

Causes

The improvement of understanding is for two ends: first our own increase of knowledge; secondly to enable us to deliver that knowledge to others.

John Locke

*Everything that can be thought at all can be thought clearly.
Everything that can be said can be said clearly.*

Ludwig Wittgenstein

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

Matthew Arnold

The great enemy of clear language is insincerity . . .

George Orwell

In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing.

Oscar Wilde

Three Objectives

This is a book about writing clearly. I wish it could be short and simple like some others more widely known, but I want to do more than just urge writers to “Omit Needless Words” or “Be clear.” Telling me to “Be clear” is like telling me to “Hit the ball squarely.” I know that. What I don’t know is how to do it. To explain how to write clearly, I have to go beyond platitudes.

But I want to do more than just help you write clearly. I also want you to understand this matter—to understand why some prose seems clear, other prose not, and why two readers might disagree about it; why a passive verb can be a better choice than an active verb; why so many truisms about style are either incomplete or wrong. More important, I want that understanding to consist not of anecdotal bits and pieces, but of a coherent system of principles more useful than “Write short sentences.”

Now there is a lively debate about whether action and understanding have anything to do with each other, whether those who want to write clearly ought to study principles of language at all. You may write well, yet can’t distinguish a subject from a verb, or you may understand everything from retained objects to the subjunctive pluperfect progressive, and still write badly. From this apparent contradiction many have concluded that we don’t have to understand principles of grammar to write well. Writing well, they believe, has to do with being sincere, or writing how they speak, or finding their authentic voices, or just being born with the knack. Others devoutly believe that they learned to write well only because they studied Latin and diagrammed sentences beyond number.

The truth will disconcert those of both persuasions. Nostalgic anecdotes aside, the best evidence suggests that students who

spend a lot of time studying grammar improve their writing not one bit. In fact, they seem to get worse. On the other hand, there is good evidence that mature writers can change the way they write once they grasp a principled way of thinking about language, but one that is rather different from the kind of grammar some of us may dimly remember mastering—or being mastered by. The principles of style offered here will not describe sentences in a vocabulary that fifteenth-century students of Latin would still recognize, but in terms that help you understand how readers of modern English read; in terms that will help us understand why readers might describe the first sentence below as turgid and confusing, the second as clearer, more readable. But most important, in terms that also make it clear how to revise one into the other.

- 1a. The Committee proposal would provide for biogenetic industry certification of the safety to human health for new substances in requests for exemption from Federal rules.
- 1b. The Committee proposes that when the biogenetic industry requests the Agency to exempt new substances from Federal rules, the industry will certify that the substances are safe.

So if our first objective is doing, our second objective is understanding.

But however well a writer understands principles, it is not enough for those who also want to articulate that understanding to others, who want to explain why most readers prefer the style of (1b), and if necessary to persuade (or coerce) those others into writing in the same style. Whatever else a well-educated person can do, that person should be able to write clearly and to understand what it means to do that. But we judge as liberally educated the person who can articulate that understanding in ways that go beyond the ability to define subjects and verbs and explain their disagreements, certainly beyond self-evident truisms like “Be specific.” This book provides a vocabulary that will let you explain these matters in ways that go beyond impressionism and banality.

A Very Short History of Bad Writing

Now, anyone familiar with the history of English prose might wonder whether anything we do here will substantially improve

its future. Since the earliest times, many writers have graced us with much good writing. But others have afflicted us with much that is bad. Some of the reasons for the bad writing are rooted in history, others in personal experience.

In the last seven hundred years, English writers have responded to three influences on our language. Two are historical, one is cultural. These influences have helped make English a language flexible and precise enough to use with subjects ranging from the most concrete and mundane to the most abstract and elevated. But ironically, the very influences that have created this flexibility and precision have also allowed—indeed encouraged—many writers to produce prose that is quite bad. One of the two historical influences was the Norman Conquest in 1066, an event that led us to acquire a vocabulary qualitatively different from the Anglo-Saxon wordhord we’ve inherited from Bede, Alfred, and Aelfric. The second influence occurred in the sixteenth century, when Renaissance scholars struggling to translate Greek and Latin texts found themselves working at a lexical disadvantage.

After the Norman Conquest, those responsible for institutional, scholarly, and religious affairs wrote in Latin and later Norman French. In the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, increasing numbers of writers began using English again for matters of state, commercial, and social life. But since the native vocabulary for these matters had long since disappeared (or had never come into being), English writers were able to write about them in the only vocabulary available, in words borrowed from Latin, but particularly from French. By the sixteenth century, French and Latin had disappeared from most institutional affairs, but writers were still using their words to refer to institutional concepts. As a result, the foundations were laid for a two-tiered vocabulary: one consisting of words common to daily life, the other of words having more special application.

Conspiring with that influence on our vocabulary was a second one, the Renaissance. In the sixteenth century, as England was increasingly influenced by classical writers, scholars began translating into English large numbers of Greek and Latin texts. But as one early writer put it “there ys many wordes in Latyn that we have no propre Englysh accordyng thereto,” and so translators simply “Englished” foreign words, thereby providing us with another set of borrowings, many from Greek but most

from Latin, and almost all of them more formal than either our native English vocabulary or the Anglicized words from French.

As a consequence of these two influences, our vocabulary is the most varied of any modern European language. Of the thousand words we use most frequently, over 80 percent descend from Anglo-Saxon. But most of them are the single syllable labor-intensive words: the articles *the, this, that, a*, etc.; most of the prepositions and pronouns: *in, on, of, by, at, with, you, we, it, I*, etc.; the most common verbs and most of the common nouns: *be, have, do, make, will, go, see, hand, head, mother, father, sun, man, woman*, etc. (Many words borrowed from French have lost any sense of formality: *people, (be)cause, use, just, really, very, sort, different, number, place*.)

When we refer to specific matters of our intellectual and artistic life, however, we use almost three times as many French and Latin content words as native English. Compare how I might have been obliged to write the paragraph before last, had on Hastings Field in 1066 a Norman arrow not mortally wounded Harold, the Anglo-Saxon King:

↙

Togetherworking with the outcome of the Norman Greatwin was the Newbirth. In the sixteenth yearhundred, as England was more shaped by the longread writers, the learned began turning into English many of the books of Athens and Rome, but as one early writer put it, “There ys many wordes in Latyn that we have no right Englysh withgoing thereto.” So those who tongueturned works written in Latin and French into English only “Englished” outland words, thereby giving us yet more borrowed words, many from Greek but most from Latin, and almost all of them rather higher than the hereborn words or the words Englished from French.

Of course, if Harold had won the Battle of Hastings I wouldn’t have written that at all, but he didn’t, and as a result we now have a lexical resource that has endowed us with a stylistic flexibility largely unavailable to other modern languages. To express the precise shade of meaning and connotation, we can choose from among words borrowed from French—*bravery, mettle, valor, endurance, courage*; from Latin—*tenacity, fortitude*, and from words inherited from native English—*fearlessness, guts*.

But this flexibility has come with a price. Since the language of political, cultural, scientific, and economic affairs is based largely

on Romance words, those of us who aspire to participate have had to learn a vocabulary separate from that which we learned through the first five or ten years of our lives. Just as we have to spend a good deal of time in school learning the idiosyncrasies of our spelling system and of “good” grammar, so must we spend time learning words not rooted in our daily experience. Five-year-olds know the meaning of *between, over, across, and before*, but fifteen-year-olds have to learn the meaning of *intra-, supra-, trans-, and ante-*. To those of us already in an educated community, that vocabulary seems natural, not the least difficult. But if it were as natural to acquire as we think, publishers would not profit from selling books and tapes promising us Word Power in Thirty Days.

And of course once we learn these words, who among us can resist using them when we want to sound learned and authoritative? Writers began to surrender to that temptation well before the middle of the sixteenth century, but it was about then that many English writers became so enamored with an erudite vocabulary that they began deliberately to lard their prose with exotic Latinisms, a kind of writing that came to be known as the “inkhorn” style and was mocked as pretentious and incomprehensible by those critics for whom English had become a special passion. This impulse toward an elevated diction has proved quite durable; it accounts for the difference today between “The adolescents who had effectuated forcible entry into the domicile were apprehended” and “We caught the kids who broke into the house.”

But while this Romance component of our vocabulary has contributed to one kind of stylistic inflation, it cannot alone account for a deeper problem we have with bad modern prose. We cannot point to the historical influence of borrowed words to explain why anyone would write (1a) rather than (1b) because (1b) has *more* borrowed words:

- 1a. The Committee proposal would provide for biogenetic industry certification of the safety to human health for new substances in requests for exemption from Federal rules.
- 1b. The Committee proposes that when the biogenetic industry requests the Agency to exempt new substances from Federal rules, the industry will certify that the substances are safe.

In addition to the influence of the Norman Conquest and the Renaissance, there has been another, more subtle historical influence on our prose style, an influence that some linguists have speculated to be a kind of stylistic destiny for literate societies. As societies become intellectually mature, it has been claimed, their writers seem increasingly to replace specific verbs with abstract nouns. It allegedly happened in Sanskrit prose, in the prose of many Western European languages, and it seems to be happening in modern English. What centrally distinguishes sentence (1a) from (1b) is not the historical source of their vocabulary, but the abstract nouns in (1a) in contrast to the shorter and more specific verbs and adjective of (1b):

- 1a. The Committee proposal would provide for biogenetic industry certification of the safety to human health for new substances requested for exemption from Federal rules.
- 1b. The Committee proposes that when the biogenetic industry requests the Agency to exempt new substances from Federal rules, the industry will certify that the substances are safe.

These nouns alone make a style more abstract, but they encourage more abstraction: once a writer expresses actions in nouns, she can then eliminate whatever (usually concrete) agents perform those actions along with those whom the actions affect:

The proposal would provide for certification of the safety of new substances in requests for exemption.

These abstract Romance nouns result in a prose that we variously call gummy, turgid, obtuse, prolix, complex, or unreadable. An early example:

If use and custom, having the help of so long time and continuance wherein to [re]fine our tongue, of so great learning and experience which furnish matter for the [re]fining, of so good wits and judgments which can tell how to [re]fine, have griped at nothing in all that time, with all that cunning, by all those wits which they will not let go but hold for most certain in the right of our writing, that then our tongue ha[s] no certainty to trust to, but write all at random. But the antecedent, in my opinion, is altogether unpossible, wherefore the consequent is a great deal more th[a]n probable, which is that our tongue ha[s] in her own possession and writing very good evidence to prove her own right writing; which, though no man as yet by any public writing of his seem[s] to have seen, yet the tongue itself is ready to show them to any whosoever

which is able to read them and withal to judge what evidence is right in the right of writing.

—Richard Mulcaster, *The First Part of the Elementary*, 1582

Other sixteenth-century writers were able to write prose not wholly free of abstraction, but not burdened by it either, a prose that we would judge today to be clear, direct, and still readable (I have changed only the spelling and punctuation):

Among all other lessons this should first be learned, that we never affect any strange inkhorn terms, but to speak as is commonly received, neither seeking to be over-fine, nor yet living overcareless, suiting our speech as most men do, and ordering our wits as the fewest have done. Some seek so far for outlandish English that they forget altogether their mother's language. And I dare swear this, if some of their mothers were alive, they [would] not [be] able to tell what they say. And yet these fine English clerks will say they speak in their mother tongue, if a man should charge them for counterfeiting the King's English.

—Thomas Wilson, *Art of Rhetoric*, 1553

By the middle of the seventeenth century, this impulse toward “over-fine” prose had infected scholarly writing. Shortly after the Royal Society was established in 1660, Thomas Spratt, one of its historians, complained that scientific writing suffered from a “vicious abundance of phrase, [a] trick of metaphors, [a] volatility of tongue which makes so great a noise in the world.” Better, he said, to

reject all the amplifications, digressions, and swellings of style: to return back to the primitive purity, and shortness, when men deliver'd so many things, almost in an equal number of words . . . [to prefer] the language of Artizans, Countrymen, and Merchants, before that, of Wits, or Scholars.

—From *The History of the Royal Society*

When the New World was settled, American writers had a chance to create such a prose style, one lean and sinewy fit for a new society. But we did not. Early in the nineteenth century, James Fenimore Cooper complained that “the common faults of American language are an ambition of effect, a want of simplicity, and a turgid abuse of terms”:

The love of turgid expressions is gaining ground, and ought to be corrected. One of the most certain evidences of a man of high

breeding, is his simplicity of speech: a simplicity that is equally removed from vulgarity and exaggeration. . . . He does not say, in speaking of a dance, that “the attire of the ladies was exceedingly elegant and peculiarly becoming at the late assembly,” but that “the women were well dressed at the last ball”; nor is he apt to remark, “that the Rev. Mr G—— gave us an elegant and searching discourse the past sabbath,” but that “the parson preached a good sermon last sunday.”

The utterance of a gentleman ought to be deliberate and clear, without being measured. . . . Simplicity should be the firm aim, after one is removed from vulgarity, and let the finer shades of accomplishment be acquired as they can be attained. In no case, however, can one who aims at turgid language, exaggerated sentiments, or pedantic utterances, lay claim to be either a man or a woman of the world.

—James Fenimore Cooper, *The American Democrat*, 1838

In these sentiments, Cooper reflects a long tradition about what constitutes genteel behavior in the English-speaking world. For five hundred years, writers on courtesy have urged aspiring gentle people to avoid speech that is loquacious, flamboyant, or pompous, to keep their language plain, modest, and unassuming. In *The American Democrat*, Cooper was attempting to define what constituted an American gentleman in a democratic world.

But in Cooper’s own style we can see the inexorable power of that ambition of effect, want of simplicity, and turgid abuse of terms, for he demonstrated—unconsciously, it would seem—the very style he condemned. Had he been aware of his own language, he would have avoided those abstract, mostly Romance nouns—*love, expressions, simplicity, speech, vulgarity, exaggeration, utterance, simplicity, aim, accomplishment, claim* for something closer to this:

We should discourage writers who love turgid language. A well-bred man speaks simply, in a way that is neither vulgar nor exaggerated. . . . He does not say of a dance that “the attire of the ladies was exceedingly elegant and peculiarly becoming at the late assembly,” but that “the women were well-dressed at the last ball”; nor does he remark that “the Rev. Mr G—— gave us an elegant and searching discourse the past Sabbath,” but that “the parson preached a good sermon last Sunday.”

A gentleman does not measure his words, but speaks them deliberately and clearly. After he rids [his language] of vulgarity, he should aim at simplicity, and then, as he can, acquire the finer

shades of accomplishment. No one can claim to be a man or woman of the world who deliberately speaks in turgid or pedantic language or who exaggerates sentiments.

In fact, after abusing the pretentious style of “The attire of the ladies was elegant,” he echoed it in his own next sentence: “The utterance of a gentleman ought to be deliberate. . . .”

About a half century later, Mark Twain demonstrated the style that we now like to identify as American—clear, straight, and plainspoken:

There have been daring people in the world who claimed that Cooper could write English, but they are all dead now—all dead but Lounsbury [a scholar who praised Cooper’s novels]. I don’t remember that Lounsbury makes the claim in so many words, still he makes it, for he says that *Deerslayer* is a “pure work of art.” Pure, in that connection, means faultless—faultless in all details—and language is a detail. If Mr. Lounsbury writes himself—but it is plain that he didn’t; and so it is likely that he imagines until this day that Cooper’s [style] is as clean and compact as his own. Now I feel sure, deep down in my heart, that Cooper wrote about the poorest English that exists in our language.³

Unfortunately, twentieth-century writers have not all followed Twain’s example.

In probably the best-known essay on English style in the twentieth century, “Politics and the English Language,” George Orwell described turgid language when it is used by politicians, bureaucrats, and other chronic dodgers of responsibility. Orwell’s advice is sound enough:

The keynote [of such a 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 *by examining*). The range of verbs is further cut down by means of the *-ize* and *de*-formations, and the banal statements are given an appearance of profundity by means of the *not un*-formation.

But in the very act of anatomizing the turgid style, Orwell demonstrated it in his own. Had Orwell himself avoided making a verb a phrase, had he avoided the passive voice, had he avoided

noun constructions, he would have written something closer to this (I begin with a phrase Orwell used a few lines earlier):

When writers dodge the work of constructing prose, they eliminate simple verbs. Instead of using a single word, such as *break*, *stop*, *spoil*, *mend*, *kill*, they turn the verb into a phrase made up of a noun or adjective; then they tack it on to some general-purposes verb such as *prove*, *serve*, *form*, *play*, *render*. Wherever possible, such writers use the passive voice instead of the active and noun constructions instead of gerunds (*by examination* instead of *by examining*). They cut down the range of verbs further when they use *-ize* and *de-*formations and try to make banal statements seem profound by the *not un-*formation.

If Orwell could not avoid this kind of passive, abstract style in his own writing (and I don't believe that he was trying to be ironic), we ought not be surprised that the prose style of our academic, scholarly, and professional writers is often worse. On the language of social scientists:

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 the 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 cannot even understand each other.

—Tom Goldstein, *New York Times*

In short, bad writing has been with us for a long time, and its roots run wide in our culture and deep into its history.

Some Private Causes of Bad Writing

These historical influences alone would challenge those of us who want to write well, but many of us also have to deal with problems of a more personal sort. Michael Crichton cited one: some of us feel compelled to use pretentious language to make ideas that we think are too simple seem more impressive. In the same way, others use difficult and therefore intimidating language to protect what they have from those who want a share of it: the power, prestige, and privilege that go with being part of the ruling class. We can keep knowledge from those who would use it by locking it up, but we can also hide facts and ideas behind language so impenetrable that only those trained in its use can find them.

Another reason some of us may write badly is that we are seized by the memory of an English teacher for whom the only kind of good writing was writing free of errors which only that teacher understood: fused genitives, dangling participles, split infinitives. For many such writers, filling a blank page is now like laying a minefield; they are concerned less with clarity and precision than with survival.

Finally, some of us write badly not because we intend to or because we never learned how, but because occasionally we seem to experience transient episodes of stylistic aphasia. Occasionally, many of us write substantially less well than we know we can, but we seem unable to do anything about it. This kind of dismaying regression typically occurs when we are writing about matters that we do not entirely understand, for readers who do. This problem afflicts most severely those who are just getting started in a new field of knowledge, typically students who are learning how to think and write in some academic area or profession new to them, in some well-defined “community of discourse” to which they do not yet belong.

All such communities have a body of knowledge that their apprentices must acquire, characteristic ways of thinking about problems, of making and evaluating arguments. And just as important, each community articulates its arguments in a characteristic voice: lawyers talk and write in ways distinct from physicians, whose style is distinct from sociologists, whose style is distinct from philosophers. When a writer new to a field is simultaneously trying to master its new knowledge, its new style of

thinking, and its new voice, she is unlikely to manage all those new competencies equally well. Some aspect of her performance will deteriorate: typically the quality of her writing.

I once discussed these matters at a seminar on legal writing. At the end, a woman volunteered that I had recounted her academic history. She had earned a Ph.D. in anthropology, published several books and articles, and been judged a good writer. But she became bored with anthropology and went to law school, where during the first few months she thought she was developing a degenerative brain disorder: she could no longer write clear, concise English prose. She was experiencing a breakdown like that experienced by many students taking an introductory course in a complex field—a period of cognitive overload, a condition that predictably degrades their powers of written expression.

Here is a passage from the first paper written by a first year law student who as an undergraduate had been evaluated as a superior writer.

The final step in Lord Morris's preparation to introduce the precedents is his consideration of the idea of conviction despite the presence of duress and then immediate pardon for that crime as an unnecessary step which is in fact injurious for it creates the stigma of the criminal on a potentially blameless (or at least not criminal) individual.

This means,

Before Lord Morris introduces the precedents, he considers a final issue: If a court convicts a defendant who acted under duress and then immediately pardons that defendant, the court may have taken an unnecessary step, a step that may even injure the defendant, if it stigmatizes him as criminal when he may be blameless.

This writer had to juggle several related actions, few of which he entirely understood, much less how they were related. When he had to express his confused ideas, he dumped onto the page all the concepts that seemed relevant, expressing them in abstractions loosely tied together with all-purpose prepositions.

Now here is a great irony: As he struggles with his ideas, his prose predictably degenerates. But much of what he is reading for the first time (and is probably also trying to imitate) typically suffers from the same clotted abstraction:

Because the individualized assessment of the appropriateness of the death penalty is a moral inquiry into the culpability of the defendant, and not an emotional response to the mitigating evidence, I agree with the Court that an instruction informing the jury that they “must not be swayed by mere sentiment, conjecture, sympathy, passion, prejudice, public opinion or public feeling” does not by itself violate the Eighth and Fourteenth Amendments to the United States Constitution.

—Sandra Day O'Connor, concurring, *California v. Albert Greenwood Brown, Jr.*, no. 85-1563)

This means,

When a jury assesses whether the death penalty is appropriate in individual cases, it must not respond to mitigating evidence emotionally but rather inquire into the defendant's moral culpability. I therefore agree with the majority: When a court informs a jury that it “must not be swayed by mere sentiment, conjecture, sympathy, passion, prejudice, public opinion or public feeling,” the court has not violated the defendant's rights under the Eighth and Fourteenth Amendments.

In other words, as a novice in a field reads its professional prose, he will predictably try to imitate those features of style that seem most prominently to bespeak membership, professional authority. And in complex professional prose, no feature of style is more typical than clumps of Latinate abstractions:

individualized assessment of the appropriateness of the death penalty . . . a moral inquiry into the culpability of the defendant.

Simultaneously, if a writer new to a field does not entirely control his ideas, his own prose will often slip into a style characterized by those same clumps of abstraction:

consideration of the idea of conviction despite the presence of duress and then immediate pardon.

What we should find astonishing is not that so many young writers write badly, but that any of them writes well.

It may be that in these circumstances most of us have to pass through some dark valley of stylistic infelicity. But once we realize that we are experiencing a common anguish, we may be less dismayed by our failures, or at least those failures will seem explicable. If we understand some of the specific ways that our

prose is likely to break down, and are able to articulate to ourselves and to others the reasons and the ways, we might even be able to do something about it.

As I write these sentences, though, hovering over my shoulder is another critic of English style. About fifty years ago H. L. Mencken wrote,

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 is right, of course: no one can teach clear writing by rule or principle, simple or not, to those who have nothing to say and no reason to say it, to those who cannot think or feel or see. But I also know that many who see well and think carefully and feel deeply still cannot write clearly. I also know that learning to write clearly can help us think and feel and see, and that in fact there are a few straightforward principles—not rules—that help.

Here they are.