

Writing with Style
Conversations on the Art of Writing

Third Edition

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Readability

When we encounter a natural style, we are astonished and delighted; for we expected to see an author, and we find a man.

—Blaise Pascal

Sentences are not different enough to hold the attention unless they are dramatic. No ingenuity of varying structure will do. All that can save them is the speaking tone of voice somehow entangled in the words and fastened to the page for the ear of the imagination.

—Robert Frost

A readable style is one that invites reading. That circular definition I think we can all agree on. But when we ask what makes a style readable, we move into personal taste. Here it's everyone for himself. Let me take a moment to state my own views on the subject. If you agree with them, you might find the tips that follow both sensible and helpful.

Basically, I require two things of an author. The first is that he or she have something fresh to say—something that will either teach me or amuse me. If he doesn't, I stop reading. The second requirement is that he not waste my time getting out what he has to say. If he idles, I figure I'm better off reading someone else.

But beyond these bedrock requirements, what I find most appealing in a writer is an authentic manner. I like to see him or her come across as a vital, companionable human being, not a stuffed shirt or emotionally unfeeling. I like an author to *talk* to me, unbend to me, speak right out to me. If the prose has a natural, conversational rhythm to it, if it's forged out of homespun English rather than highbrow English, if it's stamped with the mark of a quirky personality, if it carries the ring of

honesty and passionate conviction, then the writer has captured my attention. I like an author to be natural, warts and all. It shows me that he or she trusts me enough to show vulnerability and not be afraid of me.

Below are examples of what I mean—examples, too, of what Pascal and Frost doubtless had in mind in those remarks of theirs that I quoted at the head of this chapter. The first pair of passages, a couple of pages apart, come from novelist/memoirist Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, a book at once wise and funny—but, best of all, real. Here she's disclosing part of her writing life and the demons she battles, especially her fear of rejection and her perfectionism. In fact, we get to see her battle her perfectionism right in front of us as she reminds us—and no less herself!—of its high costs:

What I've learned to do when I sit down to work on a shitty first draft is to quiet the voices in my head. First there's the vinegar-lipped Reader Lady, who says primly, "Well, *that's* not very interesting, is it?" And there's the emaciated German male who writes these Orwellian memos detailing your thought crimes. And there are your parents, agonizing over your lack of loyalty and discretion; and there's William Burroughs, dozing off or shooting up because he finds you as bold and articulate as a houseplant; and so on. . . . Quieting these voices is at least half the battle I fight daily. . . .

Perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor, the enemy of the people. It will keep you cramped and insane your whole life, and it is the main obstacle between you and a shitty first draft. Perfectionism will ruin your writing, blocking inventiveness and playfulness and life force (these are words we are allowed to use in California). Perfectionism means that you try desperately not to leave so much mess to clean up. But clutter and mess show us that life is being lived. Clutter is wonderfully fertile ground—you can still discover new treasures under all those piles, clean things up, edit things out, fix things, get a grip. Tidiness suggests that something is as good as it's going to get. Tidiness makes me think of held breath, of suspended animation, while writing needs to breathe and move.

And here's another pair of riveting paragraphs, from the novelist Dorothy Allison. Whenever I think of intellectual and emotional honesty, I think of paragraphs like these, ringing with conviction, passion, and integrity:

I have always passionately loved good books—good stories and beautiful writing, and most of all, books that seemed to me to be intrinsically important, books that told the truth, painful truths sometimes, in a voice that made eloquent the need for human justice. That is what I have meant when I have used the word *literature*. It has seemed to me that literature, as I meant it, was embattled, that it was increasingly difficult to find writing doing what I thought literature should do—which was simply to

push people into changing their ideas about the world, and to go further, to encourage us in the work of changing the world, to making it more just and more truly human.

All my life I have hated clichés, the clichés applied to people like me and those I love. Every time I pick up a book that purports to be about either poor people or queers or Southern women, I do so with a conscious anxiety, an awareness that the books about us have often been cruel, small, and false. I have wanted our lives taken seriously and represented fully—with power and honesty and sympathy—to be hated or loved, or to terrify and obsess, but to be real, to have the power of the whole and the complex. I have never wanted politically correct parables made out of my grief, simple-minded rote speeches made from my rage, simplifications that reduce me to cardboard dimensions. But mostly that is what I have found. We are the ones they make fiction of—we queer and disenfranchised and female—and we have the right to demand our full, nasty, complicated lives, if only to justify all the times our reality has been stolen, mismade, and dishonored.

What permits such miracles of literary authenticity to happen? The answer, I think, is either a religious reverence for truth at whatever cost—this is proverbially the case with major artists—or else genuine self-acceptance. If a person accepts herself, she will be herself, and will speak her mind in her own idiom without inhibition. She won't be engaged in posturing with her reader, or counterfeiting her real personality and feelings, because she'll have no wobbly idealized self to defend.

Achieving such self-acceptance is a difficult proposition, though. The fear of rejection straitjackets most of us from early in life. Instead of learning to discover our own writing voice, we learn to mimic the voices of others. In fact, we do a pretty good job of learning to smother all traces of individuality.

The Godlike Pose

If we're honest with ourselves, most of us can see this defensiveness operating every time we're asked to produce a piece of serious writing—an essay, for example, or a report. At such times, fear compels us to try to appear godlike: wise, rational, authoritative. But since, beyond a certain point, we can't become more rational and authoritative, we instinctively—and often unconsciously—compensate in our writing style by donning the trappings of pure rationality and authority: studied “objectivity,” impersonality of address, elevated diction, a grave manner, elaborate sentences, and the rest. It can be pretty convincing. We can even fool ourselves with our stylistic majesty.

Unfortunately, this is mostly a learned response. What keeps reinforcing it is the popular dogma that only a lofty, formal style is appropriate in serious writing. That dogma not only strengthens our feeling that we must be something we're not, but also teaches us *how* to strike the godlike pose.

How did the dogma originate? Probably through thousands of precedents resembling our own attempts at imposture. After enough people over enough decades donned the trappings of authority, the trappings themselves became part of the established style of serious discourse. At that point, Decorum—not just the individual's ego—began insisting on a standard of stylistic acceptability. From then until now we have had convention reinforcing instinct, and instinct in turn rigidifying convention—in short, a vicious circle.

You can see it operating at every commencement exercise. A speaker has been chosen to give the major address. “My God, what can I say that will be equal to the occasion?” he wails. He thinks and thinks; his desperation grows; his brain begins to freeze. Eventually he bows to tradition and comes up with an impossibly formal Address—a collection of platitudes substituting for genuine feeling and conviction. The audience hears it, yawns, then dozes. Each person leaves with the same unspoken sentiment: “Well, chalk up another boring commencement speech. Why doesn't someone—just once—give a simple, heartfelt talk, something really honest? Why must it always be so pretentious?” Because, as we've seen, convention—and the speaker's scared ego—won't have it any other way. With each new precedent, it becomes all the harder for a new commencement speaker to be simply himself.

The Dogma of Formalism

The only way to break this circle is for each of us to subject the dogma of Formalism to a searching analysis. How solid, in fact, is its rationale? What are its actual effects? What (if any) reasonable alternative is there to it? And what are the stylistic practices of our best contemporary authors?

Let's begin with its rationale. Judged solely by its corrective ends, it makes sense. The teachers who preach the formal style are trying desperately to elevate people's writing standards. More specifically, they hope to teach them stylistic discipline and grace; teach them that talking and writing, while related, are not the same thing; teach them, in short, that when one writes seriously, one must take one's style seriously. In essence, they are reacting against the shortcomings of the informal style adopted unthinkingly by so many students. Since such a style recognizes no difference between writing and talking, it tends to be loose, banal, and imprecise—disadvantages too great to offset its merits of simplicity and ease.

So far, so good. Unfortunately, what these teachers fail to perceive is that the archly conservative formal style has shortcomings of its own. While capable of satisfying the needs for precision and conciseness, it tends to lack ease and freshness, since it inhibits variety of diction, simplicity, and anything offbeat. Its self-consciousness is both its virtue and its limitation.

Which brings me to its actual effects—two principal ones, both negative. First, more often than not, it ironically promotes writing that is as bad in its own way as the very writing it's hoping to discourage—"bow-wow language," Mencken called it, marked by stilted diction, abstract phraseology, frozen sentence rhythms, and so on. Exceptionally literate people may eventually find themselves at home with a formal style, but most writers never will—and their awkwardness will show. Second, and more insidious, it promotes phoniness and empty conventionality—the Standard Way of Thinking. When a person is obliged to write like another person, who was himself obliged to write like still another person, he is invariably going to start adopting that person's neutered style of thought and to stray ever further from what he actually thinks and feels. But that's just the beginning. Teach a person this trick and pretty soon he's formed a lifelong habit. We see the dismaying evidence all around us—in "businessese," "academese," "officialese," "committee prose." Their labels may differ, but not their gobbledygook essence. Each is a form of imitation-writing sterile in its uniformity, opaque in its jargon, and absurd in its pomposity. People don't learn to write this way when they've been encouraged to write simply, directly, and honestly. They learn to write this way only when they've been taught a style which implies that naturalness is unnatural, that informality is unacceptable, and that individuality is unpardonable. (More on this in our next chapter.)

George Orwell discusses something like this syndrome in his classic essay "Politics and the English Language." He observes, for instance:

As I have tried to show, modern writing at its worst does not consist in picking out words for the sake of their meaning and inventing images in order to make the meaning clearer. It consists in gumming together long strips of words which have already been set in order by someone else, and making the results presentable by sheer humbug. . . .

In our time it is broadly true that political writing is bad writing. Where it is not true, it will generally be found that the writer is some sort of rebel, expressing his private opinions and not a "party line." Orthodoxy, of whatever color, seems to demand a lifeless, imitative style.

That last sentence says it all.

We might solve the problem, it seems to me, if we stop thinking of style in the simplistic either/or terms that the formalists have taught us to adopt. Typifying their way of thinking is the following entry on contractions in a widely used Freshman English text:

The use of contractions (I'll, can't, couldn't, didn't, he's, shouldn't) is appropriate in informal and colloquial styles but not in a formal style.

The trouble with such a dictum is that it postulates only two kinds of style, both of them extreme—an informal, colloquial style versus a formal style—and implies that only the latter is legitimate for serious writing.

The "General English" Style

What students are rarely told is that there exists a *middle* style—"General English," language expert Porter Perrin calls it—that is essentially a happy compromise between formal and informal. Being a compromise, it is by far the most palatable of the written styles, and its area of appropriateness, at least in the real world, is virtually unlimited. Why? Because skilled writers can stay within the "General English" style and still satisfy the four essentials of prose: precision, conciseness, ease, and freshness. (Indeed, as I've shown, they'd be hard put to satisfy all four with any other style.) Little wonder that it has been displacing formal English as the prevailing literary style in recent years.

The special character of this style—at least at its best—was caught by novelist Somerset Maugham when he remarked that "good prose should resemble the conversation of a well-bred man." (Or woman, he surely meant to say.) Several illustrations of it appear in this book—most notably the passages by White in Chapter 1, by Kael in Chapter 2, by Updike in Chapter 6, and by both Lamott and Allison in the present chapter. If you revisit those passages, you'll observe that each is conversational in tone—unaffected, idiomatic, straightforward—but also beautifully wrought. The phrasing is tight and precise; the diction, fresh and apt. Considerable labor has been lavished on these sentences, we can be sure, not a little of it on concealing that very labor. They all seem happy accidents—precisely the intended effect.

What makes such a style so appealing to today's reader is its authenticity and graceful informality. What makes it so attractive to writers themselves, I think, is that it frees them to discover their own

voice.¹ Moreover, it reinforces their desire to speak the truth as they see it. All of us need that reinforcement—we need as much of it as we can get, in fact. We surely don't get it when we feel compelled by a stylistic dogma to efface our personality, adopt the language of orthodoxy, and pretend to an exalted authority we know we don't possess. Bonamy Dobrée, in his *Modern Prose Style*, summed up the matter well:

The modern prose writer, in returning to the rhythms of everyday speech, is trying to be more honest with himself than if he used, as is too wreckingly easy, the forms and terms already published as the expression of other people's minds.

Unfortunately, while the "General English" style may be our answer, it doesn't simplify our writing problems. Just the reverse: the more you poke into its subtle complexities, the more you conclude that it's likely to serve only as an elusive ideal we might aim for. Writing an informal style is easy—you just talk on paper. Writing a formal style is pretty easy, too, once you have the knack—you just haul out all the high-sounding, impersonal phrases you've seen other people use. But writing a good "General English" style is hard. It's hard because it requires a sophisticated control of *tone*, which is the most intangible but perhaps most consequential element in a writer's voice.

As I said earlier, "General English" is essentially a compromise between formality and informality. This means it involves a mingling of contraries: formal and informal diction, objectivity and subjectivity, impersonality and directness. All of these things affect tone. Part of the challenge, then—and it's a formidable one—is to get the right mix. That's as tricky as concocting a good sweet-and-sour sauce. The other part of the challenge is to work around the edges of these various extremes without taking a tumble.

When, for example, will a colloquialism lend just the right note of easy informality, and when might it have the effect of cheapening a sentence? Or, to take the opposite problem, when will an unusual word add a nicely piquant effect, and when might it sound merely pretentious? Yet again: when will a personal touch be welcome, and when narcissistic? Guessing right requires a good ear, taste, and tact—all of them intuitive, finally, and acquired only through considerable reading and writing.

¹"In literature the ambition of a novice is to acquire the literary language; the struggle of the adept is to get rid of it." —George Bernard Shaw

The question of style is obviously a large issue—at bottom, a moral issue—and one that we could go on and on with. We will, in fact, pursue it a little further in the next chapter. But to draw the matter to a temporary close, I'll simply tell you what I tell my students when the issue comes up in class and we're just minutes away from the bell:

Closing Thoughts

"Each time we write, we're making a choice as to the kind of person we prefer to be. Since it's so important, let's make that choice a conscious one for a change. Here's what it involves: 'Do I want to be authentically *me*, speaking my own thoughts in my own idiom, or am I content to be a pseudo-self, using borrowed thoughts, borrowed language, and a borrowed personality to gain the approval of a few literary traditionalists?'

"Our assumptions about our readers will condition that choice, of course, since we never write in a vacuum. But instead of automatically assuming that they will reject authenticity, ask yourself this: Is it likely that mainstream readers actually *prefer* to read the highly repressed, orthodox, formal style, or might they, too, not secretly regard it as all too often effete and stuffy?'

"Sometimes, of course, stuffy or not, the formal style will seem to be the only one appropriate to the occasion, either because tradition decrees it or because the subject calls for an impersonal treatment. If you're writing a legal brief, for example, or a statement of corporate policy or a scientific paper, your job is to transmit information, not personal reflections; and you'll show readers that you understand that job by adopting a serious, reasonably judicial manner that keeps you offstage.

"But, for heaven's sake, let's not allow ourselves to be slaves to blind convention—or unnecessary pomp, for that matter. Few situations are really so intrinsically formal as we're conditioned to believe. Just because everyone else is standing on ceremony on a given occasion doesn't necessarily mean that it's obligatory, or that they *prefer* to; they may simply be afraid to be themselves, and may be just waiting for some free spirit to come along and give them the courage of their instincts. This holds as true for writing as it does for life in general.

"I suggest you keep in mind the example of Franklin Roosevelt. When he gave his periodic radio addresses to the American people, he could have adopted a lofty, presidential style. In fact, convention almost demanded it. But Roosevelt blithely ignored convention, choosing

instead to give what he called ‘fireside chats’—personal, down-to-earth talks laced with colloquialisms and jokes. Here was a man who obviously listened to the promptings of his heart. He figured that the average citizen, like himself, would prefer relaxed plain talk to studied oratory. And he was proved right. Those talks helped make him one of the most endearing of modern presidents.

“So I recommend that you be guided by what your own eyes and ears tell you, not merely by the so-called authorities. Just what *is* considered acceptable style today in serious writing? Look at the evidence—magazines such as *The New Yorker*, *Harper’s*, *Forbes*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *Time*; newspapers like *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post*; the latest books of Pulitzer Prize-winning nonfiction. You’ll find that we’re witnessing a revolution in the notion of what constitutes a good style for serious writing—a movement toward greater naturalness, vigor, informality, and individuality. It was bound to happen. We see similar revolutions occurring in lifestyles, religious beliefs, and sexual attitudes. When even *The New York Times* permits contractions in its editorial columns, as it does now, you know that literary Victorianism is on its way out.”²

Tips for Improving Your Readability

Here are the two best ways I know for promoting an authentic and readable style:

- View your reader as a companionable friend—someone with a warm sense of humor and a love of simple directness.
- Write like you’re actually talking to that friend, but talking with enough leisure to frame your thoughts concisely and interestingly.

If you tack these two tips on the wall by your writing desk and make a habit of practicing them, your readability quotient should soar.

²Bergen Evans, coauthor of *A Dictionary of American Usage* and, until his death in 1978, one of the country’s top usage experts, remarked in 1962: “As written English is used by increasing millions and for more reasons than ever before, the language has become more utilitarian and more informal. Every publication in America today includes pages that would appear, to the purist of forty years ago, unbuttoned gibberish. Not that they are; they simply show that you can’t hold the language of one generation up as a model for the next.”

Here are 26 more. Occasionally they’ll reiterate or anticipate points I make elsewhere, but for convenience of reference I’m including them here as well:

1. As a rule of thumb, whenever you’ve written three longish sentences in a row, make your fourth a short one. And don’t fear the super-short sentence. It’s arresting. Sometimes just a single word will be plenty long:

Many American parents think that today’s colleges are veritable breeding grounds for premarital sex. Nonsense. Each year, literally tens of students graduate with their virtue still intact.

—Gregg Hopkins

That last sentence, by the way, illustrates the literary knuckleball I spoke of in Chapter 6. It also illustrates an axiom in aesthetics: “The smaller the sign [i.e., cue,] the greater the pleasure.” Hopkins counts on our tendency to read “tens of students” as “tens of thousands.” The joke slips through before we realize it, in a double take.

2. Use occasional contractions. They’ll help you unbend, let your readers relax as well, and free up your writing voice. The most popular contractions involve *am*, *are*, *is*, and *not*, especially these:

I’m
you’re, we’re, they’re
he’s, she’s, here’s
won’t, wouldn’t, shouldn’t, don’t, doesn’t, can’t

Compare:

“Why should we not have clean air?”
“Why shouldn’t we have clean air?”

Honestly, which of those two writers would you rather hang out with? Contractions, though, are like kisses: bestowed too freely, they lose their effect, in fact seem cheap. Save them for when you want to humanize some sentence like “Let us start now because I will not be in town tomorrow.” My goodness, who ever *talks* like that? Keep your writing voice natural. Let yourself sound like the very person you’d want to read yourself: “Let’s start now because I won’t be in town tomorrow.”

3. Generally, prefer *that* to *which*. The one is conversational; the other, slightly more bookish. I like to save “which” for after a comma, to introduce a nonrestrictive clause: “The bike, which she rode just yesterday, has a flat.” The term “nonrestrictive,” by the way, simply means that the

clause doesn't restrict the field of reference to one particular object; the clause is contributing only some incidental information, so it functions just like a parenthesis, and could be cut with little damage. Here, because the sentence begins with the words "The bike," our writer has already specified the bike she's talking about, so her "which" clause isn't specifying anything, it's just adding some other information. Her commas around it are appropriate. But compare that to this sentence: "The bike that she rode just yesterday has a flat." Here, our *that* clause is clearly restrictive: It narrows the reference to a *particular* bike—the one ridden just yesterday. That makes it essential information, so it mustn't be set off by commas. My own practice is this: *If I could cut the clause, I'll use "which" and a comma before it; otherwise, I'll normally use "that."* But note my hedge: "normally." When in doubt, I'll read the sentence aloud, testing it on my ear. And I'll check to see what other *that's* and *which's* may lurk in the area. Sometimes I'll want a "which" purely for variety. Other times I'll want it just because, for whatever reason, it seems to sound better. So much of writing is finally intuitive, isn't it? As Rudolf Flesch has wisely said, "You have to go by feel, not by rule."

4. If you mean "I," say "I." Don't wrap yourself in pompositives like "the writer" or "one" or "this author" or "we." Reserve "we" and "our" for those situations where you're referring to both your reader and yourself—i.e., where there really is someone else involved. Reserve "one" for when you mean "a person," as in "One would have to be a CPA to grasp that." When referring to the reader alone, address that person as "you," not "the reader." The printed page already puts enough distance between the two of you. Why add to it? When generalizing about readers or people, and when including yourself among them, go ahead and use "we" and "our." They're simple, conversational, and democratic.

5. Use dashes to isolate concluding phrases for emphasis or humorous effect. Pauline Kael is an artist with the dash. By rereading her review quoted in Chapter 2, you'll get an idea of the effects you can achieve with it yourself.

6. Professionals quote, amateurs paraphrase. Pros understand a powerful truth: readers love listening to people talk—love hearing the actual words, not a preemptive digest of them. So use dialogue wherever your context warrants it—it's intrinsically dramatic. And don't be shy about inventing some. *Imagined* thoughts—one of a writer's best resources—let you do just that:

Events inexorably force Enobarbus to a decision—an impossible one. It would seem that he's thinking here something like this: "My mind tells me to leave Antony for Rome. My heart tells me to leave Rome for Antony. Both

courses of action are right, and both are wrong. To go either way is to deny a central fact of my existence. I am a Roman, but I am also a man. There seems to be only one solution: death. It will eliminate the need to choose."

Here's another example, this one from my student Matt Darroh, in a paper on John Updike's classic short story "A&P":

Mr. Lengel offers Sammy some well-intended advice: "You'll feel this for the rest of your life. . . ." In other words: "You'd better get used to keeping your mouth shut when you don't agree with certain things because that's life, and that's what you have to do. If you want to be successful, you need to quit being so idealistic. That's what I did, and that's what you have to do."

And here is the prominent architectural critic Witold Rybczynski, in his fascinating book *Home: A Short History of an Idea*, drolly contrasting the typical high-fashion modern chair, stripped of frivolity and frills, with its well-padded, voluptuous predecessors:

It exhibits lightness and movability, and it invites admiration for these qualities—just as a well-made camp cot does. But it does not ask to be sat in, or at least not for very long. The Rococo chair invites conversation, and the Victorian chair invites after-dinner naps, but the Modern chair is all business. "Let's get this sitting over with and get back to something useful," it commands. It is about many things, this chair, but it is no longer about ease, leisure, or, if truth be told, about comfort.

And here is Stewart Brand, a National Book Award-winner, sharing with us in *How Buildings Learn: What Happens After They're Built* how building historian Orlando Ridout "reads" the statements that some house styles are making, or trying to make, about their owners:

"The front facade [says Ridout] is a self-conscious part of the house, where the owner is trying to make a statement to the world about what he is about—whether it's 'I'm a simple man with simple tastes' or 'I'm richer than you are and don't you forget it' or simply, 'I have crossed the threshold of gentility. I can now afford a brick house with a fancy entrance porch.'"

7. The more abstract your argument, the more you should lace it with what I call "word pictures"—illustrations, analogies, vivid quotations, metaphors, similes. These are aids not only to your readers' understanding but also to their memory. In fact, they'll probably remember your illustration or analogy far longer than the abstract idea itself. But if the illustration is a good one, they'll be able to reconstruct the thought fairly

easily, so it will have served its purpose twice over. Here, for example, is Pulitzer Prize-winner Ron Suskind, in *A Hope in the Unseen*, explaining what faces an ambitious African-American youth, Cedric Jennings, at his crime-infested, inner-city high school in Washington, D.C.:

Cedric's 4.02 grade-point average virtually ties him for first in the junior class with a quiet, studious girl named LaCountiss Spinner. Pride in such accomplishment is acceptable behavior for sterling students at high schools across the land, but at Ballou and other urban schools like it, something else is at work. Educators have even coined a phrase for it. They call it the crab/bucket syndrome: when one crab tries to climb from the bucket, the others pull it back down. The forces dragging students toward failure—especially those who have crawled farthest up the side—flow through every corner of the school. Inside the bucket, there is little chance of escape.

8. Minimize your adjectives. Try to let nouns—especially *accurate* nouns—work alone. This will simplify your style *and* give it more point. Voltaire, who knew something about style, wasn't overstating the case much when he said, "The adjective is the enemy of the noun." Twain echoed him: "As to the Adjective: when in doubt, strike it out." In a charming 1880 letter to a schoolboy named D. W. Bowser, with whom he corresponded for two years, Twain expanded on this advice, saying:

I notice that you use plain, simple language, short words and brief sentences. That is the way to write English—it is the modern way and the best way. Stick to it; don't let fluff and flowers and verbosity creep in. When you catch an adjective, kill it. No, I don't mean utterly, but kill most of them—then the rest will be valuable. They weaken when they are close together. They give strength when they are wide apart. An adjective habit, or a wordy, diffuse, flowery habit, once fastened upon a person, is as hard to get rid of as any other vice.

9. Minimize your adverbs, too—especially trite intensifiers like *very*, *extremely*, *really*, *clearly*, and *terribly*, which show a 90% failure rate. Compare "She was very upset by the news" with "She was shattered by the news." The use of *very* and its cognates diminishes the word that follows, making it feel weak. Often, that word is actually fine. But when it isn't, "weak" generally means "inaccurate," "inexact." So find another word—there always is one. And note this irony: when you then cut the intensifier, your phrasing usually *gains* intensity. Which sounds hungrier, "very hungry" or "ravenous"? No contest. But I'll concede this: the right adverb, fresh and adroitly placed, is one of life's finest small pleasures.

Here are two proofs, both from Stewart Brand. Again, these gems appear in his *How Buildings Learn: What Happens after They're Built*. In each case, he saves his adverb for the next-to-last word, where it won't get overlooked:

James Donnelly of Whole Earth inked every page of the manuscript bright red with line-editing corrections, for which I am whimperingly grateful.

Because of water, houses deteriorate most from the bottom up and the top down. Damage comes from below thanks to what the British call, knowledgeably, "damp."

10. Use the fewest words possible and the simplest words possible. Occasionally, to be sure, the longer word will work best—it may express the idea concisely, or contribute just the cadence and texture wanted, or gratify your reader with the joy of surprise. (Remember *rectitude* and *chastening* in the Updike passage quoted in Chapter 6?) But be warned: the more you surrender to the temptation to write fancy, the further you'll stray from your true feelings and the more you'll write in a style designed to impress rather than serve the reader. Also, oratory can fool us into thinking we're saying something smart, when in fact we may not yet have gotten past a platitude. So follow Henry Thoreau's famous advice, for your own protection: "Simplify, simplify." This sounds easy but isn't, given all the temptations of self-indulgence and vanity. "To write simply is as difficult as to be good," sighed Somerset Maugham. Hemingway agreed: "Writing plain English is hard work."

11. Be sure that each sentence is somehow connected to the ones immediately before and after it. There's no other way to achieve fluidity, or what I like to call a "clean narrative line"—the hallmark, in my opinion, of professional prose.

12. In a long essay or report, summarize your argument every now and then so that readers can keep their bearings. I myself enjoy seeing these summaries cast as brief transitional paragraphs, maybe three or four sentences long. They make a welcome change of pace; they also *show* the steps in a writer's argument.

13. If you like putting questions to your reader, fine. They can add point to a discussion—and, like transitional paragraphs, variety to your style. But answer them promptly. If, for example, you've raised a juicy question at the end of your opening paragraph (which, by the way, is a wonderful strategy), the opening sentence of your next paragraph should start answering it—explicitly. You've created an expectation in us

(*Hmm, what's her answer?*) that you need to gratify, pronto. If, as often happens in that second paragraph, you find you need to explain something else first, fine; but by all means *explain* to us that you have to explain that thing first, so we'll know you haven't forgotten the question. More often than not, young writers will forget to clue in their reader as to what they are about—where they're headed and why they're taking that particular route. They assume it's understood. But the reader isn't clairvoyant; she knows only what the writer remembers to tell her. So share your road map with her. Then she can just sit back and enjoy the trip.

14. Use semicolons to reduce choppiness, particularly when you have several sentences with parallel structures. Also use them for a change of pace. (See the section on semicolons in Chapter 13.)

15. Read your prose aloud. *Always* read your prose aloud. Do you sound comfortable with your own ideas? Do you sound at ease with your reader? Can you read each sentence without stumbling or running out of breath? Does the phrasing sound like you, talking at top form, or does it sound alien, like it's coming out of some statue? Does your prose flow along? Have you managed to avoid unconscious word repeats, especially at the beginning and end of consecutive sentences? Skilled writers will always double-check those two spots. Their paragraph openings, too. It's easy to fall into a rut there.

16. Instead of always saying "first" and "second," occasionally use the numerals themselves in parentheses. (A *pair* of parentheses, please.) It's a superstition that numerals have no place in serious writing. For proof, browse through any major anthology of expository prose.

17. Numbers are tricky. When to write them out? When not to? *Everybody* has a theory on this one—which is a useful reminder of just how variable "rules" can be. Some experts claim that if a number needs a hyphen (e.g., "twenty-two") or a space (e.g., "two hundred"), it must be written as a numeral (e.g., "22" and "200"). Others will tell us, with equal flatness, that if it's two syllables or less, it must be written as a word (e.g., "sixteen" versus "31"). The *Chicago Manual of Style*, ultraconservative here, tells us to write out "whole numbers from one through ninety-nine." Still other experts insist, "Use numerals for everything over twenty." Actually, that last dictum is getting closer to my own taste—and of course it *is* just a matter of taste—since they've made it pretty brain-proof. But why write *eighteen* when it's so much simpler to write *18*, and when *18* is easier for readers to remember—not to mention already converted into the numeral they'll actually use? What can possibly be objectionable about *18*? I hear someone answer, "It lacks the dignity of *eighteen*." Such a person doubtless undresses with the lights out. As for

my own practice: For its simplicity and good sense, I go with AP style here—that is, the *Associated Press Stylebook*: "Spell out whole numbers below 10, use figures for 10 and above."³ But since I always fear forgetting which side 10 goes on, I like to recite their rule this way: "*If it's a one-digit number, make it a word.*" May I confess, though? Sometimes I'll write out a number like 16. And not just at the beginning of a sentence, either, where you have to. More heretical still, sometimes I'll use figures, not words, for numbers below 10. You'll see me do this in Chapter 10, where, in a section on "Attractive Formatting," I offer a word count of several sentences. It just seemed the simpler, more graphic style there, and I was emboldened to employ it by remembering the example of a professor friend who writes for eminent science journals. When citing numbers, he and his peers regularly use figures where non-science writers might fear to. My point is, while I admire consistency in style, I also have learned to respect instinct; and sometimes "sixteen" feels better, or looks better—don't ask me why. The same with "5" or "8." Maybe I'm unconsciously adopting Anne Lamott's aesthetic here: "writing needs to breathe and move."

18. When you begin a sentence with *And* or *But* (and you most definitely should now and then), don't, for heaven's sake, put a comma after it. You want to quicken your prose with those words, and the comma would just kill any gain. Here's Rybczynski again, in *Home: The History of an Idea*:

The modern kitchen, in which everything is hidden in artfully designed cabinets, looks well organized, like a bank office. But a kitchen does not function like an office; if anything, it is more like a workshop.

The comma is needed *only if a parenthetical phrase follows*. In that case, another comma goes *after* that phrase as well: "But, considering the evidence, she's probably right."

19. *So* and *Yet* also make great lead-offs, though most amateur writers can't believe it, or refuse to, at least in their own prose. They're sure they'd be sinning, even after seeing the practice credentialed in reputable publications, and even after having it explained to them. Maybe this is just something you have to develop nerve for. If you're a skeptic, I suggest you keep watch for such sentences, and monitor your reactions

³This rule also jibes with the U.S. Government Printing Office *Manual of Style*, which sets the style of all federal government publications, including United States Supreme Court decisions and the *Congressional Record*. It also jibes with MLA (Modern Language Association) style.

to them. Over time, I think you'll come around. Take this example from software developer and essayist Paul Graham:

Part of what software has to do is explain itself. So to write good software you have to understand how little users understand.

Or take this passage, from Mark Bittman, a *New York Times* food columnist, writing about the lovely Italian coastal province of Liguria:

The coastline, riddled with natural harbors, made the Ligurians great traders, too. Genoa, the region's capital, was a powerful city-state that vied with Venice to rule the Mediterranean in the 15th and 16th centuries. So food products from all over northern Italy and the world were exported or imported through Liguria.

Could anything be smoother, or simpler, than those little segues? Note that *So* and *Yet*, like *And* and *But*, are normally spared commas because they're so short and brisk. But their polysyllabic kin—*Consequently* and *However*—normally *do* get commas. That's another reason right there to like *So* and *Yet*.

20. As a sentence starter, prefer *But* to *However*. It has two fewer syllables and takes no comma, so it's a cleaner, punchier transition word—especially at the head of a paragraph, where it's peerless. *However* seems to work best internally, positioned right next to the point of emphasis. When it's at the sentence head, it says to the reader, "Here, you go figure out where the stress ought to be." What reader wants that job? Not me.

21. Do you have a good wit? If so, share it—share your sense of verbal play, your good spirits. Let yourself have fun with your prose. What's called "serious writing" need not be solemn writing. F. L. Lucas, in his famous book *Style*, observed with characteristic good sense: "No manual of style that I know has a word to say of good humour; and yet, for me, a lack of it can sometimes blemish all the literary beauties and blandishments ever taught."

22. Paragraphing is hugely important—as much a matter of good style, and good sense, as practically anything else one can think of in writing. Long paragraphs intimidate most readers (*I don't want to go in there!*); lots of short paragraphs can suggest a breezy, Madison Avenue glibness or a refusal to pursue a point home; a succession of cookie-cutter paragraphs—say, two per page—can suggest a tired imagination. Moral: Use variety to keep things alive and vital, as Dr. Seuss advised. But be sure that your lead-off sentence in each paragraph—your *bridge*

sentence—does double duty as a *topic sentence*. It should forecast, if not state outright, the new thought you're now developing there. Go back to the last page of Chapter 4 ("Middles") and study the 11 bridge sentences I quote there from Bergen Evans. Even without having read the article itself, you can tell in each case where the paragraph is heading. That makes for beautifully coherent, fluid prose.

23. Here's a tip on the creative use of white space—a tip I'll have more to say about in Chapter 10. Let's say you need to shift from one large section of your exposition to another large section, but you're stymied as to how to bridge into it and at the same time signal the magnitude of the shift. The solution? Skip four spaces instead of the usual two between paragraphs. Doing this will

- Cue readers *visually* that a major new section is at hand.
- Give them a convenient place to pause.
- Spare you from having to manufacture a real transition. Here, white space substitutes for *meanwhile*, a most convenient pseudo-bridge that pros rely on when all else fails. It says, "OK, enough of that. Now let's move on to . . ."

24. Choose your title with care. Leave the "teasing" title to writers who are still putting cuteness before communication. Focus instead on making your own title accurately descriptive, which is challenge enough. If possible, try to give it zing as well. Remember, it's our introduction to you as well as to your paper. A pedestrian title is about as welcoming as a burnt-out motel sign.

25. If you've written a paragraph that sounds labored, back off and ask yourself, "How would I *say* this to a friend?" Then go ahead and talk it out loud. Afterward, write down as nearly as you can recall what you said. Chances are, most of your talked-out sentences will shame your earlier, written version of them. Why? When we write, we tend to over-complicate, and our very words get in the way; but when we talk, we instinctively simplify. We need it to be simple just to get it out, it seems.

26. Another tip for the same crisis is this: Take a short break and read some paragraphs of a writer whose style you relish. Try to *soak in* that style; try to feel yourself actually writing those paragraphs as you read them. Then say to yourself, "OK, now how would [Wonderful Writer] write this?" and let yourself try again. This usually works. And even when it doesn't, it will at least give you a fresh perspective. That's maybe half the battle right there.