

## Revision and Beyond

It will probably not be very reassuring to learn that one spends a lifetime learning how to write. Of course, we are speaking of the subtleties and complexities of really good writing. By the time you have mastered the rules and techniques in this handbook, you will be an adequate writer, but don't stop there. Continue to develop and refine your skills. Insist on enjoying writing, making discoveries, playing with words – they're magic – creating an experience, an understanding, a perception out of this air and the fortuitous arrangement of words on a page, words that came together in a particular order because of you, the creator. In addition, writing enables you to communicate your most intimate thoughts and experiences, your most profound insights, your wildest imaginings, zaniest perceptions, most humble yearnings – every emotion you have ever felt, and every idea that has ever excited you – to friends and strangers alike. It enables you to share yourself, the best of yourself, with just those shades of meaning that you feel. But how do you begin and what is required? What follows are some guidelines for good writing.

1. To quote perhaps the most authoritative book on good writing. Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*, "the surest way to arouse and hold the attention of the reader is by being specific, definite, and concrete. The greatest writers... are effective largely because they deal in particulars and report the details that matter. Their words call up pictures." (p. 15) We would like to emphasize that this use of detail is important for the most intellectual and theoretical writing as well as for narratives and essays. To understand, most of us need to experience an idea with at least one of our senses which is where metaphors and other types of vivid imagery come into play. Try thinking of a metaphor of analogy for an idea that will bring it to life. For example, one writer's image of the wave theory which attempts to explain how light leaps across space to bring its message to our eyes is a stick of jello pushing a ping pong ball – not a very elegant image or even possible in the real world, but memorable, and given the explanation that follows, effective.
2. Be concise. If you think back over your learning experiences, you will probably recall the most illuminating moments were those in which concepts were presented briefly, clearly, and without unnecessary elaboration: make every word count. Why? Because your reader doesn't want to work any harder than s/he needs to in order to grasp your meaning. Unnecessary words and phrases clutter and impede that process.
3. Be clear. Clarity is essential to all effective communication. The most brilliant minds are also the clearest. Even complicated sentences such as those found in Dickens, James, and Faulkner, once the reader has done his/her work, are clear and powerful, and give us a way of looking at things that expands our awareness. Clarity is not synonymous with simplicity. If the results of mental effort are rewarding for your reader and lead to a more vivid and complex understanding, then s/he will make that effort. If they only reveal a vagueness and confusion, s/he will soon give up in frustration. Strunk and White quote a passage from Faulkner which illustrates our point.

While writing a long sentence, he manages a clear and vivid description of sluggishness or lethargy that class up similar moments in our lives or a moment to which we would right now like to succumb. (Notice that he breaks a comma rule here and there.)

He did not still feel weak, he was merely luxuriating in that supremely gutful lassitude of convalescence in which time, hurry, doing, did not exist, the accumulating seconds and minutes and hours to which in its well state the body is slave both waking and sleeping, now reversed and time now the lip-server and mendicant to the body's pleasure instead the body thrall to time's headlong course.

4. Do not overwrite. Overblown phrases, big words and ponderous sentences may sound impressive; however, when your reader tries to make sense of them s/he will soon discover the tedium of taking the long way around, or worse, that all that sound and fury really does signify nothing. If conciseness is your guideline, then you can write very complicated sentences elegantly. Strunk and White quote George Orwell's revision of a passage from the Bible that suffers from overwriting. Note the difference between Orwell's revision and the original.

no considerable account. Objective consideration of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a element of the unpredictable must inevitably be taken into (George Orwell)

riches to time and chance I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet men of understanding, nor yet favor to men of skill; but happeneth to then all. (Bible)

5. Do not overstate. Avoid saying something is "always" the case or "never" occurs. Your reader will be tempted to find an exception instead of to follow your argument, and once s/he does will be suspicious of your subsequent assertions.
6. Work on your personal style/voice. Style is a mystery, but we know it when we see it. It is inseparable from the content, the words themselves, and the mind and spirit of the writer. Strunk and White advise you to "write in a way that comes naturally to you, using words and phrases that come readily to hand. But do not assume that because you have acted naturally your product is without flaw." (p. 63) They are merely suggesting a starting point. Your personal style will emerge when your writing is true to who you are, how you think, what you cherish, and what stirs you deeply. Personal integrity then becomes an invaluable guide to finding your style.



draft to published copy through a revision, a re-thinking, a new look at your work – which should follow your first draft by at least twenty-four hours.

Reconsider you:

1. Content:

a. Do you have a clear, argumentative thesis statement in your introductory paragraph? Have you told your reader your source (title, author) and indicated your purpose?

b. Does the thesis actually address the topic you were assigned?

c. Do each of your arguments – developed in paragraphs – refer directly to your thesis? Are there warrants to show this?

d. Is each paragraph well developed with reasons, examples, quotation, or other specific detail?

2. Style:

a. Do you have more than two “to be” (stative) verbs in any paragraph?

Then change them to active verbs.

Example:

WEAK: The author is trying to say that we should respect other human beings.

BETTER: Harper Lee tells us to respect other human beings.

b. Do you have transition words to guide your reader through your argument? Have you employed words like: *therefore, because, although, and however*?

Example:

Romeo’s and Juliet’s families were enemies; *therefore*, the young lovers became rebellious figures.

*Because* Romeo and Juliet had to hide their love from their warring elders they appear sneaky or secretive.

c. Have you avoided passive voice which hides your thoughts? If so, can you restructure these sentences to be active?

Example:

WEAK: Romeo was given poison to fake his death.

BETTER: Friar Laurence, thinking to help the lovers, gave Romeo a drug which simulates death.

d. Have you chosen the most precise words available to express your thought? English has the largest vocabulary of the world’s languages. You have myriad items to define the most niggling meaning. Don’t restrict yourself. Use a Thesaurus. Try for delight and pleasure as well as utilitarian usage. Consider employing metaphors and other figurative language.

e. Have you employed the most appropriate language for your essay? Slang does not belong in a formal academic work – but may be perfectly appropriate for an informal, personal essay.

- f. Does your essay “sound” like you? Read it aloud. Is it comfortable to “say”? Do you find yourself tripping over expressions? If so, restructure the sentence so it flows more smoothly.
  - g. Have you avoided clichés? Your teachers want you to experiment with figurative language, but stale, overused similes such as “fit as a fiddle,” “solid as a rock,” or “green as grass” offer little to your individual perceptions. The adverb “definitely” is definitely overused.
3. Correct mechanical errors – See Usage Review.