

## Ten Principles for Writing Clearly

1. Distinguish real grammatical rules from folklore.
2. Open your sentences with short, concrete subjects that name the characters in your story.
3. Open your sentences with information familiar to your reader.
4. Get to the main verb quickly:
  - Avoid long introductory phrases and clauses.
  - Avoid interrupting the subject-verb connection.
5. Use specific verbs to name their important actions.
6. Push new, complex units of information to the end of the sentence.
7. Begin sentences constituting a passage with consistent topic/subject.
8. Be concise:
  - Cut meaningless and repeated words with obvious implications.
  - Compress the meaning of a phrase into one or two words.
  - Prefer affirmative sentences to negative ones.
9. Control sprawl:
  - Don't tack more than one subordinate clause onto another.
  - Extend a sentence with resumptive, summative, and free modifiers.
  - Extend a sentence with coordinate structures, arranging elements from shorter to longer.
10. Above all, write to others as you would have others write to you.

## STYLE

### The Basics of Clarity and Grace

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Joseph M. Williams

*The University of Chicago*



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And again, those who contribute more to my life than I let them know: In the first edition, there were six. Now, there are eighteen: Michele, Oliver, and Eleanor; Ingrid and Chris; Patty, Dave, Matilde, and Owen; Megan, Phil, Lily, and Calvin; Christine, Joe, Katherine, and Nicholas. And at beginning and end still, Joan, whose patience and love continue to flow more generously than I deserve.

## Lesson

# 1

## Understanding Style

*Have something to say,  
and say it as clearly as you can.  
That is the only secret of style.  
—MATTHEW ARNOLD*

### CLARITY AND UNDERSTANDING

This book rests on two principles: it is good to write clearly, and anyone can. The first is self-evident, especially to those who read a lot of writing like this:

An understanding of the causal factors involved in excessive drinking by students could lead to their more effective treatment. But that second principle may seem optimistic to those who can't get close to this:

We could more effectively treat students who drink too much if we understood why they do.

Of course, writing fails for reasons more serious than unclear sentences. We bewilder readers when we can't organize complex ideas coherently. And they won't even read what we've written unless we motivate them to. But once we've formulated our claims, organized supporting reasons, grounded them on sound evidence, and motivated readers to read attentively, we must still express it all clearly, a difficult task for most writers and a daunting one for many.

J. M. W.

*South Haven, Michigan*

It is a problem that has afflicted generations of writers who have hidden their ideas not only from their readers, but sometimes even from themselves. When we read that kind of writing in government regulations, we call it *bureaucratese*; in legal documents, *legalese*; in academic writing that inflates small ideas into gassy abstractions, *academese*. Written deliberately or carelessly, it is a language of exclusion that a democracy cannot tolerate.

## THE IRRESISTIBLE LURE OF OBSCURITY

In the best-known essay on English style, "Politics and the English Language," George Orwell anatomized the turgid language of politicians, academics, and other such speakers and writers:

The keynote [of a pretentious style] is the elimination of simple verbs. Instead of being a single word, such as *break, stop, spoil, mend, kill*, a verb becomes a phrase, made up of a noun or adjective tacked on to some general-purposes verb such as *prove, serve, form, play, render*. In addition, the passive voice is wherever possible used in preference to the active, and noun constructions are used instead of gerunds (*by examination* of instead of *of by examining*).

But in abusing that style Orwell adopted it. He could have written more concisely:

Pretentious writers avoid simple verbs. Instead of using one word, such as *break, stop, kill*, they turn the verb into a noun or adjective, then tack onto it a general-purpose verb such as *prove, serve, form, play, render*. They use the passive voice everywhere instead of the active, and noun constructions instead of gerunds (*by examination* instead of *of by examining*).

If the best-known critic of a turgid style could not resist it, we shouldn't be surprised that politicians and academics embrace it. On the language of the social sciences:

A turgid and polysyllabic prose does seem to prevail in the social sciences. . . . Such a lack of ready intelligibility, I believe, usually has little or nothing to do with the complexity of thought. It has to

do almost entirely with certain confusions of the academic writer about his own status.

—C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*

On the language of medicine:

It now appears that obligatory obfuscation is a firm tradition within the medical profession. . . . [Medical writing] is a highly skilled, calculated attempt to confuse the reader. . . . A doctor feels he might get passed over for an assistant professorship because he wrote his papers too clearly—because he made his ideas seem too simple.

—Michael Crichton, *New England Journal of Medicine*

On the language of law:

In law journals, in speeches, in classrooms and in courtrooms, lawyers and judges are beginning to worry about how often they have been misunderstood, and they are discovering that sometimes they can't even understand each other.

—Tom Goldstein, *New York Times*

On the language of science:

There are times when the more the authors explain [about ape communication], the less we understand. Apes certainly seem capable of using language to communicate. Whether scientists are remains doubtful.

—Douglas Chadwick, *New York Times*

Most of us first confront that kind of writing in textbook sentences like this one:

Recognition of the fact that systems [of grammar] differ from one language to another can serve as the basis for serious consideration of the problems confronting translators of the great works of world literature originally written in a language other than English.

In about half as many words, that means,

When we recognize that languages have different grammars, we can consider the problems of those who translate great works of literature into English.

Generations of students have struggled with dense writing, many thinking they weren't smart enough to grasp a writer's deep ideas. Some have been right about that, but more could have blamed the writer's inability (or refusal) to write clearly. Many students, sad to say, give up; sadder still, others learn not only to read that style but write it, inflicting it in turn on their readers, thereby sustaining a 450-year-old tradition of unreadable writing.

## SOME PRIVATE CAUSES OF UNCLEAR WRITING

Unclear writing is a social problem, but it often has private causes. Michael Crichton mentioned one: some writers plump up their prose to impress those who think that complicated sentences indicate deep thinking. And in fact, when we want to hide the fact that we don't know what we're talking about, we typically throw up a tangle of abstract words in long, complicated sentences.

Others write graceless prose not deliberately but because they are seized by the idea that writing is good only when it is free of errors that only a grammarian can explain. They approach a blank page not as a space to explore new ideas, but as a minefield to cross gingerly. They creep from word to word, concerned less with their readers' understanding than with their own survival. I address that issue in Lesson 2.

Others write unclearly because they freeze up, especially when they are learning to think and write in a new academic or professional setting. The afflicted include not just undergraduates taking their first course in economics or psychology, but graduate students, businesspeople, doctors, lawyers—anyone writing on a new topic for unfamiliar and therefore intimidating readers.

As we struggle to master new ideas, most of us write worse than we do when we write about things that we understand better. If that sounds like you, take heart: you will write more

clearly when you more clearly understand what you are writing about.

But the biggest reason most of us write unclearly is that we don't know when we do, much less why. Our own writing seems clearer to us than it does to our readers, because we read into it what we want them to get out of it. And so instead of revising our writing to meet their needs, we send it off the moment it meets ours.

In all of this, of course, there is a great irony: we are likely to confuse others when we write about a subject that confuses us. But when we also read about a confusing subject written in a complex style, we too easily assume that its complexity signals deep thought, and so we try to imitate it, compounding our already-confused writing.

This book shows you how to avoid that trap, how to read your own writing as others will, and, when you should, how to improve it.

## ON WRITING AND REWRITING

\*A warning: If you think about these principles as *you draft*, you may never finish drafting anything. Most experienced writers get something down on paper or up on the screen as fast as they can. Then, as they rewrite that first draft into something clearer, they understand their ideas better. And when they understand their ideas better, they express them more clearly, and the more clearly they express them, the better they understand them . . . and so it goes, until they run out of energy, interest, or time.

For a fortunate few, that moment comes weeks, months, even years after they begin. (Over the last twenty-five years, I've wrestled this book through dozens of drafts, and there are parts I still can't get right.) For most of us, though, the deadline is closer to tomorrow morning. And so we have to settle for prose that is less than perfect, but as good as we can make it. (Perfection is the ideal, but an obstacle to done.)

So use what you find here not as rules to impose on every sentence as you draft it, but as principles to help you identify sentences you've already written that might give your readers a problem, and then to analyze, and, if necessary, revise those sentences quickly.

As important as clarity is, though, some occasions call for more:

Now the trumpet summons us again—not as a call to bear arms, though arms we need; not as a call to battle, though embattled we are; but a call to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle, year in and year out, "rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation," a struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease and war itself.

—John F. Kennedy, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961

Few of us are called upon to write a presidential address, but in even our modest prose, some of us take a private pleasure in writing a shapely sentence, regardless of whether anyone notices. If you enjoy not just writing a sentence but crafting it, you will find suggestions in Lesson 9. Writing is also a social act that might or might not serve the best interests of your readers, so in Lesson 10, I address some issues about the ethics of style.

Many years ago, H. L. Mencken wrote this:

With precious few exceptions, all the books on style in English are by writers quite unable to write. The subject, indeed, seems to exercise a special and dreadful fascination over school ma'ams, bucolic college professors, and other such pseudoliterates. . . . Their central aim, of course, is to reduce the whole thing to a series of simple rules—the overmastering passion of their melancholy order, at all times and everywhere.

Mencken was right: no one learns to write well by rule, especially those who cannot feel or think or see. But I know that many do see clearly, feel deeply, and think carefully but can't write sentences that make their thoughts, feelings, and visions clear to others. I also know that the more clearly we write, the more clearly we see and feel and think. Rules help no one do

that, but some principles can. The first is to put your readers ahead of yourself:

\* Essentially style resembles good manners. It comes of endeavouring to understand others, of thinking for them rather yourself—or thinking, that is, with the heart as well as the head.

—Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch

That passage now “hangs together” not for just one reason, but for three:

- Its topics consistently focus on physicians and diagnosis.
- Running through it are strings of words that focus on the themes of (1) tests, (2) mental conditions, and (3) a new problem.
- *And no less important, the opening sentence helps us notice those themes by emphasizing them at its end.*

This principle applies to sentences that introduce fairly long paragraphs (two or three-sentence introductory, transitional, and other kinds of paragraphs follow different patterns). It also applies to sentences that introduce passages of any length, even to a whole document.

**Here's the point:** We depend on concepts running through a passage to create a sense of its coherence. You help readers identify those concepts in two ways:

- Repeat some of them as topics of sentences, usually as subjects.
  - Repeat others as themes elsewhere in a passage, in nouns, verbs, and adjectives.
- Readers are more likely to notice those themes if you emphasize them at the end of the sentence that introduces that passage.

## Lesson

# 1

## Concision

*To a Snail: If “compression is the first grace of style,” you have it.*

—MARIANNE MOORE

## CLARITY, GRACE, AND CONCISION

You get close to clarity when you match your character and actions to your subjects and verbs, and closer yet when you get the right characters into topics and the right words under stress. But readers may still think your prose is a long way from graceful if it's anything like this:

In my personal opinion, it is necessary that we should not ignore the opportunity to think over each and every suggestion offered.

That writer matched characters with subjects, and actions with verbs, but in too many words: opinion is always personal, so we don't need *personal*, and since this statement is opinion, we don't need *in my opinion*. *Think over* and *not ignore* both mean *consider*. *Each and every* is redundant. A suggestion is by definition offered. In fewer words:

- ✓ We should consider each suggestion.

Though not elegant, that sentence at least has style's first grace—compression, or as we'll call it, *concision*. Concision, though, is only a start. You must still make your sentences shapely. In this lesson, I focus on concision; in the next, on shape.

## DIAGNOSIS AND REVISION

### Six Principles of Concision

When I edited that sentence about suggestions, I followed six principles:

1. Delete words that mean little or nothing.
2. Delete words that repeat the meaning of other words.
3. Delete words implied by other words.
4. Replace a phrase with a word.
5. Change negatives to affirmatives.
6. Delete useless adjectives and adverbs

Those principles are easy to state but hard to follow, because you have to inch your way through every sentence you write, cutting here, compressing there, and that's labor intensive. Those six principles, though, can guide you in that work.

**1. Delete Meaningless Words** Some words are verbal tics that we use as unconsciously as we clear our throats:

kind of	actually	particular	really	certain	various
virtually	individual	basically	generally	given	practically

Productivity **actually** depends on **certain** factors that **basically** involve psychology more than **any particular** technology.

✓ Productivity depends on psychology more than on technology.

**2. Delete Doubled Words** Early in the history of English, writers got into the habit pairing a French or Latin word with a native English one, because foreign words sounded more learned. Most paired words today are just redundant. Among the common ones:

full and complete	hope and trust	any and all
true and accurate	each and every	basic and fundamental
hope and desire	first and foremost	various and sundry

**3. Delete What Readers Can Infer** This redundancy is common but hard to identify, because it comes in so many forms.

**Redundant Modifiers** Often, the meaning of a word implies its modifier:

Do not try to predict those **future** events that will **completely revolutionize** society, because **past** **history** shows that it is the **final outcome** of minor events that **unexpectedly surprises** us more.

✓ Do not try to predict revolutionary events, because history shows that the outcome of minor events surprises us more.

Some common redundancies:

terrible tragedy	various different	free gift
basic fundamentals	future plans	each individual
final outcome	true facts	consensus of opinion

**Redundant Categories** Every word implies its general category, so you can usually cut a word that names it. Compare (the category is boldfaced):

During that **period of time**, the **membrane** area became **pink** in color and **shiny** in appearance.

✓ During that **period**, the **membrane** became **pink** and **shiny**.

In doing that, you may have to change an adjective into an adverb:

The holes must be aligned in an **accurate manner**.

✓ The holes must be aligned **accurately**.

Sometimes you change an adjective into a noun:

The county manages the **educational system** and **public recreational activities**.

✓ The county manages **education** and **public recreation**.

Here are some general nouns (boldfaced) often used redundantly:

large in <b>size</b>	round in <b>shape</b>	honest in <b>character</b>
unusual in <b>nature</b>	of a <b>strange type</b>	area of mathematics
of a <b>bright color</b>	at an <b>early time</b>	in a confused <b>state</b>

**General Implications** This kind of wordiness is even harder to spot, because it can be so diffuse:

Imagine someone trying to learn the rules for playing the game of chess.

*Learn implies trying, playing the game implies rules*, chess is a game. So more concisely,

Imagine learning the rules of chess.

**4. Replace a Phrase with a Word** This redundancy is especially difficult to fix, because you need a big vocabulary and the wit to use it. For example:

As you carefully read what you have written to improve wording and catch errors of spelling and punctuation, the thing to do before anything else is to see whether you can use sequences of subjects and verbs instead of the same ideas expressed in nouns.

That is,

✓ As you edit, first replace nominalizations with clauses.

I compressed five phrases into five words:

carefully read what you have written	→	edit
the thing to do before anything else	→	first
use X instead of Y	→	replace
nouns instead of verbs	→	nominalizations
sequences of subjects and verbs	→	clauses

I can offer no principle that tells you what phrases to replace with a word, much less give you the word. I can point out only that you often can, and that you should be alert for opportunities to do so—which is to say, try.

Here are some common phrases (**boldfaced**) to watch for. Note that some of them let you turn a nominalization into a verb (both italicized):

We must explain the **reason** for the *delay* in the meeting.

✓ We must explain **why** the meeting is *delayed*.

Despite the fact that the data were checked, errors occurred.

✓ Even though the data were checked, errors occurred.

In the event that you finish early, contact this office.

✓ If you finish early, contact this office.

In a situation where a class closes, you may petition to get in.

✓ When a class closes, you may petition to get in.

I want to say a few words concerning the matter of money.

✓ I want to say a few words about money.

There is a need for more careful inspection of all welds.

✓ You must inspect all welds more carefully.

We are in a position to make you an offer.

✓ We can make you an offer.

It is possible that nothing will come of this.

✓ Nothing may come of this.

Prior to the end of the training, apply for your license.

✓ Before training ends, apply for your license.

We have noted a decrease/increase in the number of errors.

✓ We have noted fewer/more errors.

**5. Change Negatives to Affirmatives** When you express an idea in a negative form, not only must you use an extra word: *same* → *not different*, but you also force readers to do a kind of algebraic calculation. These two sentences, for example, mean much the same thing, but the affirmative is more direct:

Do not write in the negative. → Write in the affirmative.

You can rewrite most negatives, some formulaically:

not careful	→	careless	not many	→	few
not the same	→	different	not often	→	rarely
not allow	→	prevent	not stop	→	continue
not notice	→	overlook	not include	→	omit

Do not translate a negative into an affirmative if you want to emphasize the negative. (Is that such a sentence? I could have written, *Keep a negative sentence when . . .*) Some verbs, prepositions, and conjunctions are implicitly negative:

- Verbs**      *preclude, prevent, lack, fail, doubt, reject, avoid, deny, refuse, exclude, contradict, prohibit, bar without, against, lacking, but for, except unless, except when*
- Prepositions**
- Conjunctions**

You can baffle readers if you combine *not* with these negative words. Compare these:

**Except** when you have **failed** to submit applications **without** documentation, benefits will **not be denied**.

- ✓ You will receive benefits only if you submit your documents.
- ✓ To receive benefits, submit your documents.

And you baffle readers completely when you combine explicitly and implicitly negative words with passives and nominalizations:

There should be **no** submission of payments **without** notification of this office, **unless** the payment does **not exceed** \$100.

Do not **submit** payments if you have not **notified** this office, unless you are **paying** less than \$100.

Now revise the negatives into affirmatives:

- ✓ If you pay more than \$100, notify this office first.

**6. Delete Adjectives and Adverbs** Many writers can't resist adding useless adjectives and adverbs. Try deleting every adjective and every adjective before a noun, then restore *only* those that readers need to understand the passage. In this passage, which ones should be restored?

At the heart of the argument culture is our habit of seeing issues and ideas as **absolute and inflexible** principles **entirely** at

war. To move beyond this **static and limiting** view, we can remember the Chinese approach to yin and yang. They are **two** principles, yes, but they are conceived not as **irreconcilable polar opposites** but as elements that coexist and should be brought into balance **as much as possible**. As sociolinguist Suzanne Wong Scollon notes, "Yin is always present in and changing into yang and vice versa." How can we translate this **static** idea into **dynamic** practice?

—Deborah Tannen, *The Argument Culture*

**Here's the point:** Readers think you write concisely when you use only enough words to say what you mean.

1. Delete words that mean little or nothing.
2. Delete words that repeat the meaning of other words.
3. Delete words implied by other words.
4. Replace a phrase with a word.
5. Change negatives to affirmatives.
6. Delete useless adjectives and adverbs.

## A PARTICULAR KIND OF REDUNDANCY: METADISCOURSE

Lesson 4 described metadiscourse as language that refers to the following:

- the writer's intentions: *to sum up, candidly, I believe*
  - directions to the reader: *note that, consider now, as you see*
  - the structure of the text: *first, second, finally, therefore, however*
- Everything you write needs metadiscourse, but too much buries your ideas:

The last point I would like to make is that in regard to men-women relationships, it is important to keep in mind that the greatest changes have occurred in how they work together.

Only nine of those thirty-four words address men-women relationships:

men-women relationships . . . greatest changes . . . how they work together.

The rest is metadiscourse:

The last point I would like to make is that in regard to . . . it is important to keep in mind that . . .

When we prune the metadiscourse, we tighten the sentence:

The greatest changes in men-women relationships have occurred in how they work together.

Now that we see what the sentence says, we can make it still more direct:

✓ Men and women have changed their relationships most in how they work together.

Some teachers and editors urge us to cut all metadiscourse, but everything we write needs some. You have to read with an eye to how good writers in your field use it, then do likewise.

There are, however, some types that you can usually cut.

#### **Metadiscourse That Attributes Your Ideas to a Source**

Don't announce that something has been *observed*, *noticed*, *noted*, and so on; just state the fact:

High divorce rates **have been observed** to occur in areas that **have been determined to have** low population density.

✓ High divorce rates occur in areas with low population density.

**Metadiscourse That Announces Your Topic** The boldface phrases tell your reader what your sentence is "about":

This section introduces another problem, that of noise pollution. The first thing to say about it is that noise pollution exists not only . . .

Readers catch the topic more easily if you reduce the metadiscourse:

✓ **Another** problem is noise pollution. **First**, it exists not only . . .

Two other constructions call attention to a topic, usually one already mentioned in the text:

In **regard to** a vigorous style, the most important feature is a short, concrete subject followed by a forceful verb.

**So far as** China's industrial development **is concerned**, it will take only a few years to equal that of Japan.

But you can usually work those topics into a subject:

✓ **The most important feature of a vigorous style** is a short, concrete subject followed by a forceful verb.

✓ **China** will take only a few years to equal Japan's industrial development.

Look hard at a sentence opening with a metadiscourse subject and verb that merely announce a topic:

In this essay, **I will discuss** the role of metaphor in style.

I write that kind of sentence when I have no idea where I am going, saying in effect, *I have this topic and hope I eventually think of something to say about it*. On the other hand, that kind of sentence in a professional journal promises to develop what it names.

**Metadiscourse That Hedges and Intensifies** Another kind of metadiscourse reflects the writer's certainty about what she is claiming. This kind of metadiscourse comes in two flavors, *hedges* and *intensifiers*. Hedges qualify your certainty; intensifiers increase it. Both can not only be redundant, but influence how readers judge your character, because they signal how well you balance caution and confidence.

**Hedges** These are common hedges:

**Adverbs** *usually, often, sometimes, almost, virtually, possibly, allegedly, arguably, perhaps, apparently, in some ways, to a certain extent, somewhat, in some/certain respects*

- Adjectives** *most, many, some, a certain number of  
may, might, can, could, seem, tend, appear,  
suggest, indicate*

Some readers think all hedging is not just redundant, but mealy-mouthed:

There **seems to be some** evidence to **suggest** that **certain** differences between Japanese and Western rhetoric **could** derive from historical influences **possibly** traceable to Japan's cultural isolation and Europe's history of cross-cultural contacts.

On the other hand, only a fool or someone with vast historical evidence would make a claim as confident as this:

This evidence **proves** that Japanese and Western rhetorics differ because of Japan's cultural isolation and Europe's history of cross-cultural contacts.

In most academic writing, we more often state claims closer to this (and look at that for my own hedging; compare the more assertive, *In academic writing, we state claims like this*):

✓ This evidence **suggests** that **aspects** of Japanese and Western rhetoric differ because of Japan's cultural isolation and Europe's history of cross-cultural contacts.

The verbs **suggest** and **indicate** let you state a claim about which you are less than 100 percent certain, but confident enough to propose:

✓ The evidence **indicates** that some of these questions remain unresolved.

✓ These data **suggest** that further studies are necessary.

Even confident scientists hedge. This next paragraph introduced the most significant breakthrough in the history of genetics, the discovery of the double helix of DNA. If anyone was entitled to be assertive, it was Crick and Watson. But they chose to be diffident (note, too, the first-person *we*; hedges are boldfaced):

We **wish to suggest** a [not **the**] structure for the salt of deoxyribose nucleic acid (D.N.A.) . . . A structure for nucleic acid has already been proposed by Pauling and Corey . . . In **our opinion**, this structure is unsatisfactory for two reasons: (1) **We believe** that the material which gives the X-ray diagrams is the salt, not the free acid . . . (2) **Some** of the van der Waals distances **appear** to be too small.

—J. D. Watson and F. H. C. Crick,  
“Molecular Structure of Nucleic Acids”

Without the hedges, their claim would be more concise but more aggressive. Compare this (I boldface my stronger words, but most of the more aggressive tone comes from the absence of hedges):

We ~~wish to suggest~~ state here **a** the structure for the salt of deoxyribose nucleic acid (D.N.A.) . . . A structure for nucleic acid has already been proposed by Pauling and Corey . . . ~~in our opinion~~ [This structure is unsatisfactory for two reasons: (1) **We believe** this [T]he material which gives the X-ray diagrams is the salt, not the free acid . . . (2) **Some** [T]he van der Waals distances ~~appear~~ **to be** are too small.

### Intensifiers

These are common intensifiers:

- Adverbs** *very, pretty, quite, rather, clearly, obviously,  
undoubtedly, certainly, of course, indeed,  
inevitably, invariably, always*
- Adjectives** *key, central, crucial, basic, fundamental, major,  
principal, essential*
- Verbs** *show, prove, establish, as you/we/everyone  
knows/can see, it is clear/obvious that*

The most common intensifier is the absence of a hedge. In this case, less is more. The first sentence below has no intensifiers at the blanks, but neither does it have any hedges, and so it seems like a strong claim:

Americans believe that the federal government is \_\_\_\_\_ intrusive and \_\_\_\_\_ authoritarian.

✓ Many Americans believe that the federal government is **often** intrusive and **increasingly** authoritarian.

Confident writers use intensifiers less often than they use hedges because they want to avoid sounding as assertive as this:

For a century now, all liberals have argued against any censorship of art, and every court has found their arguments so completely persuasive that not a person any longer remembers how they were countered. As a result, today, censorship is totally a thing of the past.

Some writers think that kind of aggressive style is persuasive. Quite the opposite: if you state a claim moderately, readers are more likely to consider it thoughtfully:

For about a century now, many liberals have argued against censorship of art, and most courts have found their arguments persuasive enough that few people may remember exactly how they were countered. As a result, today, censorship is virtually a thing of the past.

Some claim that a passage hedged that much is wordy and weak. Perhaps. But it does not come on like a bulldozer. It leaves room for a reasoned and equally moderate response.

**Here's the point:** You need some metadiscourse in everything you write, especially metadiscourse that guides readers through your text, words such as *first*, *second*, *therefore*, *on the other hand*, and so on. You also need some metadiscourse that hedges your certainty, words such as *perhaps*, *seems*, *could*, and so on. The risk is in using too many.

For the best writers, a concern with style always begins by thinking about readers. That's what motivated the founder of the Methodist church, John Wesley:

I write for those who judge of books, not by the quantity, but by the quality of them: who ask not how long, but how good they are? I spare both my readers' time and my own, by couching my sense in as few words as I can.

## Lesson

# 8

## Shape

*Sentences in their variety run from simplicity to complexity, a progression not necessarily reflected in length: a long sentence may be extremely simple in construction—indeed must be simple if it is to convey its sense easily.*

—SIR HERBERT READ

### UNDERSTANDING THE SHAPE OF SENTENCES

If you can write clear and concise sentences, you have achieved a good deal, and more if you can assemble them into coherent passages. But if you couldn't write a clear sentence longer than twenty words or so, you'd be like a composer who could write only jingles. Some advise against long sentences, but you cannot communicate every complex idea in a short one; you have to know how to write a sentence that is both long and clear. Consider, for example, this sentence:

In addition to differences in religion that have for centuries plagued Sunnis and Shiites, explanations of the causes of their distrust must include all of the other social, economic, and cultural conflicts that have plagued them that are rooted in a troubled history that extends 1,300 years into the past.

Even if that idea needed all those words (it doesn't), they could be arranged into a more shapely sentence.