The Sense of Style

The Thinking Persons's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century

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What is really meant by writing well, and having a good style? On the lowest level there is the issue of correctness, some things are permitted others are forbidden. Some people take those issues very seriously and are referred to as sticklers. They are easy to make fun of. On one hand they prescribe to a simplistic and naive notion of language, as something fixed and prescriptive, on the other hand when they tend in public to inveigh against abuses of language they not seldom fall into the same traps themselves. A professional linguist and cognitive scientist to boot is of course not so naive. Languages develop and are not set by fixed rules, the proper task of a linguist is to describe not to offer norms. In fact grammar itself is but a partial description of language and as far as it is normative, i.e. providing rules, those tend to be riddled with exceptions. Language is not mathematics or physics, its rules are not ironclad and its laws not eternal but subject to the ravages of time. You learn a language by exposure. First during the critical stages of growing up, a process surprisingly fast and effective, but only pertaining to the basic aspect of language, namely its oral one. Similarly to learn to write you need to read a lot, and this is a far less natural process and takes much longer time. To acquire a sense of style you need a lot of exposure, and this is what eventually provides you with an ear going beyond that of the oral aspect. Most of us do not know the rules, mostly because there are so few articulated ones, and even those that have been marked down, we usually can do without as long as we follow our ear(s). But let us start from the beginning, and consider what is usually referred to as good and correct usage. The author does not do so, meaning starting out this way but instead relegates this part of his presentation to the very end.

Pace the bogey rules and hang-ups of the sticklers, they have a point, rules sometimes are necessary, even if they individually may appear silly and above all arbitrary. Conventions are of course by nature arbitrary, but sticking to them have benefits. Whether to drive on the right or left is a matter of taste, but it is of utmost importance that a community sticks to the same taste, otherwise chaos will ensue. The same with language. Admittedly the meaning of words tend to drift over time, although when it comes to basic words they show remarkable stability, yet it is very convenient that their meanings are fixed, as far as it is possible to locate the meaning of words, which in natural languages tend to be somewhat fluid. In particular this pertains to unusual sophisticated words which you have to get right as not to be branded as lazy and slovenly at best and stupid and uneducated at worst. Many of those words are very similar yet with precise meanings distinct from each other. One does well to check on them in dictionaries as to meaning and spelling to save oneself from blundering. Then there are some guidelines for punctation, many of them conventional ones, which one may do well respecting. This too is on the

level of acquiring codes to enable you to belong to the educated and literary elite. Such things you may take seriously or not, what really matters in writing is something else and more fundamental. Writing is about clarity and effectiveness of communication, something which is independent of language in the sense that it applies to all languages equally. And ultimately any rule or recommendation of usage needs to be based on its relevance as to those ulterior goals of promoting clarity.

Writing is an encoding of natural oral language, as such it leaves out a lot which comes for free in regular intercourse. Sentences are linearly ordered by necessity, but the structures they represent are not linear, but tree-like. There are of course ways of encoding that structure, but they tend to be a bit cumbersome. One is to use parentheses nested into each other, but this is rarely used as it would be forbidding to encounter, thus much of the nesting has to be conveyed by other means. In oral interchanges this is easier and more natural, through a varied prosody which is hard to convey on the printed page. In principle nothing is impossible, but matters have to be decoded in real time by human cognitive resources, which are surprisingly limited, in fact human cognitive power may be inferior to those of many other fellow mammals. The crucial bottleneck is the limitations of the working memory. It used to be said that it is only possible to maintain seven independent items in it simultaneously, now even that is thought of as an exaggeration and number such as three and four seems more realistic. In fact our powers of so called subtizicing, meaning to gauge the number of items without counting, seems to be limited by some such number. In order to overcome this handicap you need to be clever. Counting is one such stratagem, or more generally so called chunking. This means that one item can stand for several, one of each in its turn being a chunking, and so in principle *ad infinitum* although in practice the lengths of such chains will be limited as well, because of the human slowness in unfolding (but once again certain unfoldings may be automized by virtue of sustained repetition). Basically the structure of sentences is based on phrases that serve various grammatical functions such as being nouns or verbs, and each phrase may be further subdivided into subsidiary phrases. Phrases that fit together make up clauses, and a sentence may be made up of complete as well as subsidiary clauses, and the understanding of the structure is not only of paramount importance as to understanding, without it there is no understanding at all. Thus the main work in reading a text is to reconstruct the structure from the hints given by the text. Text whose main purpose is to communicate from one consciousness to another an understanding of facts and relationships the author refers to as the classical text, and that is the one he is exclusively concerned wit. As he puts it the classical text or style is to convey what the writer sees in front of him, literally or metaphorically, to the reader. Then there are other kinds of text with entirely different agendas, and a text that blurs the distinction between reader and author inevitably degenerates into incoherence and becomes a kind of stream of consciousness, to which we will have occasion to return.

Now a good style is one which facilitates the hard work for the reader. It does so foremost by ruling out ambiguities, at least unintended ones, without this the ambition of faithful communication is undercut from the start. Secondly it does so by making the reconstruction as quick and effortless as possible for the reader. While the first is fairly straightforward, just being a matter of logic so to speak, the second is the real challenge. For one thing, sentences should not be too complicated and too daunting to unravel. True

certain topics demand a lot on the reader yet it is unnecessary to add to the already existing burdens. The gauging of the degree of complication is a rather subtle thing. A long string of more or less self-contained clauses, where the preceding ones give the necessary clues to the succeeding ones, is comparatively easy to take in, the effort is minimal and can be sustained for a very long time provided that the topic is an engaging one. Harder it is if the different parts of the structure depend on each other in a complicated way, so the meaning of one clause say only becomes apparent when the meaning of another one emerges later on. Thus if the branching so to speak goes from right to left rather than the other way, the demands on the reader are increased. Even worse if the nesting is done in the middle, than the mind is forced to go back and forth repeatedly while laboring not to lose track. Here the nature of the language does play a role. In uninflected languages such as English the meaning and significance of a word depends on the context, hence word order is paramount, an order which not always agrees with logic and imposes an amount of rigidity that can be hard to handle. In the case of English this is further aggravated by the fluidity of the vocabulary, in principle any noun can serve as a verb. 'To table a motion','to board a plane','to bread a roast','to pen an article','to ship a gift' ,'to house a guest' or more fancifully to 'to steam a boat','to car into a city','to gift a ship','to guest a house'. Thus 'he ships gifts' means something different than 'he gifts ships'. In other languages such as the close relative German or the somewhat more distant Russian, a word comes with most of its grammatical information attached to it, thus it is less dependable on context and thus the order of words is far more flexible. The author is an American, writing for an American audience, and thus such fascinating topics, as how different languages meets different challenges, is naturally not explored. One may argue that there is a natural remedy for such problems, namely to provide standard sentence structures, devoid of any convolutions, and the use of others to be prohibited at least in the classical mode. Attempts at such strictures have been made. Manuals on good writing conduct warn against the use of the passive, always use the active form. Much can be said for that, but it is not always possible. The passive form has survived and thus one suspects for good reasons. And as to different sentence structures, sometimes what has to be conveyed is convoluted to start out with, so a certain amount of convolution is necessary, one can only meet the reader so far. To understand a reasonably complex mathematical proof, maybe hardly the typical text that most people encounter, yet, if any, a quintessential case of the classical style, it is not enough to have the presentation chunked up in suitable lemmas, to really understand it, it needs to sink in. Of course the same thing is applicable to a much wider spectrum of topics. It is not enough to understand the sentences, it is only the first if necessary step, the subsequent digestion constitutes the postreading phase and is the sole responsibility of the reader. It is a common misunderstanding of the purpose of pedagogy that if a text is only clear and pedagogical enough, true understanding will be more or less immediate and concurrent with the decoding. This is not how it works in real life. The purpose of good prose is just to deliver the 'food to the stomach', what goes on afterwards is a private matter.

If you understand that clarity is the purpose of good prose everything else falls into place. Variability has no intrinsic worth it is not to be pursued for its own sake. When an important comparison is to be made, variability should be kept to a minimum in order to

emphasize what is really variable, just as in say a medical investigations, you keep all the variables, save one, fixed. Yet if this is not the issue, it may serve other useful purposes such as diversion and de-emphasis. For similar reason a proper name say, should not be unnecessarily repeated but be replaced by the appropriate pronoun not to mislead the reader into thinking that a new character is being introduced. That this is not the case can of course be easily checked, but it will need to be so, and adds a gratuitous obstacle for the reader. In the same vein the human mind has difficulty with repeated negations, two is hard enough, thee requires a real mental effort, while four or more is simply ridiculous. Logical notation can be drastically reduced by using only negations, one logical connective and one quantifier, but the result in spite of notational simplicity becomes humanly unreadable even after a lot of exposure and practice. The limitations of the working memory cannot be overcome by practice, no matter how intense and sustained, there is no alternative to chunking, as noted above, and that of course leads to a proliferation of signs. In principle we need only ones and zeroes to encode all information, but it is hardly practical. Of course one cannot dispense with negations entirely, it is often useful in order to contrast the real state of affairs with what is imagined, and it is always pedagogical to start out from what is naturally assumed. How would you express 'I am not a racist' in positive terms? Is there even a word for the opposite of 'racist'? Should one assume that in our culture everyone is a racist until proven innocent?

Now coherence is not just on the sentence level. Coherent sentences may be stapled on top of each other, and even if there is local order, there will be no global, and if so, the first order becomes irrelevant. A text is unified by topic, each sentence linking to other ones, mirroring the nested structure within each sentence. In fact the way to interpret a sentence follows from other sentences in its vicinity. We are once again speaking about context, and context makes things easier for the reader. In fact many alternate readings of a sentence may be ruled out by the context, making it unnecessary to burden it with additional pointers embedded in it just to enable the reader to avoid interpretations she or he would never think of in the first place. Thus style is a global phenomenon, simple and unremarkable sentences may add up to something quite remarkable and complicated. But of course the higher the level the structure is placed, the less relevant it becomes to formulate general rules, as rules, although even when general, always have to have specific consequences to be useful.

Now to the final issue, which the author treats at an early stage, is the question of lack of clarity particularly in the case of much academic writing. How come? Academics ought to be masters at style, considering their education and intellectual pursuit, constantly engaged in writing. Is it because the subject matter is so difficult or is it a case of willful obfuscation to create a coterie and to shut out outsiders? In the case of some classical hard-core disciplines such as mathematics and physics where there is indubitably real content if subtle, the need for obfuscation is nil, while in many other academic endeavors, such as gender studies, it is hard to divest yourself of the suspicion that this actually is the case. Or simpler put: You suspect this is the case. In other words, that the lack of real content necessitates its absence being hidden under large chunks of verbiage, the more abstract and the more impenetrable the better. The author assumes not, or rather that the interesting case is where the obfuscation is not intended. Once again we return to the phenomenon

of chunking, which is the only way we can transcend those cognitive limitations imposed by working memory, and in a somewhat reductive way, one may characterize knowledge as elaborate structures of chunking. Different people know different things and facts of course, but a more relevant way of putting it would be to say that different people have developed different chunkings. As William James already pointed out, your memory is limited and you cannot expand it, all you can do is to organize it. Darwin was not blessed with a prodigious memory, only that his knowledge was so well structured. The feats of memorists of committing large chunks of meaningless data are based on finding some more or less contrived chunking structure availing themselves on *ad hoc* associations to already familiar structures. Such applications to study seem to me to be spurious as subjects you study already come with structures and it is those you should become familiar with. 'Oh be a fine girl kiss me right now sweetie' is a jingle I came across fifty years ago and still retain in my memory although I seldom had ever had occasion to do so. It lists the spectral classes of stars in the order of O B A F G K M R N S, a seemingly random of letters giving little purchase for memory. If such knowledge is essential to you, you gradually acquire it without the aid of a jingle, if not, it is dead knowledge and you have no business knowing it in the first place and provides no pleasure above that of the satisfaction of greed. Now in academic writing it is the curse of knowledge that is the culpable factor. All communication is based on shared knowledge and common assumptions, obvious ones being a common vocabulary and shared grammatical conventions. When there is a gap there is a problem. To the expert in the field there are in addition special chunkings having become second nature, and it is very hard to realize that those are not shared with everyone. When the appropriate audience is present it works fine, or at least better, but there is always the possibility that speaking or writing on things you know very intimately no one else can really follow you and your intercourse, spoken or written, becomes more of a stream of consciousness in which you roam around your vast field of associations with ease and pleasure leaving the reader in the lurch. The coherence is already in place for you, there is no need to create it. The author takes as an example the military historian Keegan who by virtue of his reputation is allowed to roam indulgently in his mind. The problem is to remove your knowledge and to start all over again. This is the perennial problems of writers of popular science, where it is not a question of leaving out the difficult bits and pieces, this only renders it incomprehensible to expert and neophyte alike, but to rebuild your knowledge from scratch again, as I am fond of putting it, speaking to the child in you. As a child you were indeed ignorant, but not stupid, maybe even smarter than you are now. The secret of good popular writing is not to patronize your readers but to once again share in the process of discovery. Then of course even if the reader is satisfied and believes to have understood everything, an illusion that is not that hard to create, everything is not solved, that would be the fulfillment of the impossible dream of the pedagogue already referred to. Most understanding you get from reading say popular books in physics (and the author brings out for particular praise the efforts of Greene) is inevitably superficial. Without doing the mathematics, and popular books are never allowed to present formulas lest the reader becomes unduly intimidated, you cannot get any deeper understanding, nor really engage your imagination, but those are matters beyond the responsibility of the author. If he has intrigued you and inspired you to delve deeper he has, in the case of

popular writing, done more than enough.

But how do you divest your superior knowledge and meet the reader on level ground? There is no way you can do it on your own, as there is no way you can divine what is in the mind of others, without some kind of confrontation. You simply need to experiment, confront reality, by showing your drafts to outsiders and in that way see what could possibly confuse. The process is of course unending but its fruits are not contingent upon its completion.

Finally, to confront a lesser issue, but nevertheless a very topical one, is English a sexist language? Of course it is, and the author shows convincingly that the pronouns 'he' and 'she' can never be experienced as gender neutral. The same problem occurs in Swedish of course, while I believe it is mitigated in languages such as German when genders are more of a grammatical nature. Germans have no problems of referring to a 'Mädchen' as 'es' (it), and as noted pronouns as 'er' and 'sie' refer to such a multitude of objects with no reference to gender, that they are more likely to be seen more neutral. It also makes substitutions easier. The word 'Leser' is masculine in German, and thus the reference to 'er' is more likely to refer to the grammar of the word than the sexual identity of the reader. There is of course the option in German to use the word 'Leserin' but unless for special emphasis it would seem pedantic to maintain the distinction. But not being a native German speaker myself I can only speculate. On the other hand the drive in the 70's to change words as 'chairman' to chairperson' I find merely silly. After all there is 'man' in 'woman' and 'male' in 'female'. In Sweden there has been a concerted effort to create a new pronoun in order to achieve political correctness with less tedious effort. In other words to create a gender neuter compromise (hen) between 'han' and 'hon'. The move has been resisted, as such tinkerings with very basic structures of languages are, but that does not mean that it may not eventually prevail. It is harder to come up with such a word in English. Where do you find the middle between 'he' and 'she'? And the author discusses the use of the singular 'they' which many find an abomination. Then finally there are languages that dispense with gender altogether, such as Finnish, but I am yet to be convinced that it makes the speakers more gender equal in daily life. To me much of the issue is a red herring.

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