

Some Rules on Writing

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I.

Introduction

"All in all, a writer's style is a true reflection of his inward life. Anyone who seeks to write a clear style, let him first achieve a clear mind."

Goethe

What follows are some rules about writing I find helpful. I want to share them with this hope: At most, those whose writing is continually and thoroughly revised will have standards by which to evaluate revisions, to judge whether they are reasonable to be emulated or idiosyncratic to be ignored. At least, those whose writing I have revised will know my standards.

The goal is easily understood writing. These rules are a way to that goal; they're about the building blocks of a composition. These are, from the ground up, the sentence and the paragraph. Of what follows, Parts II-X are about constructing sentences, and Parts XI-XVII about using sentences to construct paragraphs.

These rules are basic. For more, please consult the Bibliography. And make no mistake: These rules are about easily understood, not good writing. Good writing is a happy blend of ideas and style. The most easily read journalist who says nothing is a bad writer. So is the most mordant philosopher whose prose is so embrangling it hides his brilliant ideas. Neither communicates.

II.

Simple Sentences

"The first and most important thing of all, at least for writers today, is to strip language clean, to lay it bare down to the bone."

E. Hemingway

Rule 1: Tend to use simple sentences. Simply, simple sentences are easily understood. For example, compare--"Alexander conquered the Persians"--with--"Alexander crossed from Macedonia into Persia, where after many battles he and his troops overcame the Persian armies." Clearly, the first sentence is more quickly understood, and more memorable.

We use simple sentences to construct complex sentences. So naturally simple sentences involve less thought to understand than complex sentences.

This idea--that we construct complex sentences from simple sentences--is behind modern or "transformational" grammar. Transformational grammar is a theory to explain how we, with limited experience, can seemingly create and understand an unlimited variety of sentences. We can do it, theorists say, because we are *predisposed* to understand "kernel" sentences--the simplest kind of sentences--and certain rules to transform these simplest sentences into infinitely many complex sentences. So a writer who uses kernel sentences is apt to communicate clearly.

What is, then, the kernel sentence, the simplest kind of sentence, the bones of our language?

"The kernel sentence . . . has two main parts--a subject and a predicate. The subject consists of a noun phrase; the predicate consists of a verb phrase."

V. Tufte, *Grammar as Style*

So far, that is simple enough. The simple sentence comprises:

Subject * Predicate
(Noun Phrase) (Verb Phrase)

Let's go on:

"The four types of basic sentences are distinguished by four types of verb phrases, arranged here according to increasing verbal activity.

1. Some form of **be** with a noun, adjective, or adverb as predicate;
2. A linking verb such as **seems, feels, remains, becomes** with a noun or adjective as predicate;
3. An intransitive verb, which may or may not be followed by an adverbial;
4. A transitive verb with a noun phrase as direct object."

V. Tufte, *Grammar as Style*

Here are examples of each type:

1. "Words are deeds."

L. Wittgenstein

2. The caterpillar became a butterfly.

3. "Caesar wrote admirably."

Cicero

4. "God created man in his own image . . ."

Gen. 1:26

Types one and two are similar, but type one is more common. Types three and four are similar, but type four is more common. Overall, each type has a place in effective writing. But we will focus on types one and four, the more common forms.

Of these two, type four is more important. This is because it is more verbally active. It represents a subject acting, a sentence, that is, in the "active voice." When read, such a sentence usually sparks a mental image: an actor steps onto the stage of your mind and acts. The scene becomes vivid. And that's important because vivid mental images help us comprehend. So, always remember--verbs live! Other words are just words.

But here is a caution: forcing yourself to use type four (and three) sometimes leads to "reification". To reify is to use an abstract concept as though it were concrete. For example:

"Time shall unfold what plighted cunning hides, who covers faults,
at last with shame derides."

W. Shakespeare, *King Lear*

Though Shakespeare reified wonderfully, our reifications can often seem contrived. For example:

"On its tiptoes 'knowingly' cannot quite reach the level of culpability 'intentionally' enjoys."

W. Masters

So avoid forcing an idea into the form of sentence type four if it just won't fit. Consider then type one, usually best for either definition or attribution of qualities.

For example:

Definition: "Molecules are combinations of tightly bound atoms".

Attribution: Botticelli's *Madonna and Child* is beautiful.

III.

Complex Sentences

"What can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence."

L. Wittgenstein

No one writes only simple sentences. Nor should anyone do so stylistically. We must use "complex" sentences--sentences we construct from simple or kernel sentences. For example, here are two kernel sentences we may transform into a complex sentence:

- (1) He hates mankind.
- (2) He hates vice.

The second sentence we may transform into the relative clause "who hates vice". This relative clause we may then imbed in the first sentence to create the complex sentence:

"He who hates vice hates mankind."

Pliny the Younger

Complex sentences are natural. That is, we *tend* to compose them. But this tendency sadly often results in awkward sentences. For example, sometimes we imbed relative clauses into a sentence again and again and again and again, creating monsters like this:

The man who caught the dog that chased the cat that ate the rat that ate the grain that lay in the house that Jack built wore a red hat.

And so some experts instruct:

"The best professional prose on complex or technical subjects averages 20 words per sentence. For legal writers, this average is slightly higher (20 to 25 words per sentence). Although a variety of sentence lengths is important for avoiding monotony (which actually retards comprehension) even the longer sentences normally should not exceed 35 words."

L. Squire

Some have even devised formulas, keyed to average sentence length, to test the readability of prose, like the so-called "fog index":

"(1) Take a sample writing. Count the number of words in several complete sentences, until you have about 100 words. Divide the number of words by the number of sentences for the average sentence length.

(2) Count the words with three or more syllables. Don't count words capitalized, or combinations of short, easy words (like book/keeper or garbage/man) or verbs made of three syllables by adding **-ed** or **-es** (like **expanded** or **confesses**). This gives you the percentage of hard words.

(3) Add the average sentence length and the percentage of hard words. Multiply by .4."

R. Gunning

If your fog index exceeds 12, you could be ignored. No popular magazine--writing that sells--has a fog index above 12. For example, check the mass market magazine, *People*.

This rule of thumb--to shorten sentences to 20 words or less--is a quick fix. That is, a writer who keeps his sentences short must keep them simple--even if he fails to know why the longer sentence is difficult to understand.

But sentence length itself is not the problem. Here are two sentences about the same length with similar modifiers, but not equally easy to understand:

"The type of religious thought and feeling which the assumption of the infinity of the world and the multiplicity of inhabited globes probably chiefly tended to produce in the average orthodox and commonplace mind in the eighteenth century finds perhaps its best expression in the last book of Young's *Night Thoughts* (Night IX), 1745."

A.O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*

In the eighteenth century, some typical men believed the universe was infinite with many inhabited planets, a belief that produced certain religious thoughts and feelings, perhaps best expressed in the last book of Young's *Night Thoughts* (Night IX), 1745.

Of these two sentences, the second is more easily understood. The difference between them is this: the first is loaded with "restrictive" modifiers while the second has instead "non-restrictive" modifiers. The problem, then, is not length but too many "restrictive" modifiers.

As a refresher, modifiers--whether a word, phrase or clause--may be classified by their function: adjectives modify nouns, and adverbs modify verbs, adverbs and adjectives. For instance:

1. Adjectives

(a) Word

Adjective: "Ambition makes more **trusty** slaves than need."

B. Jonson, *Sejanus*

Infinitive: "The way **to rise** is to obey and please."

B. Jonson, *Sejanus*

Present Participle: "Hope is a **waking** dream."

Aristotle

Past Participle: "So we'll live, and pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh at **gilded** butterflies. . . ."

Shakespeare, *King Lear*

(b) Phrase

Preposition: "In him were blended servility and arrogance; behind a mask **of modesty** there was an unbridled appetite **for power.**"

Tacitus, *Annals*, IV.1

Present Participle: "**Turning off the electric light**, he continued the conversation with himself."

E. Hemingway, "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place"

Past Participle: He spoke truthfully, **impelled by a code of honor.**

Perfect Participle: "Having **the fewest wants**, I am nearest to the gods."

Socrates

Infinitive: "Tyrannies are perpetuated by diffident men who do not possess the courage **to act out their beliefs.**"

S. Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*

Adjective: "Stranger, go tell the Spartans that we lie here **obedient to their laws.**"

Herodotus, *Histories* 7.228

(c) Clause (introduced by who, whom, which or that):

"The only test of true justice is the way a man behaves to those **whom he can wrong with impunity.**"

Plato, *Laws*

2. Adverbs

(a) Word: "I **cruelly** hate cruelty. . . ."

Montaigne, "Essay on Cruelty"

(b) Phrase:

Preposition: "**In the beginning** God created the heavens and the earth."

Gen. 1:1

Infinitive: He lived **to do good deeds.**

(c) Clause: "**While the earth remaineth**, seed time and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease."

Gen. 8:22

Modifiers may be either "bound" (restrictive) or "free" (non-restrictive). "Bound" modifiers define; "free" modifiers comment.

Consider, for example, the relative clauses in these sentences:

The conductor **who was manic** led the orchestra.

Rocky, **who was manic**, led the orchestra.

In each sentence the same words constitute the relative clauses--"who was manic." But the two clauses are used differently.

The function of "who was manic" in "The conductor who was **manic**" is to modify and identify the noun phrase "the conductor." It indicates the manic conductor, not the conductor who was calm or depressive. A relative clause like this--identifying or restricting the meaning of a noun phrase--is called "bound". "Bound" modifiers tax memory. That is, to grasp the idea or word being modified, one must also grasp the meaning of all its restrictive modifiers.

The relative clause in "Rocky, who was manic, led the orchestra" does not identify. Rocky is fully identified by his proper name. A clause like this comments about rather than identifies or restricts the meaning of the noun phrase. So it is called "free".

"Free" modifiers can be classified for their position in the sentence as either left branching, medial or right branching:

Left Branching: **Trembling**, the hare limped through the frozen grass.

Medial: The hare, **trembling**, limped through the frozen grass.

Right Branching: "The hare limped **trembling** through the frozen grass."

Keats, *Eve of St. Agnes*

IV.

Styling the Complex Sentence

"To write simply is as difficult as to be good."

S. Maugham

Given that background, here is a more useful rule to simplify complex sentences than the rule to write sentences with less than 20 or so words.

Rule 2: In complex sentences, favor free modifiers over bound modifiers, right branching modifiers over left branching modifiers and left branching modifiers over medial modifiers.

Rule 3: Use the left branching or periodic sentence sparingly. It requires the reader to hold his attention until the end of the sentence, the site of the main idea. This often too greatly strains memory.

For example:

"While tools and instruments, designed to produce more and something altogether different from their mere use, are of secondary importance for laboring, the same is not true for the other great principle in the human labor process, the division of labor."

H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*

Rule 4: Tie the subject and verb together. That is, avoid imbedding free modifiers between the subject and verb.

Is this pleasant to read?

"A distinguished old friend, a very eminent lady and highly marked character, though technically, as it were, a private person, unencompassed by literary luggage or other monumental matter, and dropped from the rank at a great age and, as I was to note after a sufficient interval, to my surprise, with a singularly uncommemorated and unchronicled effect: given, I mean, her social and historical value."

Henry James, *The Art of the Novel*

Rule 5: The most easily managed and understood longer sentence is the right branching or "cumulative" sentence. The cumulative sentence is an independent clause, often a kernel trailed with free modifiers, limiting, amplifying or otherwise explaining the idea of the independent clause (like this sentence).

These are also cumulative sentences:

"The trench system', says Lewis, 'had all the elements of grotesque comedy--a prodigious and complex effort, cunningly contrived, and carried out with deadly seriousness, in order to achieve just nothing at all'."

P. Fussell, *The Great War & Modern Memory*

"The Romans also for many ages trained up only to a military roughness, resembling most the Lacedaemonian guise, knew of learning little but what their twelve tables, the Pontifick College with the Augurs and Famins taught them in Religion and Law, so unacquainted with other learning, that when Carneades and Critolaus, with the Stoic Diogenes coming Ambassadors to Rome, took thereby occasion to give the city a taste of their Philosophy, they were suspected for seducers by no less a man than Cato the Censor, who moved it in the Senate to dismiss them speedily and to banish all such Attic babblers out of Italy."

J. Milton, *Areopagitica*

The cumulative sentence is mostly used in writing that describes or narrates. But it is also important in writing that involves analyzing concepts--definition and explanation. Usually, however, in defining and explaining, we tend to use the linking verb (sentence types 1 and 2). Here are some straightforward examples:

"Hubris is an assault on a man to humiliate him publicly."

"Sycophancy is, at its root, severe cynicism."

"Trust is the . . . expectation . . . another will behave according to the constraints of morality."

C. Fried, *An Anatomy of Values*

But sometimes, in defining or in explaining, we overdo, constructing nauseating, complex sentences like this:

"The primary reason why such errors occurred is the presence of assumptions regarding progress which were analogous to the assumptions which had led Darwin and others to look upon biological evolution as being inherently progressive in its overall tendency."

M. Mandelbaum, *History, Man & Reason*

That sentence is the very hallmark of jargon, the long noun phrase as subject and the long noun phrase as complement, the two coupled by an empty verb like "is".

If you write an awkward sentence like that, consider recasting it as a cumulative sentence, using appositives. For example:

These errors primarily stemmed from assumptions about progress--assumptions like those that led Darwin and others to believe life evolved progressively.

These thinkers erred primarily because they assumed ideas about progress--ideas like those that led Darwin and others to believe life progressed.

Rule 6: Avoid the negative sentence. Simply, it is harder to process mentally than the positive sentence. For instance, of each example, which sentence is easier to understand?

Example:

(1) He does not have style.

(2) He has no style.

(3) He lacks style.

Example:

(1) When he began to learn, he proved not bright and not quick to comprehend, but of what he once received, his memory was remarkably not forgetful.

(2) "When he began to learn, he proved dull and slow to comprehend, but of what he once

received, his memory was remarkably tenacious."

Plutarch, Cato the Younger in *The Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*

A careful writer would eliminate almost all "nots" from what he crafts.

V.

Deletion

"Incompetence will show in the use of too many words. The reader's first and simplest test of an author will be to look for words that do not function, that contribute nothing to the meaning or that distract from the most important factor of the meaning to factors of minor importance."

Ezra Pound

Rule 7: Delete the inessential. To create an easily understood sentence--a concise sentence--eliminate inessential words, phrases and clauses.

For example, instead of "Zeno smiled, and Zena smiled," you would ordinarily delete a "smiled" and say Zeno and Zena smiled."

You often delete a noun following a pronominal adjective. That is, though you might say "This pie tastes good," you might also say "This tastes good," deleting the noun "pie," if everyone understands you are eating pie.

In certain noun phrases with an indefinite article, you may delete the noun following the article. Instead of "Some boys were there," you may say "some were there." Instead of "Several boys were outside," you may say "several were outside."

Here are three important decisions in clauses:

1. Deletion is the relative clause:

Several men [who are] in the car were drinking.

2. Deletion in the subordinate clause:

When [I was] hungry, I would eat.

3. Deletion of "that" in noun clauses:

He said [that] he was tired.

"I know [that] he would not be a wolf but that he sees [that] the Romans are but sheep."

Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*

Beware: Do not delete "that" if the result is an awkward sentence. For example: "Is your statement [that] 'the only policy your client issued which may provide coverage is the referenced policy' intended to be limited to the former partners ...".

Also, obviously, you cannot delete "that" when used as a relative adjective. For example: He was the man that scored.

Rule 8: Favor the shorter word, phrase or clause. Related to the rule to delete the excess is the rule of parsimony: Of possible words, phrases or clauses alike in meaning, use the shorter word, phrase or clause.

For example, avoid using a prepositional phrase as adverb if you can use a single word adverb:

in a slow manner:	slowly
in a careful way:	carefully

Here is a list that juxtaposes the awkward and preferred word or phrase:

- along the lines of: like
- as to: about (or leave out)
- for the purpose of: for
- for the reason that: since, because
- from the point of view of: for
- inasmuch as: since, because
- in favor of: for, to
- in order to: to
- in order for: for
- in accordance with: by, under
- in the case of: if
- in the event that: if
- in the nature of: like
- in the neighborhood of: about
- in terms of: in, for (or leave out)
- on the basis of: by
- on the grounds that: since, because
- prior to: before
- subsequent to: after
- with a view to: to
- with a reference to: about (or leave out)
- with regard to: regarding, about (or leave out)
- the result that: so that

accordingly: so
 consequently: so
 for the reason: so
 furthermore: then
 hence: so
 thus: so
 in addition: besides, also
 indeed: in fact
 likewise: and, also
 more specifically: for instance, for example
 moreover: now, next
 nevertheless: but, however, even so
 that is to say: in other words, that is
 to be sure: of course
 in connection with: in

despite the fact that)	
regardless of the fact that)	even though, though
notwithstanding the fact that)	

if it should transpire/happen)	
that under circumstances in)	
if which)	
on the occasion of)	
in a situation in which)	when
under circumstances in which)	

as regards)	
in reference to)	
concerning the matter of)	about
where __ is concerned)	

it is necessary that)	
there is a need/necessity for)	
it is important that)	
it is incumbent upon)	must
cannot be avoided)	
has to)	

is able to)	
has the opportunity)	can
is in a position to)	
has the capacity for)	

has the ability to)	
it is possible that)	
there is a chance that)	
it could happen that)	may, might, can, could
the possibility exists that)	
at the same time as)	
simultaneously with)	as
the fact that)	that

VI.

Smothered & Empty Verbs

Rule 9: Avoid smothering verbs. If you write "we conducted an investigation", you could have written more simply, more effectively--"we investigated."

When you use a word like "investigation," you have smothered a verb--that is, turned a verb into a thing or quality, robbing it of life.

Look for the following word endings: -ion, -tion, -ing, -ent, -ant, -ency, and -ancy. They usually indicate a smothered or disguised verb--a verb in noun's clothing.

For example, of the following sentences, avoid those in the left-hand column:

He committed an error.	He erred.
He is productive.	He produces.
We had a discussion about golf.	We discussed golf.

The writer who often smothers verbs kills what he writes. Here is an example:

"Total domination, which strives to organize the infinite plurality and differentiation of human beings as if all of humanity were just one individual, is possible only if each and every person can be reduced to a never-changing identity of reactions, so that each of these bundles of reactions can be exchanged at random for any other. The problem is to fabricate something that does not exist, namely, a kind of human species resembling other animal species whose only 'freedom' would consist in 'preserving the species.' Totalitarian domination attempts to achieve this goal both through ideological indoctrination of the elite formations and through absolute terror in the camps; and the atrocities for which the elite formations are ruthlessly used become, as it were, the Practical application of their ideological indoctrination--the testing ground in which the latter must prove itself--while the appalling spectacle of the camps themselves is supposed to furnish the 'theoretical' verification of the ideology."

H. Arnedt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*

She may mean this:

Those who want to control others totally have this goal: to organize people naturally different as if they were alike. That's possible only if everyone always reacts identically. Their goal, then, is to reduce humans to sub-humans, only free to try to exist.

To achieve that, they designated some as superior, in whom they then inculcate certain ideals, and terrorize the rest.

How well the elite learned its lessons is revealed in its evil deeds. And the spectacle of the inhumane behavior of the terrorized to one another, owing to their brutish environment, confirms their oppressors' beliefs about them.

Rule 10: Avoid empty verbs. Often a smothered verb accompanies an empty verb like "make", "take", and "get", or their conjugates. A writer uses an empty verb to accommodate a smothered verb as a direct or indirect object.

Consider these examples:

He will make a favorable impression on the jury. He will impress the jury.

"Politically powerful people [make] use [of] or enjoy the presence of others, but they are not as a rule capable of friendship."

J. Shklar, *Ordinary Vices*

He took a left hand turn. He turned left.

He got tired. He tired.

He got a headache. His head ached.

NOTE: If you apply rules 9 and 10, you will tend to transform phrases into clauses. As a result, your sentences will become longer. Then you will need to break those longer sentences into shorter sentences, or apply the rules on styling the complex sentence.

Also your diction will change: generally your words will shorten. If you know too few short words (a more serious problem than knowing too few long words), your writing will become monotonous. To avoid that unpleasant result, learn more short, Anglo-Saxon words.

VII.

Nouns as Modifiers

"Language most shows a man. Speak, that I may see thee."

Ben Jonson

Rule 11: Avoid modifying a noun with a noun. Those who convert verbs into nouns also often string them together modifying nouns with nouns. For example:

"There is a need for a Mafia hit man contract performance reliability investigation."

Instead, write:

"We must determine how reliable Mafia hit men perform their contracts."

At times a prepositional phrase modifies a noun, as in "masters of the art of verbal persuasion." That, of course, is proper. But some writers drop the preposition and place its object just before the modified noun as in "verbal persuasion art masters." That is economical. But it sounds stilted. So rarely combine nouns of more than two syllables; even then, do so discreetly.

VIII.

Emphasis

Rule 12: Emphasize your important ideas. What we believe is more important in what we write often differs significantly from what we convey to the reader. We simply fail to empathize thoroughly. If you provide the reader a chance to miss your point, she likely will. So eliminate that chance; emphasize your important ideas. Do so with these five tools:

* Use the dash and colon. Professional writers use the dash and colon more often than amateurs. To see it is so, look at your writing, then look closely at any popular magazine.

Here are some examples:

Colon: "The brotherhood of man is not a mere poet's dream: it is a most depressing and humiliating reality."

O. Wilde

Dash: "And truly I too speak as one who knows not--only guesses."

Plato, *Meno* 98b

* Use quotes. Better writers also often quote others and use "scare" quotes to emphasize.

* Place important ideas at the beginning and end of the sentence. The beginning and end of a sentence are sacred. There enshrine your most important ideas. For example:

"The word 'confidentiality' has by now become a means of covering up a multitude of questionable and often dangerous practices."

S. Bok, *Secrets*

This rule introduces the "passive voice." A sentence in the passive voice is in this form "John was hit by a car" rather than "A car hit John". Generally avoid the passive voice. It is wordy and weak.

Sometimes it is useful. Use it to highlight the object of the transitive verb, by placing it, as subject, at the beginning of a sentence. Or use it to put the kernel subject into the **by** phrase at the end of the sentence, another position of emphasis.

For example, begin with this kernel sentence:

A car hit John.

If you want the word "John" to begin the sentence or the word "car" to end the sentence, recast the sentence in the passive voice:

John was hit by a car.

* Direct your reader. The skilled writer clearly tells the reader where he is going (what questions he will answer) and where he has been (what again are his answers to those questions). That courtesy not only clarifies but also emphasizes. For example:

"To sum up these remarks: even if psychological continuity is neither logically, nor always in fact, one-one, it can provide a criterion of identity. . . ."

"The criterion might be sketched **as follows.** . . ."

D. Parfit, *"Personal Identity"*

But this rule is less about how to construct sentences and more about how to paragraph, the topic of Part XI.

* Pace your ideas. A sentence is a showcase for ideas. The simple sentence is a one idea showcase; it can hold no more. For example:

"Love begets love."

T. Roethke

Because prominent--it is the only idea in the showcase--that idea about love is emphasized. Granted, that the simple sentence displays but one idea is no guarantee it will be quickly understood. Consider:

"Logic is transcendental."

L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

Yet the idea, however cryptic, is emphasized.

No one writes only simple sentences. We mostly write complex sentences. Herein lies

the problem: The complex sentence is an expandable showcase; it can hold many ideas. The more ideas in that showcase, the less each is emphasized. And an un-emphasized idea is an idea the reader will likely ignore.

So craft the complex sentence to display not too many ideas, lest all be lost in the crowd. Here, for example, is a sentence with too many ideas.

"Caesar with his legions conquered the western world, and through a mixture of fear and indulgence subverted the free spirit of Republican Rome, a city with a semi-tropical climate, situated among seven hills along the Tiber River."

IX.

Verb-Preposition Conjuncts

Rule 13: Avoid verb-preposition conjuncts. Very often found in the writing of both amateurs and professionals is what I shall term “the verb-preposition conjunct.” This conjunct is displeasing. Replace it with a more carefully considered verb that will convey the same action but do so more felicitously.

Examples of Verb-Preposition Conjuncts

Verb-Preposition Conjunct	Remedy
He made up this story.	He falsified this story. He created this story.
She looked into this problem.	She investigated this problem. She considered this problem.
He pulled off the bank heist.	He successfully robbed the bank. He stole money from the bank.
He carried on with his friend.	He talked with his friend. He wooed his friend. He flirted with his friend.

Strong Word Endings

Rule 14: Use strong word endings. Inexperienced writers tend to use “weak word endings.” The phrase “word endings” refers to the kind of word used to end a sentence. A “strong” word ending is usually a noun or verb, not a preposition, adjective or adverb. The word that ends a sentence should embody an important idea in the sentence, a word deserving emphasis. Here are some examples:

Weak word endings:

He was the intellectual who we had read a lot about.
The book gave us many ideas to think about.

The ending is not a noun or a verb.
The ending is not the most or the second most important idea in the sentence.
The ending is not a link to the ideas of the following sentence.

Strong word endings:

He saved John. John was his brother.
The book caused us to think about many ideas. The most interesting of these ideas was the notion of knowledge.

The ending is a noun or a verb.
The ending is the most or the second most important idea in the sentence.
The ending is a link to the ideas of the following sentence.

XI.

Paragraphing

A higher art in discursive writing than constructing sentences is paragraphing. Like the sentence, the paragraph must be easily understood--clear, logical, and not overly burdened with ideas. And like the sentence, it must have a rhythm. The difference is not of kind but of degree; paragraphing requires a grander--more sustained--effort. It is the difference between the Mona Lisa's smile and the Mona Lisa.¹

Rule 15: Avoid long paragraphs. At first sight, the paragraph must seduce the mind's eye. If too long, it will seem too formidable; the reader will back away. Its length will bar its understanding. To verify this, tackle the paragraphs in *Wiseman v. N.P.R.R. Co.*, 20 Or 425 (1891). So, as a rule of thumb, write paragraphs no longer than a third of a page.

The existence and contents of the supposed contract, as well as the claim of defendant based upon it, is denied by the plaintiff in the case at bar. The issue thus being joined, its execution and contents were very material to defendant in establishing its defense. Indeed, defendant seeks to exempt itself from liability solely by reason of this contract. It admits having received as a common carrier plaintiff's goods, and that while in its possession they were destroyed, but it seeks to escape liability by virtue of this contract. It then became of the utmost importance to both plaintiff and defendant that the original contract, if such a contract was made at all, be produced on the trial, so that there might be no controversy as to its contents, and that the court might declare its legal effect to the jury. Before defendant should be permitted to give secondary evidence of its contents, it should prove that it had exercised the utmost diligence to procure the original (*Smith v. Cox*, 9 Ore. 327), and this it failed to do. No competent evidence whatever was offered to prove any search in the office of the traffic manager at Chicago, where it was shown the document was most likely to be found. All that the witness Watts said about the supposed search was clearly hearsay and incompetent evidence. (*Lawrence v. Fulton*, 19 Cal. 683.) It did not in any way tend to prove that any effort had been made in the Chicago office to find the original paper. The testimony of the traffic manager, or some person in his office having the custody of such papers, should have been had, or some proper effort made to obtain it, showing what effort, if any, had been made to find the original. Indeed, counsel for defendant did not seriously contend that it had brought itself within the rule concerning the admission of secondary evidence, if proof of the loss of the original is required, but he claimed that all that was necessary for defendant to do was to show that the original was in the

¹ In what follows I do not discuss short introductory, transitional and concluding paragraphs.

possession of a person outside of this state, and that no further proof was required. That when it showed that the original contract was in Chicago, it was entitled to give secondary evidence of its contents without further proof, and in support of his position cites the following authorities: *Burton v. Driggs*, 20 Wall. 125, 22 L. Ed. 299; *Gordon v. Searing*, 8 Cal. 49; *Beattie v. Hilliard*, 55 N.H. 428; *Brown v. Wood*, 19 Mo. 475; *Shepard v. Giddings*, 22 Conn. 282; *Ralph v. Brown*, 3 Watts & Serg. 395; *Gordon v. Tweedy*, 74 Ala. 232. The broad doctrine is stated in these authorities that if books or papers necessary as evidence in a court in one state be in the possession of a person living in another state, secondary evidence without further showing may be given to prove the contents of such papers. As we have already said in effect, each case must largely depend on its own particular circumstances as to what showing is sufficient in order to admit secondary evidence of the contents of a writing, and the language used in the cases above cited must be interpreted in the light of the facts of each case. None of these cases goes so far as to hold that where a defendant relies upon the contents of a writing to exempt himself from liability, and both the execution and contents of the supposed writing are denied, and the alleged writing is shown to be in the possession of a person outside of the state, that secondary evidence of the contents of such writing is admissible unless an effort is made to produce it. And besides, the doctrine stated in these authorities is denied by authorities of equal weight, and even by some of the same courts. Thus in *Turner v. Yates*, 16 HOW 14, 14 L. Ed. 824, it was held that proof that an invoice of goods was in London was not a sufficient showing to admit secondary evidence of its contents in the circuit court of the United States for the district of Maryland, the court saying: "If the paper was in the hands of the consignees in London, secondary evidence was not admissible. If as parties, they were entitled to notice to produce the paper; if as third persons, their depositions should have been taken, or some proper attempt made to obtain it." (*Wood v. Cullen*, 13 Minn. 394; *Dickinson v. Breeden*, 25 Ill. 186; *McGregor v. Montgomery*, 4 Pa. 237; Wharton on Ev. § 130.) The rule laid down in the authorities just cited we think is founded on reason and justice and imposes no hardship on the defendant. By defendant's own showing, the last known place of deposit of the contract it claims plaintiff executed was in the office of the traffic manager in Chicago, and the law provides an easy and simple method of taking the deposition of a witness residing out of the state, and his deposition should have been taken, or some proper effort made to obtain it. The fact that the person to whose possession the paper was traced resided out of the state, did not excuse defendant from a diligent effort to procure it.

XII.

The Topic Sentence

Rule 16: Always have a topic sentence. The topic sentence is, of course, the theme of the paragraph. That is, if the topic sentence were recast as a question, that question would be answered by the remaining sentences in the paragraph.

Having a topic sentence avoids confusion. If you omit the topic sentence, state no question, would your reader have trouble inferring it from the paragraph? In truth, she would. She would have to read through the paragraph, ponder, perhaps reread some sentences. Even then, she may fail to divine its theme. If luckily she did, she would do so only after spending more time than otherwise.

For example, consider this paragraph without its topic sentences.

". . . Ben Jonson seemed to suggest that they could only grumble and acquiesce in the treachery of their rulers, because there was no alternative. In *Sejanus*, Tiberius is easily persuaded to dispose of his inconvenient relations by trickery, but then, following Machiavelli's advice, he destroys Sejanus, his now far too powerful courtier and henchman. The fallen favorite is brutally killed by all his erstwhile hangers-on. A successor is already in place, and while the courtiers bemoan the good old days, they also have no choice but to go along with Tiberius, vile though his personal life may be. He is, at least, a shrewd prince. What else is there? Join in. That is the measure of Jonson's disgust. The great resort of personal friendship 'chaste and masculine' . . . remains the only haven."

J. Shklar, *Ordinary Vices*

What is its theme? It is, says the author, "What happens to men of honor in a detestable Machiavellian world?"

Rule 17: Have the topic sentence begin the paragraph. If elsewhere, it will elude the reader like a pheasant in a cornfield.

XIII.

Levels of Abstraction

Rule 18: Make the topic sentence more general or abstract than its supporting sentences. The topic sentence tends to summarize the supporting ideas of the paragraph. That is what distinguishes it as the topic sentence. This difference in levels of generality or abstraction fulfills a psychological need: thinking--the mental interplay between abstract and concrete, general and specific, theory and experience, synthetic and analytic.

Here is an unpleasant paragraph because it is abstract throughout:

"The liberal state has a characteristic type of institution that reflects its prevailing kinds of social order. The types of social order are the general ways of disposing of the relations among individuals and groups. They are the deep and hidden modes of social organization. Institutions are the particular organized groups to which individuals belong. They are the immediately visible face of social life. Several principles of social order will often be at work in an institution. But in any social situation there will be prevalent kinds of institutions, just as there are dominant principles of order. We learn about social order by studying institutional life, but we can only fully grasp the character of the latter after we have understood the former."

R.M. Unger, *Knowledge and Politics*

Here is a paragraph that moves properly from abstract to concrete:

"With his appeal to his daughters to proclaim who loves him most, the King [Lear] demonstrates the difficulties of another problem which was of great interest to the Renaissance philosophers and which they found well stated in another essay of Plutarch, **How a man may discern a flatterer from a friend**. Self-love, Plutarch says, subjects a man to flattery, for he likes to have his good opinion of himself sustained. It is difficult to tell the flatterer from the friend, but the basis of judgment is to be found in the fact that the flatterer applies himself to appeal to the passions of the one concerned, while the friend makes his appeal not to passion but to reason. Many specific differences are further to be observed, of course. The flatterer is inconstant, the friend constant; the flatterer always says and does what will give pleasure, the friend does not hesitate to give pain, to offer rebuke or correction, when it is

necessary; the flatterer is always ready to speak, the friend is often silent; the flatterer is over-ready and excessive in his promises, the friend is temperate and just and reasonable; the flatterer bustles about but is not ready for genuine service, the friend will dissuade from unjust action but will serve even at great cost to himself."

L.B. Campbell, *Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes, Slaves of Passion*

XIV.

Supporting Sentences

Rule 19: Insure that sentences following the topic sentence develop its theme.
Discard any sentence in the paragraph that fails to do so, no matter how clever.

All sentences supporting the topic sentence will be subordinate to it. The third and following sentences in the paragraph will be either subordinate to or coordinate with its predecessor. A coordinate sentence has the same function or relation to its super-ordinate sentence. A subordinate sentence comments on the sentence or a set of sentences above it.

For example:

1. "Modern empiricism has been conditioned in large part by two dogmas.
 2. One is a belief in some fundamental cleavage between truths which are **analytic**, or grounded in meanings independently of matters of fact, and truths which are **synthetic**, or grounded in fact.
 2. The other dogma is **reductionism**: the belief that each meaningful statement is equivalent to some logical construct upon terms which refer to immediate experience.
 2. Both dogmas, I shall argue, are ill-founded.
 3. One effect of abandoning them is, as we shall see, a blurring of the supposed boundary between speculative metaphysics and natural science.
 3. Another effect is a shift toward pragmatism."

W. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" in *From a Logical "Point of View*

The sentences labeled (2) are subordinate to the topic sentence (1) and coordinate with each other. The sentences labeled (3) are subordinate to the sentence above them labeled (2) and coordinate with each other.

XV.

Linking

"Few write as an architect builds, drawing up a plan beforehand and thinking it out down to the smallest details. Most write as they play dominoes and their sentences are linked together as dominoes, one by one, in part deliberately, in part by chance."

Schopenhauer

"The question of repetition is very important."

G. Stein

Rule 20: Link your sentences to establish their relationship. Here are three techniques to achieve "linking."

* To show the relationship between coordinate sentences cloak them in parallel structures, like twins dressed alike. For example:

1. "The problem of the freedom of the will arises, like so many philosophical problems, from an apparent contradiction between two beliefs which both seem well-justified.

3. We believe that everything which happens is due to something else which caused it to happen.

4. This is the belief in the Law of Causation.

3. We also believe that when we are free to do one thing rather than another, we are free to do otherwise.

4. This is the belief in Freewill.

2. Now by the Law of Causation your decision to act as you did was due to something which happened before, that is, it was caused and determined by what had gone before.

2. But, if that is so, how can we say that you were free to have acted otherwise?"

J. Wisdom, *Problems of Mind and Matter*

Mr. Wisdom has crafted sentences with coordinate ideas in similar form (labeled 3 and 4).

* Use a connecting word or phrase between sentences unless their relationship is quickly obvious. Connecting words or phrases are, for example, "but", "moreover" "for", "also", and "and".

For example:

"What is truth? said jesting Pilate, would not stay for an answer. Pilate was in advance of his time. **For** 'truth' itself is an abstract noun, a camel, that is, of a logical construction, which cannot get past the eye even of a grammarian. We approach it cap and categories in hand: we ask ourselves whether Truth is a substance (the Truth the body of Knowledge), or a quality (something like the colour red, inhering in truths) or a relation ('correspondence'). **But** philosophers should take something more nearly their own size to strain at. What needs discussing **rather** is the use, or certain uses, of the word 'true'. **In vino** possibly, '**veritas**', but in a sober symposium '**verum**'." (Emphasis added.)

J.L. Austin, "Truth" in *Philosophical Papers*

* To thread your sentences together--to maintain their relationship--repeat an important "tag" word or phrase of the preceding sentence in the following sentence. The repeated "tag" word is often a pronoun or synonym, to avoid monotony. For example:

"The constitution **fuses** legal and moral issues, by making the validity of a law depend on the answer to complex moral problems, like the problem of whether a particular statute respects the inherent equality of all men. This **fusion** has important **consequences** for the debates about civil disobedience; I have described **these** elsewhere and I shall refer to **them** later. But **it** leaves open two prominent questions. **It** does not tell us whether the constitution, even properly interpreted, recognizes all the moral rights that citizens have, and **it** does not tell us whether, as many suppose, citizens would have a duty to obey the law even if it did involve their moral rights." (Emphasis added.)

R. Dworkin, "Taking Rights Seriously" in *Taking Rights Seriously*

XVI.

Overloading

"We should sow with the hand, and not with the whole sack."

Corinna, an ancient Greek poetess

"The secret of popular writing is never to put more on a given page than the common reader can lap off it with no strain WHATSOEVER on his habitually slack attention."

E. Pound

Rule 21: Pace your ideas. That is, avoid overloading a paragraph with ideas. Our short term memory is limited; at a time, it can hold five to seven items or "chunks" of information. That is why phone numbers are only seven digits. For example, is it easier to learn 224338022110113684986761210, or

224-3380
221-1011
368-4986
876-1210?

So if we have to absorb too many ideas too quickly, our minds will lock up; nothing will get in. As writers we must anticipate that problem. We must pace what we want the reader to understand by presenting it in easily absorbed chunks or patterns.

As a rule of thumb, keep the "chunks" in each paragraph to five or less. What you have up to now crammed into one paragraph you may have to unpack and neatly repack into an entire chapter. Always remember, as Mr. Pound suggests, coddle the reader!

XVII.

Rhythm

"Prose without rhythm is formless... The formless is displeasing..."

Aristotle

"In good prose, rhythm never stumbles . . ."

J. Gardner

Rule 22: Create a pleasing rhythm. If you tend to write simple sentences, you may find you have written a paragraph of them, one after another, a series of related sentences, purified, striped of the superfluous. Unfortunately, a paragraph of simple sentences often results in a staccato rhythm. TA TA TA TA TA. And in discursive writing, that rhythm is distracting and unpleasant. It calls attention to itself. Instead, aim to create a pleasing, almost inconspicuous rhythm, a rhythm the reader takes for granted.

To do that most effectively, vary the length of your sentences. A poet once wrote "a sentence should be at least four words less or more than the previous sentence written." That rule is probably too restrictive, but it takes the point--you must sow some longer or complex sentences among your simple sentences. But do not sow weeds. That is, style your complex sentences using rules 2-6.

It is also helpful in creating a pleasing rhythm to think of certain punctuation marks as musical notes, each representing a different duration. The period is a whole note; the colon is a half note; the semicolon is a quarter note; the comma is an eighth note; and the space between words within a sentence a sixteenth note.

A series of ten sixteenth notes sandwiched between whole notes would result in a staccato rhythm, the rhythms of a tom tom. When you vary sentence length and use colons, semicolons and commas, the rhythm ceases to be staccato, becomes more irregular and less conspicuous, the rhythm of a cello in a sonata.

Postscript

"Tis with our judgments as our watches: None go just alike, yet each believes his own."

A. Pope, "Essay on Criticism"

Obviously these rules are not *the* guide to writing effectively. Please consider them as only a working hypothesis, to be tested by your experience. I do hope they lead you to your individual style.

XVIII.

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