Curriculum and Case Notes

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Editor

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EDITOR'S NOTE

John Boehrer

Instilling the habits of good writing in graduate students is surely one of the professor's most constant and testing tasks, and one of her most valuable contributions to the students' professional education. In this memo to his students, former Curriculum and Case Notes editor Michael O'Hare offers practical guidance you can share with yours. In doing so, he demonstrates that good writing—even about writing—is not only clear, concise, and correct, but that it can be witty, stimulating, and sometimes satiric, as well.

O'Hare uses this document in two ways, and hopes colleagues will benefit from doing the same, perhaps adding their own improvements. At the beginning of a course, he distributes it on paper or on a Web site (where it has the title "Rhetoric Note"), suggesting that it will help them write their papers later on. It's hard to read a didactic list of dos and (especially) don'ts, hence his concern for making the memo itself rewarding. When it's on a Web site (he uses Blackboard), he can track hits if not actual reading, and finds about 80% of students at least open it. He reports this practice greatly reduces the incidence of rhetorical shortfalls displayed in papers.

Then he critiques papers, especially paper drafts, by highlighting items with the marginal note "RN," meaning "this is explained in the Rhetoric Note." He also points out that attention to a student paper in draft form, before the end-of-semes-

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ter rush and when it can be used to improve the product, is worth a lot more to the student than nailing him for mistakes (or noting successes, which is always better anyway[1]) on a document that has already been submitted and graded.

RHETORIC: MEMO TO MY STUDENTS

Michael O'Hare

Almost everything public policy and management students and alumni write is, and will be, important enough to deserve precise, elegant rendering. This memo includes suggestions I find myself writing on many student papers; since I started to distribute this note, I write them a lot less.

I often mark up a few paragraphs to indicate opportunities to write better. The symbols I use are standard proofreading marks; if they aren't clear, you can find a table of them in any good dictionary, either under *proofreading* or with the front matter.

Some of the following describe plain errors, while others are linguistically arguable by the criteria of such scholars as Stephen Pinker (e.g., Pinker, 2000, 1999). If you take the latter view, and Pinker is a very smart guy, you should do so at least knowing that many of your readers take the former, and of course you won't be there to explain.

Avoiding errors, though, doesn't make good writing. Creating new, original, sparkling phrases and constructions (and avoiding errors) makes good writing. Why is the present essay so negative? I tried to construct it with positive examples, but a powerful asymmetry foiled me: errors tend to be common (clichés, for example) and made similarly by lots of people, while good writing is unique. So if I quote an example to emulate, you have to start by not emulating it exactly, which makes ambiguous what is being exemplified. In the end, I have to leave the fun and interesting part of better writing to a much larger enterprise that comprises reading good examples attentively, and much longer works on style and rhetoric—indeed, the reader's whole rhetorical life, both incoming and outgoing.

GENERAL PRACTICE

There is/there are

Don't use this weak construction to start a sentence, much less a paragraph, much less a paper. (I learned this from an excellent editor, when I did the last of these many years ago.) Change, for example,

> there are three reasons why people go to the museum.

to

[1] Schuster, J. Mark. (1998) Never use a red pen and other maxims for reflective teaching. Journal of Policy Analysis and Management, 17(2), 322–333.

> people go to the museum for three reasons.

It's shorter, it has a real verb and subject, and it's punchier. Better still:

> People go to the museum to see art, to have lunch, and to meet each other.

Passive construction

A crippled, unauthored style is easily fallen into by writers trying to be formal and careful. Sometimes a subconscious hope of evading responsibility for what's said is evidenced, sometimes an appearance of gravity is sought. In any case, a snooze rather than enlightenment is achieved. Hey! Wake up!

The passive style is not only stupefying but also commonly obscures meaning. "It is hoped that taxes will be increased": by whom—you, or the misguided people you are about to refute? The reader needs to know.

Instead of

> interviews were conducted with senior administrators…,

which could be reporting something done before you arrived, perhaps by the agency itself, say

> we interviewed senior administrators.

Save passives for the few times you really want to deflect attention from an irrelevant subject to the action or object, as in, "Nathan Hale was hanged as a spy but is remembered as a patriot." It's not important who hanged him, so hiding it in a passive is effective, and the parallel construction achieves punch even though you don't get to say it's we who so remember him.

Sex and gender

The political purpose that motivates *his/her, s/he,* and the like is widely supported, by yr. obdt. svt. as well. However, no amount of goodwill can make a singular antecedent take a plural pronoun ("Will Passenger Smith please make, uh, um, *their-self* known to the flight attendant?"), or change the fact that language is a spoken medium recorded by writing: because *his/her* is unsayable, it's not really language.

More important, writing like this so grates on the ears of some people that they will completely lose the thread of your thought, and may not give your work the attention you need in order to teach them something.[1]

[1] It may or may not be reassuring to know that gender in language and sex in life are not the same thing (any more than male and female bolt and nut threads are sexes), and only match imperfectly. In German, for example, the three genders are used only vaguely to indicate sex: *die Frau* = *the* woman (feminine), but *das Fraülein* = the young/unmarried woman (neuter). A German would say (literally translated), "the young lady put its bonnet on." In French, with no neuter, lots of things with no sex at all have gender: *la ville* (f) = city but *le village* (m) = village, etc. It is a politically awkward accident of English grammar, but no more than that, that while English actually has no gender, the sex-indeterminate singular pronouns for people are spelled and pronounced the same as the masculine. If you think you have problems doing the right thing, consider the poor right-thinking French parent who has no neuter *they*, and must say of her five daughters and one son, "…qu'ils me font fière!" (...they make me so proud!) because the only pronouns are *ils* (*they*, masculine or mixed) and *elles* (feminine) (Trask, 1999).

The wise will seek to make precise language an ally of right thinking, not its enemy. Why not use masculine and feminine pronouns and examples alternately, or subversively? Even better, use them to increase clarity, as in:

> A mayor may sometimes want her police commissioner to keep his name out of the news.

Clearly *and its treacherous kin*

The phrases *it is clear that, obviously, clearly, without doubt* are among the most treacherous in the language. We intend to emphasize and strengthen our argument with them, but they weaken and undermine, mostly because they almost always sneak in when our evidence is scarce or our argument is irrelevant, flawed, or missing. Most readers subconsciously recognize these as red flags saying, "Please read quickly past this thin spot, and don't notice that I haven't got a leg to stand on." Edit them out, and check to see if you don't need some real reinforcement, like a logical connection or some facts, to substitute for them.

Evaluative adjectives

> The agency's database is an incredible resource..

> Good morale is absolutely critical to quality.

These may be true, but adjectives and adverbs that simply record the writer's evaluation are mere assertions and—especially when hyperbolic or extreme—weaken prose. They are even worse when the hyperbole is paradoxical, like the *incredible* above: if it's incredible, why bother to make the reader believe it? Or when they are completely upended metaphorically: "I was literally destroyed by his remark" may be acceptable conversation, but can only be written by someone who doesn't know the difference between *figurative* and *literal*.

Make your case with facts and evidence ("…the database contains records of every transaction with the public for the last five years") and make the right point ("Quality is at risk if workers are so unhappy that they don't stay long enough to become really skilled.")

Wordiness

The prose analog of obesity is wordiness. It's bad for you (and your readers) and epidemic. If you have ever been diagnosed with this condition, you must get on top of it. Take a paragraph you've written and ruthlessly prune it of unnecessary modifiers and vacuous phrases like *the fact that*. Replace every adverb-adjective pair (*very disagreeable*) with the single adjective you really need (*loathsome*): lucky you, using the language with the largest lexicon on earth. Try this with verbs, too. Then give it to a friend who writes tightly and offer her a nice treat for every five additional words she can take out. With a little practice, you can get good at this important exercise on your own and start writing (or at least ending up with) lean, tough, effective prose.

A SMALL GALLERY OF PITFALLS

Affect/effect

Each of these words is both a verb and a noun. (*Affect* as a noun is accented on the first syllable.) Look them up and memorize them; misusing any of the four is a solecism.

As such

Do not use to mean "in view of/because of what I just said"; the phrase must be preceded by a nominal characterization of the subject of the sentence in which it appears. It's almost impossible to do this without the verb *to be*. Example of correct use: "*Cows are* large herbivorous ungulates. As such, *they* make bad apartment pets." You need the parts in italics, and they have to match. Example of incorrect use: "Cows make big puddly poops. As such, few people keep them in apartments." If the foregoing is confusing, you can stop using this cliché entirely and lose nothing of value.

Based on

This overused phrase requires a subject, something that is based on whatever you're identifying, though the verb *to be* can be implicit, and it cannot substitute for conjunctive phrases like *in view of* or *because of*. Examples of correct use (subject italicized): "*My position* is based on the analysis by Jones"; "Based on your data, *our projections* show no growth next year." Example of incorrect use "Based on your report, I think there will be no growth next year."

Comprise

The parts *constitute* the whole; the whole *comprises* its parts. Twenty-six letters do not comprise the alphabet; it's the other way around. Evil forces have slipped *constitute* into degenerate dictionaries as a synonym for *comprise* in the third or so definition; let this be anathema.

Considerable

Do not use to mean *much* or *many*. Use *much* or *many* for that, and save *considerable* to mean "needing or deserving consideration."

Counting up to two…and beyond!

Something is *unique* when there is exactly one of it. If there's even one more out there, it is *rare* or *unusual*. The only permissible modifiers for *unique* indicate likelihood: *possibly unique* is OK, but not *fairly/somewhat unique*. The jury has failed to convict *almost unique*, but it was a split decision and suspicion remains.

If you are having trouble deciding between *between* and *among*, or among *between, among, and amidst,* note the usage in this sentence: *between* accepts only two entities.

Between the cracks (in a floor) is a board, through which nothing can fall; the phrase is *fall through the cracks*. Between stools is a space; the phrase is *fall between stools* (and means something completely different).

Dash and hyphen

A hyphen (-) connects words, as in "a well-turned phrase," or parts of a word across lines. A dash (—) separates parts of a sentence with more oomph than a comma, as in "Overpunctuation—rarely encountered these days, admittedly—can undermine clarity." You can make an em-dash[2] in Word by typing two hyphens (what we used to use on a typewriter to indicate this) *with no space before or after*; when you complete the following word, Word turns them into a dash, or if you like the spaces, set up the change in Tools/AutoCorrect. If you type Ctrl with the number pad minus sign you get an en-dash–a little shorter, like these–which some prefer.

Different from/than

Different/differently than are wrong. *Than* requires an asymmetric relationship of inequality between elements, some sort of scalar measure of which one has more than the other; compare *distant from* and *taller than*. *Different* is a symmetrical relationship; neither element in the comparison is more different than the other, nor (necessarily) more of anything, so it takes *from* and not *than*. Unfortunately this rule precludes some common constructions and occasionally demands a fair amount of sentence crafting. Instead of "John approached this problem differently than I did" you have to say "John's approach was different from mine" or "John approached this differently from the way I did."

Due to

Use only after verb *to be*: "X is due to Y." Otherwise, use *owing to, because of,* etc. Don't ask why; just do it.

Etymology

English has *suffered* over *centuries* from *continued assaults* on its *glorious purity*, most *notably* the *humiliating incursion* of French in 1066, *subsequently* as *various colonials* who didn't know their *places* uploaded things like *boomerang*.[3] Right-thinking purity pedants bravely remind us at least not to mix Greek and Latin roots. Hence, for example, eschew the mongrel rolling dogs "automobile" and "bicycle." Use *ipsomobile* (or *autokino*) and *dicycle*, unless (i) you are the sort of unprincipled person who would put peanut butter (African) and jelly (European) on the same sandwich, or can tolerate viols (double bass) and violins (the other strings) in the same orchestra, and (ii) you don't care who knows it.

Geometry

Center on; if you use *around*, you need *gather* or *cluster*.

Home in on, meaning to adjust a trajectory or path (or by extension, attention) toward a specific location, is adapted from aviation slang. A pilot *homes in on* the

[2] An em is a length equal to the width of the letter M in any font.

[3] To see how dire the situation is, note that all the italicized words in this sentence except *boomerang* are Latin/French illegal immigrants that waded ashore from boats. When the immortal Tom Jobim wrote the English lyrics for his *Aguas de Março* he chose only words with Germanic (non-Latin) roots to contrast with the original Portuguese. Check it out; it's a (uh, um, damn… OK, I give up) *tour de force*.

radio beacon at his destination airport. *Hone* means to sharpen to a fine edge. The pilot may hone his skills so he can home in on landing beacons better, but the only explanation I can find for the absurd "hone in on" is the user's tin ear.

Speaking of aviation, a *zoom* is a specific maneuver in which an airplane exchanges kinetic for potential energy by turning rapidly upward and then leveling off, winding up higher but going slower. It's careless to use the word for a downward or just fast movement.

A spiral is a plane figure, the path traced by a moth toward a flame. "Spiraling costs" are going around in quasi-circles, either further and further from a point or closer to it, but not what is intended by the phrase, which is thus not only a tired cliché but deformed. The geometric shape wanted is a helix, so a noun verber could say "helixing costs," but you wouldn't. Try plain old *increasing* or *growing,* and allow "skyrocketing costs" to fly up to cliché heaven as well, or to fall (parabolically, of course) into what I was about to call the sea of oblivion, but won't.

Impact

An impact is a collision (not necessarily a fast one) between hard objects. Metaphoric use to mean merely *effect,* or as a verb, is careless jargon. Figure out what kind of effect you mean (increase, damage, improvement, etc.) and say it.

Jerry and Jury

Jury-rigged comes from nautical jargon and means improvised or responding to an emergency; it has no pejorative connotation: "We put the speaker on a jury-rigged podium made of chairs and a ping-pong tabletop…." *Jerry-built* means cheaply or incompetently made: "…but the jerry-built table was thin Masonite and he fell through it." It may have its origin in an old British pejorative for Germans (Jerries). "Jerry-rigged" is a jerry-built version of *jury-rigged*: sloppy, wrong, and completely ambiguous.

Myriad

…is both an adjective and a noun, all the way back to the original Greek. One of my favorite pedantries, trashed by facts a student drug in. Sigh….

None

I give up; Pinker is right. In "…none of these bills are ready to enact…" *none* means, and functions as, "not any" and doesn't demand a singular verb. Human civilization is not at risk here.

Proportion

Ten inches of sewing thread has "immense proportions" and small dimensions, the earth is the opposite. A proportion is a ratio, not a size.

Speech slopovers

Different conventions apply to conversation, formal speech, and written prose, and *vive la difference*. To see how different, read one of George V. Higgins' wonderful

novels, which are almost entirely in dialogue. Sloppy locutions barely tolerable in spoken discourse are poison in writing, and two that grate especially are: (i) *as far as* without the … *is concerned,* a miserable amputee; and (ii) *I could care less* to mean "[I care so little that] I couldn't care less." *I could care less* is probably a misbegotten hash of "I couldn't care less" and the sarcastic "I should care?"

Technolegacies

The physical business of writing was established during the last century on things called typewriters (your parents can tell you about them). Because these machines had severely limited typography, we used conventions that are now pointless. Among these are typing two hyphens for a dash (see Dash and Hyphen, above) and using the underscore to indicate italics. Underscored text is not part of any real typographic system: lose it. Use real italics for emphasis (sparingly), words used *qua* words, implicit definitions, foreign words and phrases, book titles, and the like. The conventional page layout for manuscripts is another of these fossils (see Typography, Packaging, and Convenience below).

Time

Biennial means every 2 years: it's not *biannual,* and not to be confused with *semiannual* (twice a year).

Which/that

This is certainly the "fork challenge" of English usage. Miss Manners (Judith Martin) let the cat out of the bag about forks (just use the fork farthest to the left) and I herewith reveal the secret easy version of the rule for *which/that*:

> Use neither if possible (the book I lent John); use that if it sounds OK (the book that explains this material); and use *which* if *that* sounds wrong (the book, which weighs three pounds, is called The Concise [sic] *Oxford Dictionary*).

Easier than the old stuff about restrictive and nonrestrictive clauses, and just as good. If your ear doesn't help you here, you have to do this the hard way until it becomes a habit.

PICTURES

Graphs, flow charts, and diagrams are powerful, clarifying, and underused. A paragraph that uses words like *after* or *then* more than three times probably deserves a flow chart. Computer software such as Visio, the rudimentary drawing tools in Word, Excel graphing tools, and the like make it easy to whip up a figure that can greatly clarify an argument. Unfortunately, these canned graphic programs also make a lot of decisions that may not be in your interest. Think about a picture as carefully as you think about prose, and make graphic choices to maximize its value.

For example, a conventional organizational diagram shows seniority as height on the page, reporting by a single kind of line, and a unit by a box with text in it. This doesn't begin to use the potential of the graphic language available. Why should the boxes follow the printed size of their labels; what about making their areas propor-

tional to budget or number of people in them? Different kinds of organizational units can be indicated with varying border line weights, rounded or square corners, fill color, and type size and weight of the labels. Many different kinds of line can connect boxes, and each can mean something. Can you use left-to-right position instructively?

In many cases, you will be better off to just take a pen or pencil and draw what you really mean on paper, and then scan it into your document, than to try to use automated graphics software.[4]

Photographs of places or people are quite rare in professional research but can give readers an invaluable sense of place, character, and context, and they are pretty easy to scan right into a file nowadays. Less useful in my view is the *Dilbert* or *Calvin and Hobbes* strip that often gets pasted in, and clip art of the type distributed on CD-ROMs (exception: formal, abstract printers' ornaments, borders, and initial caps can be used, with practice, to excellent effect in some kinds of document). The cartoon strips are usually used without permission, and this is a copyright violation, which is fancy language for stealing. Why would you want to present yourself to your reader as a thief?

Anyway, the professionalism of this work, and the artist's very different purpose when he created it, tends simultaneously to upstage and trivialize its context. The clip art is just cheap art with no particular punch or point and almost always degrades what it is attached to. On the other hand, if you can find a piece of really good graphics that's relevant and unusual (old engravings and etchings scan and copy especially nicely), you can get some real mileage from it. In a professional environment, why not budget for a real artist to draw something that will actually illuminate your ideas?

CITATIONS

Your reader needs citations to find your sources (and of course to be reassured that you have some!) and to evaluate your assertions. Your sources deserve your implicit thanks for their unknowing help. Citations are not optional scholarly decoration, and they should be used in a way that makes the reader's work easy.

Unless the author strongly affects the interpretation of the statement, leave the name and the title of the work out of your text—it's a distraction. E.g., omit the first three words from "Jones showed that California legislators serve an average of 3 terms" (but do say, "Even George W. Bush admits we need more regulation in this area").

Make it easy for the reader to find the source if she wants to, however, either by putting all the footnotes in one section at the end, or in full in every citation. The scientific style, with a full bibliography at the end where the reader knows to look for it and (Jones, 1968) in the text is also considerate.

The most inconvenient style is the law review model that provides a full citation to Jones' paper once, and then says "Jones, p. 47" for subsequent references. The reader certainly won't memorize all the sources as they come up, and if he wants to see which Jones article you're citing at your tenth reference to it, he has to search back one page at a time until the first one appears. In addition to wasting the reader's time, this completely destroys his concentration on your ideas.

[4] Good graphic practice is a large subject impossible to cover here, but Edward Tufte's series of books on the subject combine a good eye with an analytic perspective and lots of examples.

Worse, what happens if someone likes your paper so much that she copies your immortal section from pages 45 to 53 and sends it to her colleagues, but the first citation of Jones was on page 32? The same problem afflicts the *ibid/idem* style. If you don't give full citations on every page, it's at least more likely that a user will include your bibliography from the end than find and copy the earlier page that happens to have the first citation to Jones.

TYPOGRAPHY, PACKAGING, AND CONVENIENCE

The physical form of a document (or its on-screen format on a Web page, etc.) has a lot to do with its value to others. Good packaging of this type is entirely a matter of thinking carefully about someone else using your work and making it easy to do so. In this, our instincts to be considerate of others and to advance our own interests are almost perfectly aligned. Think, for example, about these steps in using your work (I will use a paper document as the example):

- Find it, amidst other documents on a desk

Are the title and author clearly on the front? Might you want to put a colored cover on it ("…where is that paper I want to read tonight; I remember it had a yellow cover…").

- Read it

…with one hand free to take notes, drink coffee, or operate a dictating machine? In a narrow airplane seat? The paper should be bound so it will lie flat by itself (a single staple in the corner is not bad, actually). Subheads, clear typography, and the like speak for themselves. If you want comments back from a reader, is there space to make them right on the pages, and did you submit another copy so she can give you feedback and still keep a clean copy to use?

- Copy the brilliant section on pages 5–9 for the senator and the assistant secretary.

This is the most success your work can have in a professional context. Is it easy to take apart and put back together (page numbers, in case a breeze comes by and for many other reasons)? Is your name, the title, and the draft date on every page in a header or footer? Is every figure captioned and labeled, with a source? Will your beautiful color graphs mean anything in black and white?

- Quote a critical passage.

Did you include a file on a diskette (labeled, of course) with the paper paper? Or will she have to type it in, or find a scanner that works?

Everyone can be a designer now, with cheap high-resolution printers and lots of fonts and formatting tools in word processors, but even if you don't want to make a hobby of this, you should get to know your word processor's basic tricks. Unprofessional or awkward pages look much more ragged and careless to us than they did when a page of typing in Courier with dabs of whiteout was the norm. For example, set the formatting for your subhead styles to "keep with next" so you don't get headings alone at the bottom of a page.

Avoid sans-serif typefaces like Arial/-Helvetica for extended text passages; recent research has established that they are significantly more difficult to read than traditional faces (Century Schoolbook, Palatino, Times Roman, etc.). The last of these, by the way, was designed specifically to get a lot of words in a narrow newspaper column and is less readable at a given size than many other body type faces. Word installs itself with CG Times, a version of Times Roman, as its standard body type, but you don't have to accept it.

This paragraph is in Century Schoolbook for comparison; the rest of *JPAM* is set in New Aster, which is similar to Times Roman.

Liberate yourself from the tyranny of the obsolete typewriter page format. An 8-1/2″ x 11″ page with margins of about an inch is good for typewriting (computer equivalent: Courier 12 pt.) but the column is too wide for optimal readability in "real" type, for which the rule of thumb is between seven and 11 words per line. It's easy to arrange columns, and I set this section in two columns, 10 pt. to illustrate the effect. Or you can use landscape pages in two columns that are also more legible, and allow more interesting page layouts, than the standard letter format.

Be sure to hyphenate right-justified material to avoid rivers and awkwardly spaced words.

GOING BEYOND THE CHECKLIST

It's not certain that general propositions ever led anyone to write better, but the following are pretty sound:

(1) *Being aware of more than one way to say something, and forcing yourself to consider alternatives, will lead you to better prose.* Many people get something on paper and more or less leave it alone, but going back over what you write and looking carefully, sentence by sentence, for other ways you could have phrased something will pay off wonderfully, and sooner than you think. At first this exercise is quite difficult for most people, but it becomes much easier and quickly leads to a salutary editorial/revising habit

(2) As one of my mid-career students, a nurse, put it: *Start where the patient is.* Write with a clear view of what your reader thinks on arriving at your work, and imagining a specific, individual person (within reason) is not a bad way to do this. Good writing is attentive to an active, participatory customer with a complete set of life experiences (different from yours) and prejudices. It's not about you, it's about the change you wish to cause inside her head, a head that does not arrive at your work empty.

This note has grown over the years by absorbing both explicit suggestions and inspiring examples from colleagues and students, including especially, but absolutely not limited to, Eugene Bardach, Mark A.R. Kleiman, Robert Leone, J. Mark Schuster, and Edith Stokey. Thanks to all of you; forgive me for not footnoting specifically, and in case I have omitted your favorite kvetch.

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