Lessons in Style

The following advice on writing clear, direct, and forceful prose is taken from Regina Oost's (University of Utah) summary of principles treated at much greater length by Joseph M. Williams, Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace, 2nd ed. (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1985) and Richard A. Lanham, Revising Prose (New York: Scribners, 1979). For a more thorough summary of these principles see Barbey Nyce Dougherty's chapter "Editing for Readability and Style" in Composing Choices for Writers.

I. Working for Clarity: Agents, Actions, and the Active Voice

One of the primary concerns of any writer (and any reader who has encountered cluttered, vague or rambling prose) is clarity. A writer can insure clarity in his or her prose by keeping three basic concepts in mind:

1. State agents and actions clearly in each sentence.

The terms agent and action often correspond in a sentence to the elements we conventionally label subject and verb. The agent of a sentence is the source of, the person or thing ultimately responsible for, the action, what happens in the sentence. Occasionally, however, agents and actions are not subjects and verbs. For example, in the sentence "The investigation of the crime was conducted by the police," the subject is the investigation, even though the police are the source of the action, and the central actions is not contained in the verb phrase "was conducted," but in the nominalization "The investigation." A much more direct way of conveying this information is to make the agent (the police) the subject, and to present the action (investigating) as the verb:

The police investigated the crime.

Stating who is doing what in each sentence simplifies and clarifies prose.

2. Whenever possible, adopt the active voice.

Sentences written in the passive voice tend to obscure both agents and actions, and to complicate prose unnecessarily. The example given in the discussion above is a good instance of the passive voice blurring what is really happening in the sentence (who is doing what). In passive sentences, the subject expresses the goal of an action (the circumstance or objective toward which an agent directs its action, often a direct object), a form of the verb "to be" always precedes a past participle of the verb (e.g., was conducted), and the agent is often introduced in a "by"-phrase:

Passive: The investigation of the crime was conducted by the police.

Whenever possible, avoid passive voice sentences by stating agents and actions directly:

Active: The police investigated the crime.

Occasionally, a passive construction will be more appropriate and more convenient than an active construction. For example, the agent of a sentence may be unimportant in a particular situation: "the mail was delivered at noon" is a clear, easily grasped sentence, and since it is not all that necessary to know who delivered the mail, the passive construction is probably a better choice for this sentence. In order to decide which voice is more appropriate, however, a writer must be able to consider both an active and passive construction before he or she can judge which to use.

3. Avoid nominalizations and empty verbs.

Nominalizations are nouns which are derived from verbs or adjectives. Thus, the verb "discover" becomes "discovery," "investigate" becomes "investigation," "react" becomes "reaction," and such adjectives as "careless, "difficult," "different" become "carelessness," "difficulty," "difference." Writers often use nominalizations as subjects of sentences:

The discovery of the fossil was made by the scientists.

A reaction to the president's policies occurred at the board meeting.

The verbs which accompany these nominalizations are meaningless: "was made" and "occurred" are empty verbs which convey little actual information to a reader. By stating agents and actions clearly, a writer can avoid using nominalizations and empty verbs:

The scientists discovered the fossil.

Board members reacted to the president's policies.

II. Working for Coherence: Contexts, Topics, and Transitions

Although it is important to write clear, effective sentences, isolated sentences, no matter how clear, do little to advance an argument. Sentences must be placed in the context of other sentences in order for them to define, develop and explore a subject. Connections between sentences thus become one of the primary concerns of a writer, and he or she can make sentences, and consequently paragraphs, more coherent by setting contexts, establishing sequences of topics, and providing transitions and orienters.

1. Whenever possible, express familiar ideas in the beginning of the sentence and end the sentence with the newest, most important information.

Just as an introduction provides a context for an essay, the beginning of a sentence can provide a context for the information presented in that sentence. Beginning a sentence with ideas already stated or implied, with predictable, less important or readily accessible information allows a writer to prepare readers for the new or important information he or she wants to communicate. (Note, for example, the structure of the preceding sentence). Moving from the known to the unknown, from the old to the new, will not only provide a context for the information presented in the second part of the sentence, but will also allow a writer to emphasize that new information and to tie one sentence to another more integrally.

2. Establish coherent, logical sequences of topics.

The topic of a sentence is what a sentence is about. Usually the topic of a sentence will be its subject, but it is possible for subjects and topics to be different. For example, the topic of all three of the following sentences is "the dog," even though the subjects differ:

The dog ran down the street.
I know that the dog ran down the street.
As for the dog, it ran down the street.

Topics are important because they focus a reader's attention on particular ideas within sentences, and cumulatively these ideas help direct a reader to a well-defined set of connected ideas. If a sequence of topics within a paragraph seems coherent, it will move a reader through that paragraph from a coherent point of view. However, if topics shift randomly and abruptly, a reader will lose any sense of coherence within the paragraph: the paragraph will seem fragmented, choppy or illogical because the reader must begin every sentence out of context. To ensure coherence in paragraphs, a writer should be

sure that sequences of topics are fairly consistent.

In maintaining coherent topics, a writer may find him or herself confronted with two other stylistic considerations: loss of the active voice and repetition of one word or phrase. Even though the active voice is generally preferable in prose, occasionally a writer will need to use a passive construction to keep topics consistent; this, in fact, is one of the exceptions to the rule of using the active voice. In addition, a writer may fear that he or she will write boring, repetitive prose by using one topic or a series of related topics throughout a paragraph. It is important to realize that "boring" prose more often results from lack of clarity than it does from repetitive sequences of topics, but a writer can get away from exactly repeating the words which identify topics by using, for example, pronouns or variants of phrases. Maintaining a series of consistent topics does not require repetition of the same words or phrases throughout a paragraph.

3. Place transitions and orienters at the beginning of sentences.

In order to clearly and immediately establish the connection between two sentences and to provide a context for new information, a writer should place transitions close to the beginning of sentences, usually among the first six words. It is also important for that writer to choose carefully the connectors he or she uses. Transitional devices commonly have six functions:

adding (furthermore, in addition, moreover, similarly, also);
opposing (but, however, though, nevertheless);
concluding (so, therefore, as a result);
exemplifying (for example, for instance, to illustrate);
intensifying (in fact, indeed, even);
sequencing (first, second, finally, in conclusion).

Confusing the functions of transitions or using inappropriate transitions can obscure the connections between ideas.

Orienters guide a reader through a sentence by establishing a point of view (or context) toward what they introduce. They may

establish a time or place of events (last Thursday, in parts of Idaho),
restrict the range or certainty of an assertion (under certain circumstances, up to a point),
state how an idea should be understood (from a Marxist perspective, in light of this information).

Because orienters provide a context for an assertion, like transitions, they are most effective early in the sentence.

Readers understand the paragraphs that follow an introduction primarily in relation to that introduction--paragraphs that present details, explain causes, offer reasons, and cite examples in support of the position or thesis--and in relation to each other. In other words, though it is sometimes useful to think of paragraphs as mini-essays unified around a single topic, your reader will interpret the paragraph based on the paragraphs surrounding it and in relation to the essay's main topic and purpose. Keep the context of the whole essay in mind when considering the points listed below.

1. Most paragraphs will present one main point of your discussion, expressed in a topic sentence that (1) supports the essay's thesis and (2) announces and unifies the paragraph's content and organization.

2. Depending on surrounding paragraphs, the topic or thesis sentence will usually occur as the first, second, or last sentence--or it may remain implied. The rest of the paragraph often (1) clarifies the topic, (2) illustrates it with examples, and (3) interprets its significance in relation to the larger essay and/or next major point.

3. In addition to the unity achieved by maintaining a clear focus on your topic throughout the paragraph, you need to achieve coherence through: (1) a recognizable order (time, space, deductive, inductive, old/less important to new/more important); (2) the use of words and phrases that orient your reader by providing connections and transitions close to the beginning of sentences (consequently, for example, but, however, first); (3) the repetition of key words; (4) keeping sentences parallel in structure.

Finally, I want to qualify the advice on topic sentences by borrowing a suggestion from John R. Trimble's Writing with Style (1975). He suggests that instead of "viewing the opening sentence of each paragraph as a thesis sentence, as you've probably been taught to do, try this: View it as a bridge sentence whose prime function is to convey the reader over into the new paragraph" (54).

Qualifying Advice: Remember, however, that when making sentences clearer and more concise, you should give priority to emphasis and cohesion within the whole paragraph. You may end up using passives and nominalizations in order to (1) express at the beginning of a sentence what you have already mentioned or knowledge that you can assume you and your reader readily share, (2) and to express at the end of the sentence, where it will receive emphasis, the newest and most important information.

Imagine, for example, the difference if the following paragraph contained this sentence: The collapse of a dead star into a point perhaps no larger than a marble creates a black hole.

Some astonishing questions about the nature of the universe have been raised by scientists exploring the nature of black holes in space. A black hole is created by the collapse of a dead star into a point perhaps no larger than a marble. So much matter compressed into so little volume changes the fabric of space around it in profoundly astonishing ways.

You should also keep the topics in your paragraphs consistent. In this paragraph the topics are italicized: Topics are crucial because they focus a reader's attention on particular ideas toward the beginning of each clause. Cumulatively, these ideas provide thematic signposts that should focus your reader's attention toward a well-defined set of connected ideas. If a sequence of topics seems coherent, they will move the reader through a paragraph from a cumulatively coherent point of view. But if through that paragraph the topics shift randomly, then your reader has to begin each sentence out of context, from no coherent point of view. Whatever you announce as a topic, then, will fix your reader's point of view, not just toward the rest of the sentence, but toward sequences of sentences, toward whole chunks of discourse.