



On Writing Well

THE CLASSIC GUIDE TO
WRITING NONFICTION

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Simplicity

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

Who can understand the clotted language of everyday American commerce: the memo, the corporation report, the business letter, the notice from the bank explaining its latest "simplified" statement? What member of an insurance or medical plan can decipher the brochure explaining his costs and benefits? What father or mother can put together a child's toy from the instructions on the box? Our national tendency is to inflate and thereby sound important. The airline pilot who announces that he is presently anticipating experiencing considerable precipitation wouldn't think of saying it may rain. The sentence is too simple—there must be something wrong with it.

But the secret of good writing is to strip every sentence to its cleanest components. Every word that serves no function, every long word that could be a short word, every adverb that

carries the same meaning that's already in the verb, every passive construction that leaves the reader unsure of who is doing what—these are the thousand and one adulterants that weaken the strength of a sentence. And they usually occur in proportion to education and rank.

During the 1960s the president of my university wrote a letter to mollify the alumni after a spell of campus unrest. "You are probably aware," he began, "that we have been experiencing very considerable potentially explosive expressions of dissatisfaction on issues only partially related." He meant that the students had been hassling them about different things. I was far more upset by the president's English than by the students' potentially explosive expressions of dissatisfaction. I would have preferred the presidential approach taken by Franklin D. Roosevelt when he tried to convert into English his own government's memos, such as this blackout order of 1942:

Such preparations shall be made as will completely obscure all Federal buildings and non-Federal buildings occupied by the Federal government during an air raid for any period of time from visibility by reason of internal or external illumination.

"Tell them," Roosevelt said, "that in buildings where they have to keep the work going to put something across the windows."

Simplify, simplify. Thoreau said it, as we are so often reminded, and no American writer more consistently practiced what he preached. Open *Walden* to any page and you will find a man saying in a plain and orderly way what is on his mind:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn

what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.

How can the rest of us achieve such enviable freedom from clutter? The answer is to clear our heads of clutter. Clear thinking becomes clear writing; one can't exist without the other. It's impossible for a muddy thinker to write good English. He may get away with it for a paragraph or two, but soon the reader will be lost, and there's no sin so grave, for the reader will not easily be lured back.

Who is this elusive creature, the reader? The reader is someone with an attention span of about 30 seconds—a person assailed by many forces competing for attention. At one time those forces were relatively few: newspapers, magazines, radio, spouse, children, pets. Today they also include a galaxy of electronic devices for receiving entertainment and information—television, VCRs, DVDs, CDs, video games, the Internet, e-mail, cell phones, BlackBerries, iPods—as well as a fitness program, a pool, a lawn and that most potent of competitors, sleep. The man or woman who was snoozing in a chair with a magazine or a book is a person who was being given too much unnecessary trouble by the writer.

It won't do to say that the reader is too dumb or too lazy to keep pace with the train of thought. If the reader is lost, it's usually because the writer hasn't been careful enough. That carelessness can take any number of forms. Perhaps a sentence is so excessively cluttered that the reader, hacking through the verbiage, simply doesn't know what it means. Perhaps a sentence has been so shoddily constructed that the reader could read it in several ways. Perhaps the writer has switched pronouns in midsentence, or has switched tenses, so the reader loses track of who is talking or when the action took place. Perhaps Sentence B is not a logical sequel to Sentence A; the writer, in whose head the connection is clear, hasn't bothered to provide the missing link. Perhaps the writer has used a word incorrectly by not taking the trouble to look it up.

Faced with such obstacles, readers are at first tenacious. They blame themselves—they obviously missed something, and they go back over the mystifying sentence, or over the whole paragraph, piecing it out like an ancient rune, making guesses and moving on. But they won't do that for long. The writer is making them work too hard, and they will look for one who is better at the craft.

Writers must therefore constantly ask: what am I trying to say? Surprisingly often they don't know. Then they must look at what they have written and ask: have I said it? Is it clear to someone encountering the subject for the first time? If it's not, some fuzz has worked its way into the machinery. The clear writer is someone clearheaded enough to see this stuff for what it is: fuzz.

I don't mean that some people are born clearheaded and are therefore natural writers, whereas others are naturally fuzzy and will never write well. Thinking clearly is a conscious act that writers must force on themselves, as if they were working on any other project that requires logic: making a shopping list or doing an algebra problem. Good writing doesn't come naturally, though most people seem to think it does. Professional writers are constantly bearded by people who say they'd like to "try a little writing sometime"—meaning when they retire from their real profession, like insurance or real estate, which is hard. Or they say, "I could write a book about that." I doubt it.

Writing is hard work. A clear sentence is no accident. Very few sentences come out right the first time, or even the third time. Remember this in moments of despair. If you find that writing is hard, it's because it is hard.

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is too dumb or too lazy to keep pace with the writer's train of thought. My sympathies are entirely with him.) He is not so dumb. (If the reader is lost, it is generally because the writer of the article has not been careful enough to keep him on the proper path.

This carelessness can take any number of different forms. Perhaps a sentence is so excessively long and cluttered that the reader, hacking his way through all the verbiage, simply doesn't know what ^{it} the writer means. Perhaps a sentence has been so shoddily constructed that the reader could read it in any of ^{several} ~~two or three~~ different ways. ~~He thinks he knows what the writer is trying to say, but he's not sure.~~ Perhaps the writer has switched pronouns in mid-sentence, or perhaps he has switched tenses, so the reader loses track of who is talking ~~to whom~~ or ~~exactly~~ when the action took place. Perhaps Sentence B is not a logical sequel to Sentence A -- the writer, in whose head the connection is perfectly clear, has ~~been~~ ~~not given enough thought to~~ providing the missing link. Perhaps the writer has used an important word incorrectly by not taking the trouble to look it up and make sure. He may think that "sanguine" and "sanguinary" mean the same thing, but ~~I can assure you that~~ the difference is a bloody big one ~~to the reader.~~ ~~The reader~~ ~~he can only try to infer~~ ~~max~~ (speaking of big differences) what the writer is trying to imply.

Faced with ~~such a variety of~~ ^{these} obstacles, the reader is at first a remarkably tenacious bird. He tends to blame himself. ~~He~~ obviously missed something, ~~he thinks~~, and he goes back over the mystifying sentence, or over the whole paragraph,

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piecing it out like an ancient rune, making guesses and moving on. But he won't do this for long. ~~He will soon run out of patience.~~ The writer is making him work too hard ~~→ harder than he should have to work~~ and the reader will look for ~~one~~ a writer who is better at his craft.

The writer must therefore constantly ask himself: What am I trying to say? ~~in this sentence?~~ (Surprisingly often, he doesn't know.) And then he must look at what he has just written and ask: Have I said it? Is it clear to someone ~~an acquaintance~~ ~~who is coming upon~~ the subject for the first time? If it's not ~~clear~~, it is because some fuzz has worked its way into the machinery. The clear writer is a person who is clear-headed enough to see this stuff for what it is: fuzz.

I don't mean to suggest that some people are born clear-headed and are therefore natural writers, whereas ~~other~~ ~~people~~ are naturally fuzzy and will ~~therefore~~ never write well. Thinking clearly is ~~an~~ ~~entirely~~ conscious act that the writer must ~~force~~ force upon himself, just as if he were ~~embarking~~ ~~starting~~ out on any other kind of project that ~~requires~~ logic: adding up a laundry list or doing an algebra problem ~~or~~ playing chess. Good writing doesn't ~~just~~ come naturally, though most people obviously think ~~it's as easy as walking.~~ The professional

Two pages of the final manuscript of this chapter from the First Edition of *On Writing Well*. Although they look like a first draft, they had already been rewritten and retyped—like almost every other page—four or five times. With each rewrite I try to make what I have written tighter, stronger and more precise, eliminating every element that's not doing useful work. Then I go over it once more, reading it aloud, and am always amazed at how much clutter can still be cut. (In later editions I eliminated the sexist pronoun "he" denoting "the writer" and "the reader.")

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Clutter

Fighting clutter is like fighting weeds—the writer is always slightly behind. New varieties sprout overnight, and by noon they are part of American speech. Consider what President Nixon's aide John Dean accomplished in just one day of testimony on television during the Watergate hearings. The next day everyone in America was saying "at this point in time" instead of "now."

Consider all the prepositions that are draped onto verbs that don't need any help. We no longer head committees. We head them up. We don't face problems anymore. We face up to them when we can free up a few minutes. A small detail, you may say—not worth bothering about. It *is* worth bothering about. Writing improves in direct ratio to the number of things we can keep out of it that shouldn't be there. "Up" in "free up" shouldn't be there. Examine every word you put on paper. You'll find a surprising number that don't serve any purpose.

Take the adjective "personal," as in "a personal friend of mine," "his personal feeling" or "her personal physician." It's typical of hundreds of words that can be eliminated. The personal

friend has come into the language to distinguish him or her from the business friend, thereby debasing both language and friendship. Someone's feeling *is* that person's personal feeling—that's what "his" means. As for the personal physician, that's the man or woman summoned to the dressing room of a stricken actress so she won't have to be treated by the impersonal physician assigned to the theater. Someday I'd like to see that person identified as "her doctor." Physicians are physicians, friends are friends. The rest is clutter.

Clutter is the laborious phrase that has pushed out the short word that means the same thing. Even before John Dean, people and businesses had stopped saying "now." They were saying "currently" ("all our operators are currently assisting other customers"), or "at the present time," or "presently" (which means "soon"). Yet the idea can always be expressed by "now" to mean the immediate moment ("Now I can see him"), or by "today" to mean the historical present ("Today prices are high"), or simply by the verb "to be" ("It is raining"). There's no need to say, "At the present time we are experiencing precipitation."

"Experiencing" is one of the worst clutterers. Even your dentist will ask if you are experiencing any pain. If he had his own kid in the chair he would say, "Does it hurt?" He would, in short, be himself. By using a more pompous phrase in his professional role he not only sounds more important; he blunts the painful edge of truth. It's the language of the flight attendant demonstrating the oxygen mask that will drop down if the plane should run out of air. "In the unlikely possibility that the aircraft should experience such an eventuality," she begins—a phrase so oxygen-depriving in itself that we are prepared for any disaster.

Clutter is the ponderous euphemism that turns a slum into a depressed socioeconomic area, garbage collectors into waste-disposal personnel and the town dump into the volume reduction unit. I think of Bill Mauldin's cartoon of two hoboes riding a freight car. One of them says, "I started as a simple bum, but now

I'm hard-core unemployed." Clutter is political correctness gone amok. I saw an ad for a boys' camp designed to provide "individual attention for the minimally exceptional."

Clutter is the official language used by corporations to hide their mistakes. When the Digital Equipment Corporation eliminated 3,000 jobs its statement didn't mention layoffs; those were "involuntary methodologies." When an Air Force missile crashed, it "impacted with the ground prematurely." When General Motors had a plant shutdown, that was a "volume-related production-schedule adjustment." Companies that go belly-up have "a negative cash-flow position."

Clutter is the language of the Pentagon calling an invasion a "reinforced protective reaction strike" and justifying its vast budgets on the need for "counterforce deterrence." As George Orwell pointed out in "Politics and the English Language," an essay written in 1946 but often cited during the wars in Cambodia, Vietnam and Iraq, "political speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible. . . . Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness." Orwell's warning that clutter is not just a nuisance but a deadly tool has come true in the recent decades of American military adventurism. It was during George W. Bush's presidency that "civilian casualties" in Iraq became "collateral damage."

Verbal camouflage reached new heights during General Alexander Haig's tenure as President Reagan's secretary of state. Before Haig nobody had thought of saying "at this juncture of maturization" to mean "now." He told the American people that terrorism could be fought with "meaningful sanctionary teeth" and that intermediate nuclear missiles were "at the vortex of cruelty." As for any worries that the public might harbor, his message was "leave it to Al," though what he actually said was: "We must push this to a lower decibel of public fixation. I don't think there's much of a learning curve to be achieved in this area of content."

I could go on quoting examples from various fields—every profession has its growing arsenal of jargon to throw dust in the eyes of the populace. But the list would be tedious. The point of raising it now is to serve notice that clutter is the enemy. Beware, then, of the long word that's no better than the short word: "assistance" (help), "numerous" (many), "facilitate" (ease), "individual" (man or woman), "remainder" (rest), "initial" (first), "implement" (do), "sufficient" (enough), "attempt" (try), "referred to as" (called) and hundreds more. Beware of all the slippery new fad words: paradigm and parameter, prioritize and potentialize. They are all weeds that will smother what you write. Don't dialogue with someone you can talk to. Don't interface with anybody.

Just as insidious are all the word clusters with which we explain how we propose to go about our explaining: "I might add," "It should be pointed out," "It is interesting to note." If you might add, add it. If it should be pointed out, point it out. If it is interesting to note, make it interesting; are we not all stupefied by what follows when someone says, "This will interest you"? Don't inflate what needs no inflating: "with the possible exception of" (except), "due to the fact that" (because), "he totally lacked the ability to" (he couldn't), "until such time as" (until), "for the purpose of" (for).

Is there any way to recognize clutter at a glance? Here's a device my students at Yale found helpful. I would put brackets around every component in a piece of writing that wasn't doing useful work. Often just one word got bracketed: the unnecessary preposition appended to a verb ("order up"), or the adverb that carries the same meaning as the verb ("smile happily"), or the adjective that states a known fact ("tall skyscraper"). Often my brackets surrounded the little qualifiers that weaken any sentence they inhabit ("a bit," "sort of"), or phrases like "in a sense," which don't mean anything. Sometimes my brackets surrounded an entire sentence—the one that essentially repeats what the previous sentence said, or that says something readers don't need

to know or can figure out for themselves. Most first drafts can be cut by 50 percent without losing any information or losing the author's voice.

My reason for bracketing the students' superfluous words, instead of crossing them out, was to avoid violating their sacred prose. I wanted to leave the sentence intact for them to analyze. I was saying, "I may be wrong, but I think this can be deleted and the meaning won't be affected. But *you* decide. Read the sentence without the bracketed material and see if it works." In the early weeks of the term I handed back papers that were festooned with brackets. Entire paragraphs were bracketed. But soon the students learned to put mental brackets around their own clutter, and by the end of the term their papers were almost clean. Today many of those students are professional writers, and they tell me, "I still see your brackets—they're following me through life."

You can develop the same eye. Look for the clutter in your writing and prune it ruthlessly. Be grateful for everything you can throw away. Reexamine each sentence you put on paper. Is every word doing new work? Can any thought be expressed with more economy? Is anything pompous or pretentious or faddish? Are you hanging on to something useless just because you think it's beautiful?

Simplify, simplify.

4

Style

So much for early warnings about the bloated monsters that lie in ambush for the writer trying to put together a clean English sentence.

"But," you may say, "if I eliminate everything you think is clutter and if I strip every sentence to its bare bones, will there be anything left of me?" The question is a fair one; simplicity carried to an extreme might seem to point to a style little more sophisticated than "Dick likes Jane" and "See Spot run."

I'll answer the question first on the level of carpentry. Then I'll get to the larger issue of who the writer is and how to preserve his or her identity.

Few people realize how badly they write. Nobody has shown them how much excess or murkiness has crept into their style and how it obstructs what they are trying to say. If you give me an eight-page article and I tell you to cut it to four pages, you'll howl and say it can't be done. Then you'll go home and do it, and it will be much better. After that comes the hard part: cutting it to three.

The point is that you have to strip your writing down before you can build it back up. You must know what the essential tools are and what job they were designed to do. Extending the metaphor of carpentry, it's first necessary to be able to saw wood neatly and to drive nails. Later you can bevel the edges or add elegant finials, if that's your taste. But you can never forget that you are practicing a craft that's based on certain principles. If the nails are weak, your house will collapse. If your verbs are weak and your syntax is rickety, your sentences will fall apart.

I'll admit that certain nonfiction writers, like Tom Wolfe and Norman Mailer, have built some remarkable houses. But these are writers who spent years learning their craft, and when at last they raised their fanciful turrets and hanging gardens, to the surprise of all of us who never dreamed of such ornamentation, they knew what they were doing. Nobody becomes Tom Wolfe overnight, not even Tom Wolfe.

First, then, learn to hammer the nails, and if what you build is sturdy and serviceable, take satisfaction in its plain strength.

But you will be impatient to find a "style"—to embellish the plain words so that readers will recognize you as someone special. You will reach for gaudy similes and tinselized adjectives, as if "style" were something you could buy at the style store and drape onto your words in bright decorator colors. (Decorator colors are the colors that decorators come in.) There is no style store; style is organic to the person doing the writing, as much a part of him as his hair, or, if he is bald, his lack of it. Trying to add style is like adding a toupee. At first glance the formerly bald man looks young and even handsome. But at second glance—and with a toupee there's always a second glance—he doesn't look quite right. The problem is not that he doesn't look well groomed; he does, and we can only admire the wigmaker's skill. The point is that he doesn't look like himself.

This is the problem of writers who set out deliberately to garnish their prose. You lose whatever it is that makes you unique.

The reader will notice if you are putting on airs. Readers want the person who is talking to them to sound genuine. Therefore a fundamental rule is: be yourself.

No rule, however, is harder to follow. It requires writers to do two things that by their metabolism are impossible. They must relax, and they must have confidence.

Telling a writer to relax is like telling a man to relax while being examined for a hernia, and as for confidence, see how stiffly he sits, glaring at the screen that awaits his words. See how often he gets up to look for something to eat or drink. A writer will do anything to avoid the act of writing. I can testify from my newspaper days that the number of trips to the water cooler per reporter-hour far exceeds the body's need for fluids.

What can be done to put the writer out of these miseries? Unfortunately, no cure has been found. I can only offer the consoling thought that you are not alone. Some days will go better than others. Some will go so badly that you'll despair of ever writing again. We have all had many of those days and will have many more.

Still, it would be nice to keep the bad days to a minimum, which brings me back to the problem of trying to relax.

Assume that you are the writer sitting down to write. You think your article must be of a certain length or it won't seem important. You think how august it will look in print. You think of all the people who will read it. You think that it must have the solid weight of authority. You think that its style must dazzle. No wonder you tighten; you are so busy thinking of your awesome responsibility to the finished article that you can't even start. Yet you vow to be worthy of the task, and, casting about for grand phrases that wouldn't occur to you if you weren't trying so hard to make an impression, you plunge in.

Paragraph 1 is a disaster—a tissue of generalities that seem to have come out of a machine. No person could have written them. Paragraph 2 isn't much better. But Paragraph 3 begins to have a

somewhat human quality, and by Paragraph 4 you begin to sound like yourself. You've started to relax. It's amazing how often an editor can throw away the first three or four paragraphs of an article, or even the first few pages, and start with the paragraph where the writer begins to sound like himself or herself. Not only are those first paragraphs impersonal and ornate; they don't say anything—they are a self-conscious attempt at a fancy prologue. What I'm always looking for as an editor is a sentence that says something like "I'll never forget the day when I . . ." I think, "Aha! A person!"

Writers are obviously at their most natural when they write in the first person. Writing is an intimate transaction between two people, conducted on paper, and it will go well to the extent that it retains its humanity. Therefore I urge people to write in the first person: to use "I" and "me" and "we" and "us." They put up a fight.

"Who am I to say what *I* think?" they ask. "Or what *I* feel?"

"Who are you *not* to say what you think?" I tell them. "There's only one you. Nobody else thinks or feels in exactly the same way."

"But nobody cares about my opinions," they say. "It would make me feel conspicuous."

"They'll care if you tell them something interesting," I say, "and tell them in words that come naturally."

Nevertheless, getting writers to use "I" is seldom easy. They think they must earn the right to reveal their emotions or their thoughts. Or that it's egotistical. Or that it's undignified—a fear that afflicts the academic world. Hence the professorial use of "one" ("One finds oneself not wholly in accord with Dr. Maltby's view of the human condition"), or of the impersonal "it is" ("It is to be hoped that Professor Felt's monograph will find the wider audience it most assuredly deserves"). I don't want to meet "one"—he's a boring guy. I want a professor with a passion for his subject to tell me why it fascinates *him*.

I realize that there are vast regions of writing where "I" isn't allowed. Newspapers don't want "I" in their news stories; many magazines don't want it in their articles; businesses and institutions don't want it in the reports they send so profusely into the American home; colleges don't want "I" in their term papers or dissertations, and English teachers discourage any first-person pronoun except the literary "we" ("We see in Melville's symbolic use of the white whale . . ."). Many of those prohibitions are valid; newspaper articles should consist of news, reported objectively. I also sympathize with teachers who don't want to give students an easy escape into opinion—"I think Hamlet was stupid"—before they have grappled with the discipline of assessing a work on its merits and on external sources. "I" can be a self-indulgence and a cop-out.

Still, we have become a society fearful of revealing who we are. The institutions that seek our support by sending us their brochures sound remarkably alike, though surely all of them—hospitals, schools, libraries, museums, zoos—were founded and are still sustained by men and women with different dreams and visions. Where are these people? It's hard to glimpse them among all the impersonal passive sentences that say "initiatives were undertaken" and "priorities have been identified."

Even when "I" isn't permitted, it's still possible to convey a sense of I-ness. The political columnist James Reston didn't use "I" in his columns; yet I had a good idea of what kind of person he was, and I could say the same of many other essayists and reporters. Good writers are visible just behind their words. If you aren't allowed to use "I," at least think "I" while you write, or write the first draft in the first person and then take the "I's" out. It will warm up your impersonal style.

Style is tied to the psyche, and writing has deep psychological roots. The reasons why we express ourselves as we do, or fail to express ourselves because of "writer's block," are partly buried in the subconscious mind. There are as many kinds of writer's block

as there are kinds of writers, and I have no intention of trying to untangle them. This is a short book, and my name isn't Sigmund Freud.

But I've also noticed a new reason for avoiding "I": Americans are unwilling to go out on a limb. A generation ago our leaders told us where they stood and what they believed. Today they perform strenuous verbal feats to escape that fate. Watch them wriggle through TV interviews without committing themselves. I remember President Ford assuring a group of visiting businessmen that his fiscal policies would work. He said: "We see nothing but increasingly brighter clouds every month." I took this to mean that the clouds were still fairly dark. Ford's sentence was just vague enough to say nothing and still sedate his constituents.

Later administrations brought no relief. Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, assessing a Polish crisis in 1984, said: "There's continuing ground for serious concern and the situation remains serious. The longer it remains serious, the more ground there is for serious concern." The first President Bush, questioned about his stand on assault rifles, said: "There are various groups that think you can ban certain kinds of guns. I am not in that mode. I am in the mode of being deeply concerned."

But my all-time champ is Elliot Richardson, who held four major cabinet positions in the 1970s. It's hard to know where to begin picking from his trove of equivocal statements, but consider this one: "And yet, on balance, affirmative action has, I think, been a qualified success." A 13-word sentence with five hedging words. I give it first prize as the most wishy-washy sentence in modern public discourse, though a rival would be his analysis of how to ease boredom among assembly-line workers: "And so, at last, I come to the one firm conviction that I mentioned at the beginning; it is that the subject is too new for final judgments."

That's a firm conviction? Leaders who bob and weave like ag-

ing boxers don't inspire confidence—or deserve it. The same thing is true of writers. Sell yourself, and your subject will exert its own appeal. Believe in your own identity and your own opinions. Writing is an act of ego, and you might as well admit it. Use its energy to keep yourself going.

5



The Audience

Soon after you confront the matter of preserving your identity, another question will occur to you: "Who am I writing for?"

It's a fundamental question, and it has a fundamental answer: You are writing for yourself. Don't try to visualize the great mass audience. There is no such audience—every reader is a different person. Don't try to guess what sort of thing editors want to publish or what you think the country is in a mood to read. Editors and readers don't know what they want to read until they read it. Besides, they're always looking for something new.

Don't worry about whether the reader will "get it" if you indulge a sudden impulse for humor. If it amuses you in the act of writing, put it in. (It can always be taken out, but only you can put it in.) You are writing primarily to please yourself, and if you go about it with enjoyment you will also entertain the readers who are worth writing for. If you lose the dullards back in the dust, you don't want them anyway.

This may seem to be a paradox. Earlier I warned that the reader is an impatient bird, perched on the thin edge of distract-

tion or sleep. Now I'm saying you must write for yourself and not be gnawed by worry over whether the reader is tagging along.

I'm talking about two different issues. One is craft, the other is attitude. The first is a question of mastering a precise skill. The second is a question of how you use that skill to express your personality.

In terms of craft, there's no excuse for losing readers through sloppy workmanship. If they doze off in the middle of your article because you have been careless about a technical detail, the fault is yours. But on the larger issue of whether the reader likes you, or likes what you are saying or how you are saying it, or agrees with it, or feels an affinity for your sense of humor or your vision of life, don't give him a moment's worry. You are who you are, he is who he is, and either you'll get along or you won't.

Perhaps this still seems like a paradox. How can you think carefully about not losing the reader and still be carefree about his opinion? I assure you that they are separate processes.

First, work hard to master the tools. Simplify, prune and strive for order. Think of this as a mechanical act, and soon your sentences will become cleaner. The act will never become as mechanical as, say, shaving or shampooing; you will always have to think about the various ways in which the tools can be used. But at least your sentences will be grounded in solid principles, and your chances of losing the reader will be smaller.

Think of the other as a creative act: the expressing of who you are. Relax and say what you want to say. And since style is who you are, you only need to be true to yourself to find it gradually emerging from under the accumulated clutter and debris, growing more distinctive every day. Perhaps the style won't solidify for years as *your* style, *your* voice. Just as it takes time to find yourself as a person, it takes time to find yourself as a stylist, and even then your style will change as you grow older.

But whatever your age, be yourself when you write. Many old men still write with the zest they had in their twenties or thirties;

obviously their ideas are still young. Other old writers ramble and repeat themselves; their style is the tip-off that they have turned into garrulous bores. Many college students write as if they were desiccated alumni 30 years out. Never say anything in writing that you wouldn't comfortably say in conversation. If you're not a person who says "indeed" or "moreover," or who calls someone an individual ("he's a fine individual"), *please* don't write it.

Let's look at a few writers to see the pleasure with which they put on paper their passions and their crotchets, not caring whether the reader shares them or not. The first excerpt is from "The Hen (An Appreciation)," written by E. B. White in 1944, at the height of World War II:

Chickens do not always enjoy an honorable position among city-bred people, although the egg, I notice, goes on and on. Right now the hen is in favor. The war has deified her and she is the darling of the home front, feted at conference tables, praised in every smoking car, her girlish ways and curious habits the topic of many an excited husbandryman to whom yesterday she was a stranger without honor or allure.

My own attachment to the hen dates from 1907, and I have been faithful to her in good times and bad. Ours has not always been an easy relationship to maintain. At first, as a boy in a carefully zoned suburb, I had neighbors and police to reckon with; my chickens had to be as closely guarded as an underground newspaper. Later, as a man in the country, I had my old friends in town to reckon with, most of whom regarded the hen as a comic prop straight out of vaudeville. . . . Their scorn only increased my devotion to the hen. I remained loyal, as a man would to a bride whom his family received with open ridicule. Now it is my turn to wear the smile, as I listen to the enthusiastic cackling of urbanites, who have suddenly taken up the hen socially and who fill the air with their newfound ecstasy and knowledge and the relative charms of the New Hampshire

Red and the Laced Wyandotte. You would think, from their nervous cries of wonder and praise, that the hen was hatched yesterday in the suburbs of New York, instead of in the remote past in the jungles of India.

To a man who keeps hens, all poultry lore is exciting and endlessly fascinating. Every spring I settle down with my farm journal and read, with the same glazed expression on my face, the age-old story of how to prepare a brooder house. . . .

There's a man writing about a subject I have absolutely no interest in. Yet I enjoy this piece thoroughly. I like the simple beauty of its style. I like the rhythms, the unexpected but refreshing words ("deified," "allure," "cackling"), the specific details like the Laced Wyandotte and the brooder house. But mainly what I like is that this is a man telling me unabashedly about a love affair with poultry that goes back to 1907. It's written with humanity and warmth, and after three paragraphs I know quite a lot about what sort of man this hen-lover is.

Or take a writer who is almost White's opposite in terms of style, who relishes the opulent word for its opulence and doesn't deify the simple sentence. Yet they are brothers in holding firm opinions and saying what they think. This is H. L. Mencken reporting on the notorious "Monkey Trial"—the trial of John Scopes, a young teacher who taught the theory of evolution in his Tennessee classroom—in the summer of 1925:

It was hot weather when they tried the infidel Scopes at Dayton, Tenn., but I went down there very willingly, for I was eager to see something of evangelical Christianity as a going concern. In the big cities of the Republic, despite the endless efforts of consecrated men, it is laid up with a wasting disease. The very Sunday-school superintendents, taking jazz from the stealthy radio, shake their fire-proof legs; their pupils, moving into adolescence, no longer respond to the proliferating

hormones by enlisting for missionary service in Africa, but resort to necking instead. Even in Dayton, I found, though the mob was up to do execution on Scopes, there was a strong smell of antinomianism. The nine churches of the village were all half empty on Sunday, and weeds choked their yards. Only two or three of the resident pastors managed to sustain themselves by their ghostly science; the rest had to take orders for mail-order pantaloons or work in the adjacent strawberry fields; one, I heard, was a barber. . . . Exactly twelve minutes after I reached the village I was taken in tow by a Christian man and introduced to the favorite tipple of the Cumberland Range; half corn liquor and half Coca-Cola. It seemed a dreadful dose to me, but I found that the Dayton illuminati got it down with gusto, rubbing their tummies and rolling their eyes. They were all hot for Genesis, but their faces were too florid to belong to teetotalers, and when a pretty girl came tripping down the main street, they reached for the places where their neckties should have been with all the amorous enterprise of movie stars. . . .

This is pure Mencken in its surging momentum and its irreverence. At almost any page where you open his books he is saying something sure to outrage the professed pieties of his countrymen. The sanctity in which Americans bathed their heroes, their churches and their edifying laws—especially Prohibition—was a well of hypocrisy for him that never dried up. Some of his heaviest ammunition he hurled at politicians and Presidents—his portrait of “The Archangel Woodrow” still scorches the pages—and as for Christian believers and clerical folk, they turn up unfailingly as mountebanks and boobs.

It may seem a miracle that Mencken could get away with such heresies in the 1920s, when hero worship was an American religion and the self-righteous wrath of the Bible Belt oozed from coast to coast. Not only did he get away with it; he was the most

revered and influential journalist of his generation. The impact he made on subsequent writers of nonfiction is beyond measuring, and even now his topical pieces seem as fresh as if they were written yesterday.

The secret of his popularity—aside from his pyrotechnical use of the American language—was that he was writing for himself and didn’t give a damn what the reader might think. It wasn’t necessary to share his prejudices to enjoy seeing them expressed with such mirthful abandon. Mencken was never timid or evasive; he didn’t kowtow to the reader or curry anyone’s favor. It takes courage to be such a writer, but it is out of such courage that revered and influential journalists are born.

Moving forward to our own time, here’s an excerpt from *How to Survive in Your Native Land*, a book by James Herndon describing his experiences as a teacher in a California junior high school. Of all the earnest books on education that have sprouted in America, Herndon’s is—for me—the one that best captures how it really is in the classroom. His style is not quite like anybody else’s, but his voice is true. Here’s how the book starts:

I might as well begin with Piston. Piston was, as a matter of description, a red-headed medium-sized chubby eighth-grader; his definitive characteristic was, however, stubbornness. Without going into a lot of detail, it became clear right away that what Piston didn’t want to do, Piston didn’t do; what Piston wanted to do, Piston did.

It really wasn’t much of a problem. Piston wanted mainly to paint, draw monsters, scratch designs on mimeograph blanks and print them up, write an occasional horror story—some kids referred to him as The Ghoul—and when he didn’t want to do any of those, he wanted to roam the halls and on occasion (we heard) investigate the girls’ bathrooms.

We had minor confrontations. Once I wanted everyone to sit down and listen to what I had to say—something about the

way they had been acting in the halls. I was letting them come and go freely and it was up to them (I planned to point out) not to raise hell so that I had to hear about it from other teachers. Sitting down was the issue—I was determined everyone was going to do it first, then I'd talk. Piston remained standing. I reordered. He paid no attention. I pointed out that I was talking to him. He indicated he heard me. I inquired then why in hell didn't he sit down. He said he didn't want to. I said I did want him to. He said that didn't matter to him. I said do it anyway. He said why? I said because I said so. He said he wouldn't. I said Look I want you to sit down and listen to what I'm going to say. He said he *was* listening. I'll listen but I won't sit down.

Well, that's the way it goes sometimes in schools. You as teacher become obsessed with an issue—I was the injured party, conferring, as usual, unheard-of freedoms, and here they were as usual taking advantage. It ain't pleasant coming in the teachers' room for coffee and having to hear somebody say that so-and-so and so-and-so from *your* class were out in the halls *without a pass* and *making faces* and *giving the finger* to kids in *my* class during the most *important* part of *my* lesson about *Egypt*—and you ought to be allowed your tendentious speech, and most everyone will allow it, sit down for it, but occasionally someone wises you up by refusing to submit where it isn't necessary. . . . How did any of us get into this? we ought to be asking ourselves.

Any writer who uses “ain’t” and “tendentious” in the same sentence, who quotes without using quotation marks, knows what he’s doing. This seemingly artless style, so full of art, is ideal for Herndon’s purpose. It avoids the pretentiousness that infects so much writing by people doing worthy work, and it allows for a rich vein of humor and common sense. Herndon sounds like a

good teacher and a man whose company I would enjoy. But ultimately he is writing for himself: an audience of one.

“Who am I writing for?” The question that begins this chapter has irked some readers. They want me to say “Whom am I writing for?” But I can’t bring myself to say it. It’s just not me.

Iraq's attempts to import krytons from CSI Technologies, Inc., San Marcos, Calif., made news in March 1990, when two Iraqis were arrested at London's Heathrow airport after an 18-month "sting" operation involving U.S. and British Customs. Several years before that, however, Iraq did manage to get weapons-quality capacitors from other U.S. concerns, and also produced its own capacitors. . . .

I rest my case—or, rather, I let *Spectrum* rest it for me. If a scientific subject of that complexity can be made that clear and robust, in good English, with only a few technical words, which are quickly explained (kryton) or can be quickly looked up (fissile), *any* subject can be made clear and robust by all you writers who think you're afraid of science and all you scientists who think you're afraid of writing.

16

Business Writing

Writing in Your Job

If you have to do any writing in your job, this chapter is for you. Just as in science writing, anxiety is a big part of the problem and humanity and clear thinking are a big part of the solution.

Although this is a book about writing, it's not just for writers. Its principles apply to everyone who is expected to do some writing as part of his or her daily employment. The memo, the business letter, the administrative report, the financial analysis, the marketing proposal, the note to the boss, the fax, the e-mail, the Post-it—all the pieces of paper that circulate through your office every day are forms of writing. Take them seriously. Countless careers rise or fall on the ability or the inability of employees to

state a set of facts, summarize a meeting or present an idea coherently.

Most people work for institutions: businesses, banks, insurance firms, law firms, government agencies, school systems, non-profit organizations and other entities. Many of those people are managers whose writing goes out to the public: the president addressing the stockholders, the banker explaining a change in procedure, the school principal writing a newsletter to parents. Whoever they are, they tend to be so afraid of writing that their sentences lack all humanity—and so do their institutions. It's hard to imagine that these are real places where real men and women come to work every morning.

But just because people work for an institution, they don't have to write like one. Institutions can be warmed up. Administrators can be turned into human beings. Information can be imparted clearly and without pomposity. You only have to remember that readers identify with people, not with abstractions like "profitability," or with Latinate nouns like "utilization" and "implementation," or with inert constructions in which nobody can be visualized doing something: "pre-feasibility studies are in the paperwork stage."

Nobody has made the point better than George Orwell in his translation into modern bureaucratic fuzz of this famous verse from Ecclesiastes:

I returned and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favor to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.

Orwell's version goes:

Objective consideration of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activi-

ties exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account.

First notice how the two passages look. The first one at the top invites us to read it. The words are short and have air around them; they convey the rhythms of human speech. The second one is clotted with long words. It tells us instantly that a ponderous mind is at work. We don't want to go anywhere with a mind that expresses itself in such suffocating language. We don't even start to read.

Also notice what the two passages say. Gone from the second one are the short words and vivid images of everyday life—the race and the battle, the bread and the riches—and in their place have waddled the long and flabby nouns of generalized meaning. Gone is any sense of what one person did ("I returned") or what he realized ("saw") about one of life's central mysteries: the capriciousness of fate.

Let me illustrate how this disease infects the writing that most people do in their jobs. I'll use school principals as my first example, not because they are the worst offenders (they aren't) but because I happen to have such an example. My points, however, are intended for all the men and women who work in all the organizations where language has lost its humanity and nobody knows what the people in charge are talking about.

My encounter with the principals began when I got a call from Ernest B. Fleishman, superintendent of schools in Greenwich, Connecticut. "We'd like you to come and 'dejargonize' us," he said. "We don't think we can teach students to write unless all of us at the top of the school system clean up our own writing." He said he would send me some typical materials that had originated within the system. His idea was for me to analyze the writing and then conduct a workshop.

What appealed to me was the willingness of Dr. Fleishman

and his colleagues to make themselves vulnerable; vulnerability has a strength of its own. We decided on a date, and soon a fat envelope arrived. It contained various internal memos and mimeographed newsletters that had been mailed to parents from the town's 16 elementary, junior and senior high schools.

The newsletters had a cheery and informal look. Obviously the system was making an effort to communicate warmly with its families. But even at first glance certain chilly phrases caught my eye ("prioritized evaluative procedures," "modified departmentalized schedule"), and one principal promised that his school would provide "enhanced positive learning environments." Just as obviously the system wasn't communicating as warmly as it thought it was.

I studied the principals' material and divided it into good and bad examples. On the appointed morning in Greenwich I found 40 principals and curriculum coordinators assembled and eager to learn. I told them I could only applaud them for submitting to a process that so threatened their identity. In the national clamor over why Johnny can't write, Dr. Fleishman was the first adult in my experience who admitted that youth has no monopoly on verbal sludge.

I told the principals that we want to think of the men and women who run our children's schools as people not unlike ourselves. We are suspicious of pretentiousness, of all the fad words that the social scientists have coined to avoid making themselves clear to ordinary mortals. I urged them to be natural. How we write and how we talk is how we define ourselves.

I asked them to listen to how they were defining themselves to the community. I had made copies of certain bad examples, changing the names of the schools and the principals. I explained that I would read some of the examples aloud. Later we would see if they could turn what they had written into plain English. This was my first example:

Dear Parent:

We have established a special phone communication system to provide additional opportunities for parent input. During this year we will give added emphasis to the goal of communication and utilize a variety of means to accomplish this goal. Your inputs, from the unique position as a parent, will help us to plan and implement an educational plan that meets the needs of your child. An open dialogue, feedback and sharing of information between parents and teachers will enable us to work with your child in the most effective manner.

DR. GEORGE B. JONES
Principal

That's the kind of communication I don't want to receive, unique though my parent inputs might be. I want to be told that the school is going to make it easier for me to telephone the teachers and that they hope I'll call often to discuss how my children are getting along. Instead the parent gets junk: "special phone communication system," "added emphasis to the goal of communication," "plan and implement an educational plan." As for "open dialogue, feedback and sharing of information," they are three ways of saying the same thing.

Dr. Jones is clearly a man who means well, and his plan is one we all want: a chance to pick up the phone and tell the principal what a great kid Johnny is despite that unfortunate incident in the playground last Tuesday. But Dr. Jones doesn't sound like a person I want to call. In fact, he doesn't sound like a person. His message could have been tapped out by a computer. He is squandering a rich resource: himself.

Another example I chose was a "Principal's Greeting" sent to parents at the start of the school year. It consisted of two paragraphs that were very different:

Fundamentally, Foster is a good school. Pupils who require help in certain subjects or study skills areas are receiving special attention. In the school year ahead we seek to provide enhanced positive learning environments. Children, and staff, must work in an atmosphere that is conducive to learning. Wide varieties of instructional materials are needed. Careful attention to individual abilities and learning styles is required. Cooperation between school and home is extremely important to the learning process. All of us should be aware of desired educational objectives for every child.

Keep informed about what is planned for our children this year and let us know about your own questions and about any special needs your child may have. I have met many of you in the first few weeks. Please continue to stop in to introduce yourself or to talk about Foster. I look forward to a very productive year for all of us.

DR. RAY B. DAWSON
Principal

In the second paragraph I'm being greeted by a person; in the first I'm hearing from an educator. I like the real Dr. Dawson of Paragraph 2. He talks in warm and comfortable phrases: "Keep informed," "let us know," "I have met," "Please continue," "I look forward."

By contrast, Educator Dawson of Paragraph 1 never uses "I" or even suggests a sense of "I." He falls back on the jargon of his profession, where he feels safe, not stopping to notice that he really isn't telling the parent anything. What are "study skills areas," and how do they differ from "subjects"? What are "enhanced positive learning environments," and how do they differ from "an atmosphere that is conducive to learning"? What are "wide varieties of instructional materials": pencils, textbooks, filmstrips? What exactly are "learning styles"? What "educational objectives" are "desired"?

The second paragraph, in short, is warm and personal; the other is pedantic and vague. That was a pattern I found repeatedly. Whenever the principals wrote to notify the parents of some human detail, they wrote with humanity:

It seems that traffic is beginning to pile up again in front of the school. If you can possibly do so, please come to the rear of the school for your child at the end of the day.

I would appreciate it if you would speak with your children about their behavior in the cafeteria. Many of you would be totally dismayed if you could observe the manners of your children while they are eating. Check occasionally to see if they owe money for lunch. Sometimes children are very slow in repaying.

But when the educators wrote to explain how they proposed to do their educating, they vanished without a trace:

In this document you will find the program goals and objectives that have been identified and prioritized. Evaluative procedures for the objectives were also established based on acceptable criteria.

Prior to the implementation of the above practice, students were given very little exposure to multiple choice questions. It is felt that the use of practice questions correlated to the unit that a student is presently studying has had an extremely positive effect as the test scores confirm.

After I had read various good and bad examples, the principals began to hear the difference between their true selves and their educator selves. The problem was how to close the gap. I recited my four articles of faith: clarity, simplicity, brevity and

humanity. I explained about using active verbs and avoiding "concept nouns." I told them not to use the special vocabulary of education as a crutch; almost any subject can be made accessible in good English.

These were all basic tenets, but the principals wrote them down as if they had never heard them before—and maybe they hadn't, or at least not for many years. Perhaps that's why bureaucratic prose becomes so turgid, whatever the bureaucracy. Once an administrator rises to a certain level, nobody ever points out to him again the beauty of a simple declarative sentence, or shows him how his writing has become swollen with pompous generalizations.

Finally our workshop got down to work. I distributed my copies and asked the principals to rewrite the more knotty sentences. It was a grim moment. They had met the enemy for the first time. They scribbled on their pads and scratched out what they had scribbled. Some didn't write anything. Some crumpled their paper. They began to look like writers. An awful silence hung over the room, broken only by the crossing out of sentences and the crumpling of paper. They began to sound like writers.

As the day went on, they slowly relaxed. They began to write in the first person and to use active verbs. For a while they still couldn't loose their grip on long words and vague nouns ("parent communication response"). But gradually their sentences became human. When I asked them to tackle "Evaluative procedures for the objectives were also established based on acceptable criteria," one of them wrote: "At the end of the year we will evaluate our progress." Another wrote: "We will see how well we have succeeded."

That's the kind of plain talk a parent wants. It's also what stockholders want from their corporation, what customers want from their bank, what the widow wants from the agency that's handling her social security. There is a deep yearning for human contact and a resentment of bombast. Recently I got a "Dear

Customer" letter from the company that supplies my computer needs. It began: "Effective March 30 we will be migrating our end user order entry and supplies referral processing to a new telemarketing center." I finally figured out that they had a new 800 number and that the end user was me. Any organization that won't take the trouble to be both clear and personal in its writing will lose friends, customers and money. Let me put it another way for business executives: a shortfall will be experienced in anticipated profitability.

Here's an example of how companies throw away their humanity with pretentious language. It's a "customer bulletin" distributed by a major corporation. The sole purpose of a customer bulletin is to give helpful information to a customer. This one begins: "Companies are increasingly turning to capacity planning techniques to determine when future processing loads will exceed processing capabilities." That sentence is no favor to the customer; it's congealed with Orwellian nouns like "capacity" and "capabilities" that convey no procedures that a customer can picture. What *are* capacity planning techniques? Whose capacity is being planned? By whom? The second sentence says: "Capacity planning adds objectivity to the decision-making process." More dead nouns. The third sentence says: "Management is given enhanced decision participation in key areas of information system resources."

The customer has to stop after every sentence and translate it. The bulletin might as well be in Hungarian. He starts with the first sentence—the one about capacity planning techniques. Translated, that means "It helps to know when you're giving your computer more than it can handle." The second sentence—"Capacity planning adds objectivity to the decision-making process"—means you should know the facts before you decide. The third sentence—the one about enhanced decision participation—means "The more you know about your system, the better it will work." It could also mean several other things.

But the customer isn't going to keep translating. Soon he's going to look for another company. He thinks, "If these guys are so smart, why can't they tell me what they do? Maybe they're *not* so smart." The bulletin goes on to say that "for future cost avoidance, productivity has been enhanced." That seems to mean the product will be free—all costs have been avoided. Next the bulletin assures the customer that "the system is delivered with functionality." That means it works. I would hope so.

Finally, at the end, we get a glimmer of humanity. The writer of the bulletin asks a satisfied customer why he chose this system. The man says he chose it because of the company's reputation for service. He says: "A computer is like a sophisticated pencil. You don't care how it works, but if it breaks you want someone there to fix it." Notice how refreshing that sentence is after all the garbage that preceded it: in its language (comfortable words), in its details that we can visualize (the pencil), and in its humanity. The writer has taken the coldness out of a technical process by relating it to an experience we're all familiar with: waiting for the repairman when something breaks. I'm reminded of a sign I saw in the New York subway that proves that even a huge municipal bureaucracy can talk to its constituents humanely: "If you ride the subway regularly you may have seen signs directing you to trains you've never heard of before. These are only new names for very familiar trains."

Still, plain talk will not be easily achieved in corporate America. Too much vanity is on the line. Managers at every level are prisoners of the notion that a simple style reflects a simple mind. Actually a simple style is the result of hard work and hard thinking; a muddled style reflects a muddled thinker or a person too arrogant, or too dumb, or too lazy to organize his thoughts. Remember that what you write is often the only chance you'll get to present yourself to someone whose business or money or good will you need. If what you write is ornate, or pompous, or fuzzy, that's how you'll be perceived. The reader has no other choice.

I learned about corporate America by venturing out into it, after Greenwich, to conduct workshops for some major corporations, which also asked to be dejargonized. "We don't even understand our own memos anymore," they told me. I worked with the men and women who write the vast amounts of material these companies generate for internal and external consumption. The internal material consists of house organs and newsletters whose purpose is to tell employees what's happening at their "facility" and to give them a sense of belonging. The external material includes the glossy magazines and annual reports that go to stockholders, the speeches delivered by executives, the releases sent to the press, and the consumer manuals that explain how the product works. I found almost all of it lacking in human juices and much of it impenetrable.

Typical of the sentences in the newsletters was this one:

Announced concurrently with the above enhancements were changes to the System Support Program, a program product which operates in conjunction with the NCP. Among the additional functional enhancements are dynamic reconfiguration and inter-systems communications.

There's no joy for the writer in such work, and certainly none for the reader. It's language out of *Star Trek*, and if I were an employee I wouldn't be cheered—or informed—by these efforts to raise my morale. I would stop reading them. I told the corporate writers they had to find the people behind the fine achievements being described. "Go to the engineer who conceived the new system," I said, "or to the designer who designed it, or to the technician who assembled it, and get them to tell you in their own words how the idea came to them, or how they put it together, or how it will be used by real people in the real world." The way to warm up any institution is to locate the missing "I." Remember: "I" is the most interesting element in any story.

The writers explained that they often did interview the engineer but couldn't get him to talk English. They showed me some typical quotes. The engineers spoke in an arcane language studed with acronyms ("Sub-system support is available only with VSAG or TNA"). I said that the writers had to keep going back to the engineer until he finally made himself intelligible. They said the engineer didn't *want* to be made intelligible: if he spoke too simply he would look like a jerk to his peers. I said that their responsibility was to the facts and to the reader, not to the vanity of the engineer. I urged them to believe in themselves as writers and not to relinquish control. They replied that this was easier said than done in hierarchical corporations, where approval of written reports is required at a succession of higher levels. I sensed an undercurrent of fear: do things the company way and don't risk your job trying to make the company human.

High executives were equally victimized by wanting to sound important. One corporation had a monthly newsletter to enable "management" to share its concerns with middle managers and lower employees. Prominent in every issue was a message of exhortation from the division vice-president, whom I'll call Thomas Bell. Judging by his monthly message, he was a pompous ass, saying nothing and saying it in inflated verbiage.

When I mentioned this, the writers said that Thomas Bell was actually a diffident man and a good executive. They pointed out that he doesn't write the message himself; it's written for him. I said that Mr. Bell was being done a disservice—that the writers should go to him every month (with a tape recorder, if necessary) and stay there until he talked about his concerns in the same language he would use when he got home and talked to Mrs. Bell.

What I realized was that most executives in America don't write what appears over their signature or what they say in their speeches. They have surrendered the qualities that make them unique. If they and their institutions seem cold, it's because they acquiesce in the process of being pumped up and dried out. Pre-

occupied with their high technology, they forget that some of the most powerful tools they possess—for good and for bad—are words.

If you work for an institution, whatever your job, whatever your level, be yourself when you write. You will stand out as a real person among the robots, and your example might even persuade Thomas Bell to write his own stuff.