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Six major historical writing systems (left to right, top to bottom: Sumerian pictographs, Egyptian hieroglyphs, Chinese syllabograms, Old Persian cuneiform, Roman alphabet, Indian Devanagari)

Why this book?

1. Most books teaching style don't go much beyond high mindedness. They are all for accuracy, brevity, clarity, and so forth, but—beyond offering good and bad examples—none explain how to do it. **This book teaches how a writer can achieve the lofty aims of quality prose.**

2. Most books teaching style gesture toward audiences. **This book explains in detail how a writer must anticipate what readers look for as they make their way through complex, usually unfamiliar material.**

3. Most books teaching style are wholly innocent of recent work done in the cognitive sciences. In particular, this book uses centrally relevant findings in cognitive psychology to helping writers **understand the problems that readers must solve every time they begin a new sentence.**

This book's approach is an effort to learn a system of principles that we can use to simultaneously **diagnose the quality of writing** and, if necessary, **suggest ways to improve it.**

What we want: **To be able to work confidently and skilfully to transform a rough first draft written for ourselves into a version crafted for the reader.**

There is folk wisdom about what we ought to do brainstorm, take notes, make a scratch outline, analyze objectives, define audiences; then as we draft, keep on writing, don't stop to revise minute details of punctuation, spelling, etc., let the act of writing generate ideas. When we create a first draft, we should be most concerned with getting onto the page something that reflects what we had in mind when we began to write and, if we are lucky, something new that we didn't. But once we have made clear to ourselves what ideas, points, and arguments might be available, we then have to reshape that first draft to provide what our readers need. **We write a first draft for ourselves; the drafts thereafter increasingly for the reader. That is the first objective of the book: to show how a writer quickly and efficiently transforms a rough first draft into a version crafted for the reader.**

How do we do it? **We learn how to diagnose different problems in writing and how to overcome them.**


We write badly for different reasons

- (a) confusion about a subject
- (b) confusion about the reason for writing
- (c) confusion about the audience
- (d) insufficient time to think through ideas or revise
- (e) carelessness
- (f) entrenched bad habits
- (g) sheer incompetence (poor training etc.)



Regardless of the reason the result is the same → tangled prose.

While the ‘bad result’ is the same, we need to approach different causes of bad writing in different ways. Understanding some of the causes helps us **diagnose different problems and treat them.**

All of us in professional communities must understand three things about complex writing:

- complex writing may precisely reflect complex ideas 

But

- complex writing may—without good reason—complicate complex ideas 
- complex writing may—without good reason—complicate simple ideas 

Here is an example of the second kind of complexity—*when complex complicates already complex ideas* (i.e. when complex writing makes a complex idea more complex)

ORIGINAL	THIS MEANS
<p>Similarities may develop in the social organization of societies at similar levels of economic development because there are “imperatives” built into the socio-technical system they adopt which drive them to similar responses to common problems. This model, therefore, places great emphasis on the level of economic development of nations to account for movement towards common forms of social organization. Alternatively, convergence may result from simple borrowing, so that a model of the diffusion of innovation becomes appropriate. Where such borrowing occurs levels of development may be less relevant than integration in networks of influence through which ideas and social forms are diffused. Economic development may, of course, set limits on the capacity of a nation to institute systems available to be copied, and the propensities to copy may enable nations to install convergent patterns more rapidly than one would have predicted from knowledge of their level of economic development.</p>	<p>Societies at similar levels of economic development may converge because “imperatives” in their sociotechnical system cause them to respond to similar problems in similar ways. To explain this, the model emphasizes economic development. But societies may also converge because they borrow, so a model would have to explain how ideas and social forms diffuse through networks of influence. Of course, a society at a low level of development may be unable to copy features of some systems. But a society with a strong propensity to copy may do so more rapidly than predicted.</p>

Here is an example of the third kind of complexity—*when complex writing gratuitously complicates simple ideas* (i.e. over complicates that which is otherwise simple or straightforward)

ORIGINAL	THIS MEANS
<p>The absence from this dictionary of a handful of old, well-known vulgate terms for sexual and excretory organs and functions is not due to a lack of citations for these words from current literature. On the contrary, the profusion of such citations in recent years would suggest that the terms in question are so well known as to require no explanation. The decision to eliminate them as part of the extensive culling process that is the inevitable task of the lexicographer was made on the practical grounds that there is still objection in many quarters to the appearance of these terms in print and that to risk keeping this dictionary out of the hands of some students by introducing several terms that require little if any elucidation would be unwise.</p> <p>—From the foreword, <i>Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language</i></p>	<p>We excluded vulgar words for sex and excretion not because we could not find them. We excluded them because many people object to seeing them. Had we included them, some teachers and schoolboards would have refused to let this dictionary be used by their students, who in any event already know what those words mean.</p>

Prior Knowledge and Perceived Clarity

We also know that a particular passage of prose may seem not to reflect these principles, and yet to some readers will still seem entirely clear. That experience does not invalidate the principles we offer. The reason is this: What counts most in comprehending a text is how much we already know about its content. If we know a lot about viruses, we will be able to understand a badly written account of viruses better than someone who knows relatively little. We measure the quality of writing not just by what is objectively on a page, but by the way we feel as we construct new knowledge out of our experience with the words on the page. That feeling good or bad depends substantially on what we bring to that page.

The importance of prior knowledge suggests two points: First, since a competent writer usually knows his subject matter very well, perhaps too well, he is systematically handicapped in anticipating how easily readers will make sense of his text. Second, since a writer usually overestimates how much readers know, a writer should give readers more help than he thinks they need. This book lays out principles that help a writer predict how easily a reader will comprehend complex and unfamiliar material when that reader is not deeply versed in it. If the writer finds that his prose may hinder his intended reader, he can use these principles to suggest ways to revise it.

We are our own worst editors because we know too much about our subject to experience vicariously how a reader largely innocent of our knowledge will read.

And to a reader-editor who must deal with the problems of someone else's writing, these questions will suggest ways to interpret the discomfort they often feel, to locate its source quickly, and to suggest ways to revise the prose that causes it.

It is not always easy to distinguish these kinds of complexity. When we are not experts in a subject, we tend to doubt our own competence before we doubt a writer's. And so we defer to what seems difficult, often mistakenly.

It is important for everyone—those who write professional prose and those who have to read it—to understand not only the social origins of bad writing (or tangled prose) but also its social consequences. When a piece of writing confuses us, we often assume that we are not up to its demands. That we are the problem and not the writing.

Difficult a passage may in fact be, but its complexity is usually *more seeming than substantial*.

Your inability to understand a piece of writing is not because you are incompetent. It is because the author ~~couldn't~~ didn't write clearly. Never doubt your competence as a general interested reader who is making an effort.

In cognitive psychology, **cognitive load** refers to the amount of working memory resources used. Learning tactics for working with this – chunks, signalling, packaging, parallel structure etc.

DON'T MAKE READING HARD WORK



Take a moment and think of your reader. Your audience.

Diagnostic Principles vs. Rigid Rules—Do not take what we offer here as draconian rules of composition, but rather as diagnostic principles of interpretation. We offer these principles as the basis for questions that allow a writer or editor to anticipate **how readers are likely to respond to a piece of prose**, a species of knowledge usually unavailable to writers when they unreflectively re-read their own writing. When presenting complex new knowledge, first sketch a schematic structure that is too simple to reflect the complex reality of the subject; only then qualify, elaborate, and modify it.

The immediate objective of our group is to help each other who write about complex matters; its larger objective is to help those who have to read what we write.

We seek to understand and practice the principles behind the skilled construction of sentences and paragraphs, with the logic behind the thoughtful and deliberate ordering of ideas—in short, an approach that concentrates on the craft of clear writing.

Homework

Read chapter 1

BE ON THE LOOK OUT! If you think the writing is unclear in the ways we describe, revise it using the principle in question. Collect and send sentences with suggested revision.

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