. All are from short essays written for the same upper-division Shakespeare course, and all deal with the same subject, *King Lear*. This, I should point out, is no coincidence. It wasn't until these students got to their last essay assignment of the semester—on *Lear*—that any of them learned to write a powerful closer. When you read them, you may find this hard to believe. Each seems the product of a truly natural talent. Appearances deceive, though. What looks so natural is really the effect of repeated practice, careful revision, and considerable reader feedback, not just from me but from their classmates as well. I suspect that a semester spent with Shakespeare also had something to do with it. As you read these closers, remember to read for manner as well as message:

> After his defeat and capture, Lear's transformation of character is complete. To be a prisoner of his daughters should be the most humiliating experience in a king's life, yet we find Lear expressing real happiness. Because he is with Cordelia, the longing for power and loyalty has been replaced with a desire for love and compassion. At last Lear sees a love without price and power. He actually looks forward to being a prisoner with Cordelia:
>
> Come, let's away to prison.
> We two alone will sing like birds i' th' cage.
> When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down
> And ask of thee forgiveness. So we'll live,
> And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
> At gilded butterflies . . . (V.iii.8–13)
>
> The kind of love he now wants is the antithesis of the worship that his other daughters promised him. Lear has discovered a human love based on sharing and feeling, and found that it is worth far more than crowns or kingdoms.

The tragedy of King Lear is that Lear's ideal universe discovers itself in a prison rather than in a kingdom. For when Lear had the power to preserve love he could not see it, and when he had the wisdom to see love he could not preserve it.

So, by a series of occurrences very close to the core of the man, Lear, this king becomes aware of life just as it is lost to him forever. The only non-static character in the play, Lear becomes the tragic one. The tragedy is one like saving a man's life so that he may be executed. But, in that saving, Lear is, if only briefly, whole, magnificent, wise.

Even though Lear changes into a wise, compassionate, and fit ruler, his sorrows begin anew. The sentimentalist's phrase "poetic justice" holds no meaning for Shakespeare. Ruin wrought in the old king's heart and brain is irreparable, and the tornado that whirls him to his doom carries with it the just and the unjust. Lear's little golden pause of peace, when he and Cordelia reunite, followed by the intolerably piercing scene in which he bears her dead body out of prison muttering that they have hanged his "poor fool," shows that even the virtuous suffer—not at the hands of the gods, who are indifferent, but at the claws of beastly humans. In *King Lear*, the consequences of imprudent action were never followed out to a grimmer end.

It seems we can really only speculate as to what Shakespeare is trying to say about life in *King Lear*. There are no religious morals or Elizabethan motifs jumping out at us like handy crutches. Perhaps Shakespeare is trying to convey in Lear an inner human dignity in suffering. Lear, the exalted, suffers with the common. He shares with all of his brothers the ability to suffer. Suffering is *his* bond. His ability to feel the pangs of rejection, defeat, and total disillusionment enables Lear, who has "ever but slenderly known himself," to achieve a spiritual stature in death denied him in life.

What F.L. Lucas, at the opening of this chapter, said about a sentence-end is probably even more true of an essay-end. A weak sentence-end can always be recouped by a strong following sentence; a weak essay-end cannot. Knowing this, many experienced writers take the precaution, during the early drafting stage, of setting aside a couple of choice ideas or phrases for use in their closer. That's a smart policy.

6

Diction

Less is more, in prose as in architecture.

—Donald Hall

In composing, as a general rule, run your pen through every other word you have written; you have no idea what vigor it will give your style.

—Sydney Smith

Conciseness

Most of us write as if we're paid a dime a word. We've been conditioned, I suppose, by school assignments calling for more words than we have ideas. That gets us into the habit of phrase-stretching—a hard habit to break. Then, too, it's easier to think in long, ready-made phrases, which have the added attraction of sounding elegant. What secretary or bureaucrat doesn't feel indebted to the coiner of "please be advised," "enclosed please find," "thanking you in advance," and "in reference to yours of . . ."?

This habit of thinking in prefab phrases slowly dulls our sensitivity to words as words. It's inevitable. We may hear someone say "at this point in time" and pride ourselves on recognizing the phrase as a cliché, but we'll probably not notice that it's also redundant. (What does *in time* say that *at this point* doesn't already say?) If we think in terms of months, we're only half-conscious of days. If we think in terms of phrases, we're only half-conscious of words.

7

Readability

When we encounter a natural style, we are astonished and delighted; for we expected to see an author, and we find a man.

—Blaise Pascal

Sentences are not different enough to hold the attention unless they are dramatic. No ingenuity of varying structure will do. All that can save them is the speaking tone of voice somehow entangled in the words and fastened to the page for the ear of the imagination.

—Robert Frost

A readable style is one that invites reading. That circular definition I think we can all agree on. But when we ask what makes a style readable, we move into personal taste. Here it's everyone for himself. Let me take a moment to state my own views on the subject. If you agree with them, you might find the tips that follow both sensible and helpful.

Basically, I require two things of an author. The first is that he or she have something fresh to say—something that will either teach me or amuse me. If he doesn't, I stop reading. The second requirement is that he not waste my time getting out what he has to say. If he idles, I figure I'm better off reading someone else.

But beyond these bedrock requirements, what I find most appealing in a writer is an authentic manner. I like to see him or her come across as a vital, companionable human being, not a stuffed shirt or emotionally unfeeling. I like an author to *talk* to me, unbend to me, speak right out to me. If the prose has a natural, conversational rhythm to it, if it's forged out of homespun English rather than highbrow English, if it's stamped with the mark of a quirky personality, if it carries the ring of honesty and passionate conviction, then the writer has captured my attention. I like an author to be natural, warts and all. It shows me that he or she trusts me enough to show vulnerability and not be afraid of me.

Below are examples of what I mean—examples, too, of what Pascal and Frost doubtless had in mind in those remarks of theirs that I quoted at the head of this chapter. The first pair of passages, a couple of pages apart, come from novelist Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, a book at once wise and funny—but, best of all, real. Here she's disclosing part of her writing life and the demons she battles, especially her fear of rejection and her perfectionism. In fact, we get to see her battle her perfectionism right in front of us as she reminds us—and no less herself!—of its high costs:

> What I've learned to do when I sit down to work on a shitty first draft is to quiet the voices in my head. First there's the vinegar-lipped Reader Lady, who says primly, "Well, *that's* not very interesting, is it?" And there's the emaciated German male who writes these Orwellian memos detailing your thought crimes. And there are your parents, agonizing over your lack of loyalty and discretion; and there's William Burroughs, dozing off or shooting up because he finds you as bold and articulate as a houseplant; and so on. . . . Quieting these voices is at least half the battle I fight daily. . . .

> Perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor, the enemy of the people. It will keep you cramped and insane your whole life, and it is the main obstacle between you and a shitty first draft. Perfectionism will ruin your writing, blocking inventiveness and playfulness and life force (these are words we are allowed to use in California). Perfectionism means that you try desperately not to leave so much mess to clean up. But clutter and mess show us that life is being lived. Clutter is wonderfully fertile ground—you can still discover new treasures under all those piles, clean things up, edit things out, fix things, get a grip. Tidiness suggests that something is as good as it's going to get. Tidiness

makes me think of held breath, of suspended animation, while writing needs to breathe and move.

And here's another pair of riveting paragraphs, from the novelist Dorothy Allison. Whenever I think of intellectual and emotional honesty, I think of paragraphs like these, ringing with conviction, passion, and integrity:

> I have always passionately loved good books—good stories and beautiful writing, and most of all, books that seemed to me to be intrinsically important, books that told the truth, painful truths sometimes, in a voice that made eloquent the need for human justice. That is what I have meant when I have used the word *literature*. It has seemed to me that literature, as I meant it, was embattled, that it was increasingly difficult to find writing doing what I thought literature should do—which was simply to push people into changing their ideas about the world, and to go further, to encourage us in the work of changing the world, to making it more just and more truly human.
>
> All my life I have hated clichés, the clichés applied to people like me and those I love. Every time I pick up a book that purports to be about either poor people or queers or Southern women, I do so with a conscious anxiety, an awareness that the books about us have often been cruel, small, and false. I have wanted our lives taken seriously and represented fully—with power and honesty and sympathy—to be hated or loved, or to terrify and obsess, but to be real, to have the power of the whole and the complex. I have never wanted politically correct parables made out of my grief, simple-minded rote speeches made from my rage, simplifications that reduce me to cardboard dimensions. But mostly that is what I have found. We are the ones they make fiction of—we queer and disenfranchised and female—and we have the right to demand our full, nasty, complicated lives, if only to justify all the times our reality has been stolen, mismade, and dishonored.

What permits such miracles of literary authenticity to happen? The answer, I think, is either a religious reverence for truth at whatever cost—this is proverbially the case with major artists—or else genuine self-acceptance. If a person accepts herself, she will be herself, and will speak her mind in her own idiom without inhibition. She won't be engaged in posturing with her reader, or counterfeiting her real personality and feelings, because she'll have no wobbly idealized self to defend.

Achieving such self-acceptance is a difficult proposition, though. The fear of rejection straitjackets most of us from early in life. Instead of learning to discover our own writing voice, we learn to mimic the voices of others. In fact, we do a pretty good job of learning to smother all traces of individuality.

The Godlike Pose

If we're honest with ourselves, most of us can see this defensiveness operating every time we're asked to produce a piece of serious writing—an essay, for example, or a report. At such times, fear compels us to try to appear godlike: wise, rational, authoritative. But since, beyond a certain point, we can't become more rational and authoritative, we instinctively—and often unconsciously—compensate in our writing style by donning the trappings of pure rationality and authority: studied "objectivity," impersonality of address, elevated diction, a grave manner, elaborate sentences, and the rest. It can be pretty convincing. We can even fool ourselves with our stylistic majesty.

Unfortunately, this is mostly a learned response. What keeps reinforcing it is the popular dogma that only a lofty, formal style is appropriate in serious writing. That dogma not only strengthens our feeling that we must be something we're not, but also teaches us *how* to strike the godlike pose.

How did the dogma originate? Probably through thousands of precedents resembling our own attempts at imposture. After enough people over enough decades donned the trappings of authority, the trappings themselves became part of the established style of serious discourse. At that point, Decorum—not just the individual's ego—began insisting on a standard of stylistic acceptability. From then until now we have had convention reinforcing instinct, and instinct in turn rigidifying convention—in short, a vicious circle.

You can see it operating at every commencement exercise. A speaker has been chosen to give the major address. "My God, what can I say that will be equal to the occasion?" he wails. He thinks and thinks; his desperation grows; his brain begins to freeze. Eventually he bows to tradition and comes up with an impossibly formal Address—a collection of platitudes substituting for genuine feeling and conviction. The audience hears it, yawns, then dozes. Each person leaves with the same unspoken sentiment: "Well, chalk up another boring commencement speech. Why doesn't some-

one—just once—give a simple, heartfelt talk, something really honest? Why must it always be so pretentious?" Because, as we've seen, convention—and the speaker's scared ego—won't have it any other way. With each new precedent, it becomes all the harder for a new commencement speaker to be simply himself.

The Dogma of Formalism

The only way to break this circle is for each of us to subject the dogma of Formalism to a searching analysis. How solid, in fact, is its rationale? What are its actual effects? What (if any) reasonable alternative is there to it? And what are the stylistic practices of our best contemporary authors?

Let's begin with its rationale. Judged solely by its corrective ends, it makes sense. The teachers who preach the formal style are trying desperately to elevate people's writing standards. More specifically, they hope to teach them stylistic discipline and grace; teach them that talking and writing, while related, are not the same thing; teach them, in short, that when one writes seriously, one must take one's style seriously. In essence, they are reacting against the shortcomings of the informal style adopted unthinkingly by so many students. Since such a style recognizes no difference between writing and talking, it tends to be loose, banal, and imprecise—disadvantages too great to offset its merits of simplicity and ease.

So far so good. Unfortunately, what these teachers fail to perceive is that the archly conservative formal style has shortcomings of its own. While capable of satisfying the needs for precision and conciseness, it tends to lack ease and freshness, since it inhibits variety of diction, simplicity, and anything offbeat. Its self-consciousness is both its virtue and its limitation.

Which brings me to its actual effects—two principal ones, both negative. First, more often than not, it ironically promotes writing that is as bad in its own way as the very writing it's hoping to discourage—"bow-wow language," Mencken called it—marked by stilted diction, abstract phraseology, frozen sentence rhythms, and so on. Exceptionally literate people may eventually find themselves at home with a formal style, but most writers never will—and their awkwardness will show. Second, and more insidious, it promotes phoniness and empty conventionality—the Standard Way of Thinking. When a person is obliged to write like another person, who was himself obliged to write like still another person, he is invariably going to start adopting that person's neutered style of thought and to stray ever further from what he actually thinks and feels. But that's just the beginning. Teach a per-

son this trick and pretty soon he's formed a lifelong habit. We see the dismaying evidence all around us—in "businessese," "academese," "officialese," "committee prose." Their labels may differ, but not their gobbledygook essence. Each is a form of imitation-writing sterile in its uniformity, opaque in its jargon, and absurd in its pomposity. People don't learn to write this way when they've been encouraged to write simply, directly, and honestly. They learn to write this way only when they've been taught a style which implies that naturalness is unnatural, that informality is unacceptable, and that individuality is unpardonable. (More on this in our next chapter.)

George Orwell discusses something like this syndrome in his classic essay "Politics and the English Language." He observes, for instance:

> As I have tried to show, modern writing at its worst does not consist in picking out words for the sake of their meaning and inventing images in order to make the meaning clearer. It consists in gumming together long strips of words which have already been set in order by someone else, and making the results presentable by sheer humbug. . . .
>
> In our time it is broadly true that political writing is bad writing. Where it is not true, it will generally be found that the writer is some sort of rebel, expressing his private opinions and not a "party line." Orthodoxy, of whatever color, seems to demand a lifeless, imitative style.

That last sentence says it all.

We might solve the problem, it seems to me, if we stop thinking of style in the simplistic either/or terms that the formalists have taught us to adopt. Typifying their way of thinking is the following entry on contractions in a widely used Freshman English text:

> The use of contractions (I'll, can't, couldn't, didn't, he's, shouldn't) is appropriate in informal and colloquial styles but not in a formal style.

The trouble with such a dictum is that it postulates only two kinds of style, both of them extreme—an informal, colloquial style versus a formal style—and implies that only the latter is legitimate for serious writing.

The "General English" Style

What students are rarely told is that there exists a *middle* style—"General English," language expert Porter Perrin calls it—that is essentially a happy compromise between formal and informal. Being a

compromise, it is by far the most palatable of the written styles, and its area of appropriateness, at least in the real world, is virtually unlimited. Why? Because skilled writers can stay within the "General English" style and still satisfy the four essentials of prose: precision, conciseness, ease, and freshness. (Indeed, as I've shown, they'd be hard put to satisfy all four with any other style.) Little wonder that it has been displacing formal English as the prevailing literary style in recent years.

The special character of this style—at least at its best—was caught by novelist Somerset Maugham when he remarked that "good prose should resemble the conversation of a well-bred man." (Or woman, he surely meant to say.) Several illustrations of it appear in this book—most notably the passages by White in Chapter 1, by Kael in Chapter 2, by Updike in Chapter 6, and by both Lamott and Allison in the present chapter. If you revisit those passages, you'll observe that each is conversational in tone—unaffected, idiomatic, straightforward—but also beautifully wrought. The phrasing is tight and precise; the diction, fresh and apt. Considerable labor has been lavished on these sentences, we can be sure, not a little of it on concealing that very labor. They all seem happy accidents—precisely the intended effect.

What makes such a style so appealing to today's reader is its authenticity and graceful informality. What makes it so attractive to writers themselves, I think, is that it frees them to discover their own voice.* Moreover, it reinforces their desire to speak the truth as they see it. All of us need that reinforcement—we need as much of it as we can get, in fact. We surely don't get it when we feel compelled by a stylistic dogma to efface our personality, adopt the language of orthodoxy, and pretend to an exalted authority we know we don't possess. Bonamy Dobrée, in his *Modern Prose Style*, summed up the matter well:

> The modern prose writer, in returning to the rhythms of everyday speech, is trying to be more honest with himself than if he used, as is too wreckingly easy, the forms and terms already published as the expression of other people's minds.

Unfortunately, while the "General English" style may be our answer, it doesn't simplify our writing problems. Just the reverse: the more you

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* "In literature the ambition of a novice is to acquire the literary language; the struggle of the adept is to get rid of it." —George Bernard Shaw

poke into its subtle complexities, the more you conclude that it's likely to serve only as an elusive ideal we might aim for. Writing an informal style is easy—you just talk on paper. Writing a formal style is pretty easy, too, once you have the knack—you just haul out all the high-sounding, impersonal phrases you've seen other people use. But writing a good "General English" style is hard. It's hard because it requires a sophisticated control of *tone*, which is the most intangible but perhaps most consequential element in a writer's voice.

As I said earlier, "General English" is essentially a compromise between formality and informality. This means it involves a mingling of contraries: formal and informal diction, objectivity and subjectivity, impersonality and directness. All of these things affect tone. Part of the challenge, then—and it's a formidable one—is to get the right mix. That's as tricky as concocting a good sweet-and-sour sauce. The other part of the challenge is to work around the edges of these various extremes without taking a tumble.

When, for example, will a colloquialism lend just the right note of easy informality, and when might it have the effect of cheapening a sentence? Or, to take the opposite problem, when will an unusual word add a nicely piquant effect, and when might it sound merely pretentious? Yet again: when will a personal touch be welcome, and when narcissistic? Guessing right requires a good ear, taste, and tact—all of them intuitive, finally, and acquired only through considerable reading and writing.

The question of style is obviously a large issue—at bottom, a moral issue—and one that we could go on and on with. We will, in fact, pursue it a little further in the next chapter. But to draw the matter to a temporary close, I'll simply tell you what I tell my students when the issue comes up in class and we're just minutes away from the bell:

Closing Thoughts

"Each time we write, we're making a choice as to the kind of person we prefer to be. Since it's so important, let's make that choice a conscious one for a change. Here's what it involves: 'Do I want to be authentically *me*, speaking my own thoughts in my own idiom, or am I content to be a pseudo-self, using borrowed thoughts, borrowed language, and a borrowed personality to gain the approval of a few literary traditionalists?'

"Our assumptions about our readers will condition that choice, of course, since we never write in a vacuum. But instead of automatically assuming that they will reject authenticity, ask yourself this: Is it likely that

mainstream readers actually *prefer* to read the highly repressed, orthodox, formal style, or might they, too, not secretly regard it as all too often effete and stuffy?

"Sometimes, of course, stuffy or not, the formal style will seem to be the only one appropriate to the occasion, either because tradition decrees it or because the subject calls for an impersonal treatment. If you're writing a legal brief, for example, or a statement of corporate policy or a scientific paper, your job is to transmit information, not personal reflections; and you'll show readers that you understand that job by adopting a serious, reasonably judicial manner that keeps you offstage.

"But, for heaven's sake, let's not allow ourselves to be slaves to blind convention—or unnecessary pomp, for that matter. Few situations are really so intrinsically formal as we're conditioned to believe. Just because everyone else is standing on ceremony on a given occasion doesn't necessarily mean that it's obligatory, or that they *prefer* to; they may simply be afraid to be themselves, and may be just waiting for some free spirit to come along and give them the courage of their instincts. This holds as true for writing as it does for life in general.

"I suggest you keep in mind the example of Franklin Roosevelt. When he gave his periodic radio addresses to the American people, he could have adopted a lofty, presidential style. In fact, convention almost demanded it. But Roosevelt blithely ignored convention, choosing instead to give what he called 'fireside chats'—personal, down-to-earth talks laced with colloquialisms and jokes. Here was a man who obviously listened to the promptings of his heart. He figured that the average citizen, like himself, would prefer relaxed plain talk to studied oratory. And he was proved right. Those talks helped make him one of the most endearing of modern presidents.

"So I recommend that you be guided by what your own eyes and ears tell you, not merely by the so-called authorities. Just what *is* considered acceptable style today in serious writing? Look at the evidence—magazines such as *Harper's, Forbes, The Atlantic Monthly*, and *Newsweek*; newspapers like *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Los Angeles Times*; the latest books of Pulitzer Prize–winning nonfiction. You'll find that we're witnessing a revolution in the notion of what constitutes a good style for serious writing—a movement toward greater naturalness, vigor, informality, and individuality. It was bound to happen. We see similar revolutions occurring in lifestyles, religious beliefs, and sexual attitudes. When even *The New York Times* permits

contractions in its editorial columns, as it does now, you know that literary Victorianism is on its way out."*

Tips for Improving Your Readability

Here are the two best ways I know for promoting an authentic and readable style:

- View your reader as a companionable friend—someone with a warm sense of humor and a love of simple directness.
- Write like you're actually talking to that friend, but talking with enough leisure to frame your thoughts concisely and interestingly.

If you tack these two tips on the wall by your writing desk and make a habit of practicing them, your readability quotient should soar.

Here are 26 more. Occasionally they'll reiterate or anticipate points I make elsewhere, but for convenience of reference I'm including them here as well:

1. As a rule of thumb, whenever you've written three longish sentences in a row, make your fourth a short one. And don't fear the super-short sentence. It's arresting. Sometimes just a single word will be plenty long:

> Many American parents think that today's colleges are veritable breeding grounds for premarital sex. Nonsense. Each year, literally tens of students graduate with their virtue still intact.
>
> —Gregg Hopkins

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* Bergen Evans, coauthor of *A Dictionary of American Usage* and, until his death in 1978, one of the country's top usage experts, remarked in 1962: "As written English is used by increasing millions and for more reasons than ever before, the language has become more utilitarian and more informal. Every publication in America today includes pages that would appear, to the purist of forty years ago, unbuttoned gibberish. Not that they are; they simply show that you can't hold the language of one generation up as a model for the next."

That last sentence, by the way, illustrates the literary knuckleball I spoke of in Chapter 6. It also illustrates an axiom in aesthetics: "The smaller the sign [= cue], the greater the pleasure." Hopkins counts on our tendency to read "tens of students" as "tens of thousands." The joke slips through before we realize it, in a double take.

2. Use occasional contractions. They'll help you unbend, let your readers relax as well, and free up your writing voice. The most popular contractions involve *am, are, is*, and *not*, especially these:

I'm
you're, we're, they're
he's, she's, here's
won't, wouldn't, don't, doesn't, can't

Contractions, though, are like kisses: bestowed too freely, they lose their effect, in fact seem cheap. Save them for when you want to humanize some sentence like "Let us start now because I will not be in town tomorrow." My goodness, who ever *talks* like that? Keep your writing voice natural. Let yourself sound like the very person you'd want to read yourself: "Let's start now because I won't be in town tomorrow."

3. Generally, prefer *that* to *which*. The one is conversational; the other, slightly more bookish. I like to save "which" for after a comma, to introduce a nonrestrictive clause: "The bike, which she rode just yesterday, has a flat." The term "nonrestrictive," by the way, simply means that the clause doesn't restrict the field of reference to one particular object; the clause is contributing only some incidental information, so it functions just like a parenthesis, and could be cut with little damage. Here, because the sentence begins with the words "The bike," our writer has already specified the bike she's talking about, so her "which" clause isn't specifying anything, it's just adding some other information. Her commas around it are appropriate. But compare that to this sentence: "The bike that she rode just yesterday has a flat." Here, our *that* clause is clearly restrictive: It narrows the reference to a *particular* bike—the one ridden just yesterday. That makes it essential information, so it mustn't be set off by commas. My own practice is this: *If I could cut the clause, I'll use "which" and a comma before it; otherwise, I'll normally use "that."* But note my hedge: "normally." When in doubt, I'll read the sentence aloud, testing it on my ear. And I'll check to see what other *that's* and *which's* may lurk in the area. Sometimes I'll want a "which" purely for variety. Other times I'll want it just because,

for whatever reason, it seems to sound better. So much of writing is finally intuitive, isn't it? As Rudolf Flesch has wisely said, "You have to go by feel, not by rule."

4. If you mean "I," *say* "I." Don't wrap yourself in pomposities like "the writer" or "one" or "this author" or "we." Reserve "we" and "our" for those situations where you're referring to both your reader and yourself—i.e., where there really is someone else involved. Reserve "one" for when you mean "a person," as in "One would have to be a CPA to grasp that." When referring to the reader alone, address that person as "you," not "the reader." The printed page already puts enough distance between the two of you. Why add to it? When generalizing about readers or people, and when including yourself among them, go ahead and use "we" and "our." They're simple, conversational, and democratic.

5. Use dashes to isolate concluding phrases for emphasis or humorous effect. Pauline Kael is an artist with the dash. By rereading her review quoted in Chapter 2, you'll get an idea of the effects you can achieve with it yourself.

6. Professionals quote, amateurs paraphrase. Pros understand a powerful truth: readers love listening to people talk—love hearing the actual words, not a preemptive digest of them. So use dialogue wherever your context warrants it—it's intrinsically dramatic. And don't be shy about inventing some. *Imagined* thoughts—one of a writer's best resources—let you do just that:

> Events inexorably force Enobarbus to a decision—an impossible one. It would seem that he's thinking here something like this: "My mind tells me to leave Antony for Rome. My heart tells me to leave Rome for Antony. Both courses of action are right, and both are wrong. To go either way is to deny a central fact of my existence. I am a Roman, but I am also a man. There seems to be only one solution: death. It will eliminate the need to choose."

Here's another example, this one from my student Matt Darroh, in a paper on John Updike's classic short story "A&P":

> Mr. Lengel offers Sammy some well-intended advice: "You'll feel this for the rest of your life. . . ." In other words: "You'd better get used to keeping your mouth shut when you don't agree with certain things because that's life, and that's what you have to do. If you want to be successful, you need to quit being so idealistic. That's what I did, and that's what you have to do."

And here is the prominent architectural critic Witold Rybczynski, in his fascinating book *Home: A Short History of an Idea*, drolly contrasting the typical high-fashion modern chair, stripped of frivolity and frills, with its well-padded, voluptuous predecessors:

> It exhibits lightness and movability, and it invites admiration for these qualities—just as a well-made camp cot does. But it does not ask to be sat in, or at least not for very long. The Rococo chair invites conversation, and the Victorian chair invites after-dinner naps, but the Modern chair is all business. "Let's get this sitting over with and get back to something useful," it commands. It is about many things, this chair, but it is no longer about ease, leisure, or, if truth be told, about comfort.

7. The more abstract your argument, the more you should lace it with what I call "word pictures"—illustrations, analogies, vivid quotations, metaphors, similes. These are aids not only to your readers' understanding but also to their memory. In fact, they'll probably remember your illustration or analogy far longer than the abstract idea itself. But if the illustration is a good one, they'll be able to reconstruct the thought fairly easily, so it will have served its purpose twice over. Here, for example, is Pulitzer Prize–winner Ron Suskind, in *A Hope in the Unseen*, explaining what faces an ambitious African-American youth, Cedric Jennings, at his crime-infested, inner-city high school in Washington, D.C.:

> Cedric's 4.02 grade-point average virtually ties him for first in the junior class with a quiet, studious girl named LaCountiss Spinner. Pride in such accomplishment is acceptable behavior for sterling students at high schools across the land, but at Ballou and other urban schools like it, something else is at work. Educators have even coined a phrase for it. They call it the crab/bucket syndrome: when one crab tries to climb from the bucket, the others pull it back down. The forces dragging students toward failure—especially those who have crawled farthest up the side—flow through every corner of the school. Inside the bucket, there is little chance of escape.

8. Minimize your adjectives. Try to let nouns—especially *accurate* nouns—work alone. This will simplify your style *and* give it more point. Voltaire, who knew something about style,* wasn't overstating the case

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* Novelist Somerset Maugham, who himself knew something about style, once said, "If you could write lucidly, simply, euphoniously and yet with liveliness you would write perfectly: you would write like Voltaire."

much when he said, "The adjective is the enemy of the noun." Twain echoed him: "As to the Adjective: when in doubt, strike it out."

9. Minimize your adverbs, too—especially trite intensifiers like *very, extremely, really,* and *terribly,* which show a 90% failure rate. Compare "She was very upset by the news" with "She was shattered by the news." The use of *very* and its cognates diminishes the word that follows, making it feel weak. Often, that word is actually fine. But when it isn't, "weak" generally means "inaccurate," "inexact." So find another word—there always is one. And note this irony: when you then cut the intensifier, your phrasing usually *gains* intensity. Which sounds hungrier, "very hungry" or "ravenous"? No contest. But I'll concede this: the right adverb, fresh and adroitly placed, is one of life's finest small pleasures. Here are two proofs, both from Stewart Brand, a National Book Award winner for the *Whole Earth Catalog*. These gems appear in his *How Buildings Learn: What Happens After They're Built*:

> James Donnelly of Whole Earth inked every page of the manuscript bright red with line-editing corrections, for which I am whimperingly grateful.

> Because of water, houses deteriorate most from the bottom up and the top down. Damage comes from below thanks to what the British call, knowledgeably, "damp."

10. Use the fewest words possible and the simplest words possible. Occasionally, to be sure, the longer word will work best—it may express the idea concisely, or contribute just the cadence and texture wanted, or gratify your reader with the joy of surprise. (Remember *rectitude* and *chastening* in the Updike passage quoted in Chapter 6?) But be warned: the more you surrender to the temptation to write fancy, the further you'll stray from your true feelings and the more you'll write in a style designed to impress rather than serve the reader. Also, oratory can fool us into thinking we're saying something smart, when in fact we may not yet have gotten past a platitude. So follow Henry Thoreau's famous advice, for your own protection: "Simplify, simplify." This sounds easy but isn't, given all the temptations of self-indulgence and vanity. "To write simply is as difficult as to be good," sighed Somerset Maugham. Hemingway agreed: "Writing plain English is hard work."

11. Be sure that each sentence is somehow connected to the ones immediately before and after it. There's no other way to achieve fluidity,

or what I like to call a "clean narrative line"—the hallmark, in my opinion, of professional prose.

12. In a long essay or report, summarize your argument every now and then so that readers can keep their bearings. I myself enjoy seeing these summaries cast as brief transitional paragraphs, maybe three or four sentences long. They make a welcome change of pace; they also *show* the steps in a writer's argument.

13. If you like putting questions to your reader, fine. They can add point to a discussion—and, like transitional paragraphs, variety to your style. But answer them promptly. If, for example, you've raised a juicy question at the end of your opening paragraph (which, by the way, is a wonderful strategy), the opening sentence of your next paragraph should start answering it—explicitly. You've created an expectation in us (*Hmm, what's her answer*?) that you need to gratify, pronto. If, as often happens in that second paragraph, you find you need to explain something else first, fine; but by all means *explain* to us that you have to explain that thing first, so we'll know you haven't forgotten the question. More often than not, young writers will forget to clue in their reader as to what they are about—where they're headed and why they're taking that particular route. They assume it's understood. But the reader isn't clairvoyant; she knows only what the writer remembers to tell her. So share your road map with her. Then she can just sit back and enjoy the trip.

14. Use semicolons to reduce choppiness, particularly when you have several sentences with parallel structures. Also use them for a change of pace. (See the section on semicolons in Chapter 12.)

15. Read your prose aloud. *Always* read your prose aloud. Do you sound comfortable with your own ideas? Do you sound at ease with your reader? Can you read each sentence without stumbling or running out of breath? Does the phrasing sound like you, talking at top form, or does it sound alien, like it's coming out of some statue? Does your prose flow along? Have you managed to avoid unconscious word repeats, especially at the beginning and end of consecutive sentences? Skilled writers will always double-check those two spots. Their paragraph openings, too. It's easy to fall into a rut there.

16. Instead of always saying "first" and "second," occasionally use the numerals themselves in parentheses. (A *pair* of parentheses, please.) It's a superstition that numerals have no place in serious writing. For proof, browse through any major anthology of expository prose.

17. Numbers are tricky. When to write them out? When not to? *Everybody* has a theory on this one—which is a useful reminder of just how variable "rules" can be. Some experts claim that if a number needs a hyphen (e.g., "twenty-two") or a space (e.g., "two hundred"), it must be written as a numeral (e.g., "22" and "200"). Others will tell us, with equal flatness, that if it's two syllables or less, it must be written as a word (e.g., "sixteen" versus "31"). The *Chicago Manual of Style*, ultraconservative here, tells us to write out "whole numbers from one through ninety-nine." Still other experts insist, "Use numerals for everything over twenty." Actually, that last dictum is getting closer to my own taste—and of course it *is* just a matter of taste—since they've made it pretty brainproof. But why write *eighteen* when it's so much simpler to write *18*, and when *18* is easier for readers to remember—not to mention already converted into the numeral they'll actually use? What can possibly be objectionable about *18*? I hear someone answer, "It lacks the dignity of *eighteen*." Such a person doubtless undresses with the lights out. As for my own practice: For its simplicity and good sense, I go with AP style here—that is, the *Associated Press Stylebook*: "Spell out whole numbers below 10, use figures for 10 and above."* But since I always fear forgetting which side 10 goes on, I like to recite their rule this way: "*If it's a one-digit number, make it a word.*" May I confess, though? Sometimes I'll write out a number like 16. And not just at the beginning of a sentence, either, where you have to. Though I admire consistency in style, I also have learned to respect instinct; and sometimes "sixteen" feels better, or looks better—don't ask me why. Maybe I'm unconsciously adopting Anne Lamott's aesthetic here: "writing needs to breathe and move."

18. When you begin a sentence with *And* or *But* (and you most definitely should now and then), don't, for heaven's sake, put a comma after it. You want to quicken your prose with those words, and the comma would just kill any gain. Here's Rybczynski again, in *Home: The History of an Idea*:

> The modern kitchen, in which everything is hidden in artfully designed cabinets, looks well organized, like a bank office. But a kitchen does not function like an office; if anything, it is more like a workshop.

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* This rule also jibes with the U.S. Government Printing Office *Manual of Style*, which sets the style of all federal government publications, including United States Supreme Court decisions and the *Congressional Record*. It also jibes with MLA (Modern Language Association) style.

The comma is needed *only if a parenthetical phrase follows*. In that case, another comma goes *after* that phrase as well: "But, considering the evidence, she's probably right."

19. *So* and *Yet* also make great lead-offs, though most amateur writers can't believe it, or refuse to, at least in their own prose. They're sure they'd be sinning, even after seeing the practice credentialed in reputable publications, and even after having it explained to them. Maybe this is just something you have to develop nerve for. If you're a skeptic, I suggest you keep watch for such sentences, and monitor your reactions to them. Over time, I think you'll come around. Try this passage, from Mark Bittman, a *New York Times* food columnist, writing about the lovely Italian province of Liguria for *Travel Holiday* magazine:

> The coastline, riddled with natural harbors, made the Ligurians great traders, too. Genoa, the region's capital, was a powerful city-state that vied with Venice to rule the Mediterranean in the 15th and 16th centuries. So food products from all over northern Italy and the world were exported or imported through Liguria.

Could anything be smoother, or simpler, than that little segue? Note that *So* and *Yet*, like *And* and *But*, are normally spared commas because they're so short and brisk. But their polysyllabic kin—*Consequently* and *However*—normally *do* get commas. That's another reason right there to like *So* and *Yet*.

20. As a sentence starter, prefer *But* to *However*. It has two fewer syllables and takes no comma, so it's a cleaner, punchier transition word—especially at the head of a paragraph, where it's peerless. *However* seems to work best internally, positioned right next to the point of emphasis. When it's at the sentence head, it says to the reader, "Here, you go figure out where the stress ought to be." What reader wants that job? Not me.

21. Do you have a good wit? If so, share it—share your sense of verbal play, your good spirits. Let yourself have fun with your prose. What's called "serious writing" need not be solemn writing. F. L. Lucas, in his famous book *Style*, observed with characteristic good sense: "No manual of style that I know has a word to say of good humour; and yet, for me, a lack of it can sometimes blemish all the literary beauties and blandishments ever taught."

22. Paragraphing is hugely important—as much a matter of good style, and good sense, as practically anything else one can think of in writing. Long paragraphs intimidate most readers (*I don't want to go in there*!);

lots of short paragraphs can suggest a breezy, Madison Avenue glibness or a refusal to pursue a point home; a succession of cookie-cutter paragraphs—say, two per page—can suggest a tired imagination. Moral: Use variety to keep things alive and vital, as Dr. Seuss advised.

23. Here's a tip on the creative use of white space. Let's say you need to shift from one large section of your exposition to another large section, but you're stymied as to how to bridge into it and at the same time signal the magnitude of the shift. The solution? Skip four spaces instead of the usual two between paragraphs. Doing this will

- Cue readers *visually* that a major new section is at hand.
- Give them a convenient place to pause.
- Spare you from having to manufacture a real transition. Here, white space substitutes for *meanwhile*, a most convenient pseudo-bridge that pros rely on when all else fails. It says, "OK, enough of that. Now let's move on to . . . ."

24. Choose your title with care. Leave the "teasing" title to writers who are still putting cuteness before communication. Focus instead on making your own title accurately descriptive, which is challenge enough. If possible, try to give it zing as well. Remember, it's our introduction to you as well as to your paper. A pedestrian title is about as welcoming as a burnt-out motel sign.

25. If you've written a paragraph that sounds labored, back off and ask yourself, "How would I *say* this to a friend?" Then go ahead and talk it out loud. Afterward, write down as nearly as you can recall what you said. Chances are, most of your talked-out sentences will shame your earlier, written version of them. Why? When we write, we tend to overcomplicate, and our very words get in the way; but when we talk, we instinctively simplify. We need it to be simple just to get it out, it seems.

26. Another tip for the same crisis is this: Take a short break and read some paragraphs of a writer whose style you relish. Try to *soak in* that style; try to feel yourself actually writing those paragraphs as you read them. Then say to yourself, "OK, now how would [Wonderful Writer] write this?" and let yourself try again. This usually works. And even when it doesn't, it will at least give you a fresh perspective. That's maybe half the battle right there.