

Ten Rules for Writing Readably

ARN TIBBETTS

Abstract—A readable style is created by proper handling of ideas, words, phrases, clauses, logic, syntax, and personality. Every word should be written for somebody. These rules tell how to create readable writing: (1) Read some great writing every day; (2) use genuinely familiar words; (3) break sentences into clearly defined units; (4) use signals in sentences (because, so, but); (5) make the subjects and verbs absolutely clear; (6) balance sentences with parallel structures; (7) use nouns sparingly, especially as modifiers; (8) make sentences answer Who does what?; (9) surprise the reader with variety; and (10) do not hesitate to break a rule or create a new one.

THESE rules form a set of suggestions that I use for all my writing courses, graduate and undergraduate. I also use them, or most of them, when acting as a consultant for public and private organizations.

PREMISES

First, some premises. In my teaching, I usually do not state any premises at the beginning. Instead we dive into the rules and examples, getting a feel for editing techniques. We sandwich the premises in with the rules wherever they seem to fit best. This helps to avoid lecturing and artificiality. The main point is not to separate theory from practice but to let them develop from each other as we inspect and discuss examples. Here, I put the premises in a lump at the beginning because they are easier to deal with that way.

Readability is not one thing, but many; not simple, but complex. A readable style is created by a number of things—by proper handling of ideas, words, phrases, clauses, logic, syntax, rhythm, personality. And by voices, by the sound and shape of all these in your ear. Also in your mouth, because if a style is to be readable it should also be utterable. This is another way of saying that unreadable writing is, literally, unspeakable.

If you write speakably, you will have a good chance of writing readably. Never write a sentence that twists your tongue, strains your throat, or gives you no place in it to breathe. Read all your stuff aloud, and listen. If necessary, as one fine writer told me three decades ago, take voice lessons.

Style is found mainly in the English sentence, which is relatively controllable. Reduced to written form, your ideas have a tendency to become ruly. After all, you have imprisoned them in the small, narrow space of a sentence, which in size is ordinarily only a few inches long and less than a quarter-inch high:

Here is an English sentence.

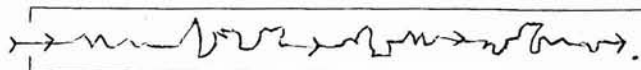
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It is greatly to the writer's advantage that sentences are placed in small, narrow jails. The ideas thus imprisoned can be manipulated—combined, separated, shortened, lengthened, switched, taken out, put in. The jail forces the sentence to keep its basic outer form, but you as writer control almost everything else about it.

A part of your control is created by a strange truth, one which is very important but usually unrecognized by writers. This is that the English sentence is read from left to right. "Dog cat the a bit" is meaningless, but "The dog bit a cat" makes sense. What does the left-to-right premise mean?

It means, first, that reader and writer have something in common. They both start at the left of the sentence and fight their way rightwards through its narrow prison:



Reader and writer are in jail together. And the more they cooperate, the more easily they can move together through the complex masses of verbal symbols and levels of grammar that we call writing.

Second, the left-to-right premise means that a writer should supply what the reader predicts. Suppose you write, The _____ said something _____ when he _____ his thumb with a _____. Because the readers of this sentence are familiar with the grammatical "code," they can rather easily predict what kinds of words might appear in the empty spaces. To write readably, you should be predictable on all the overlapping levels in the grammatical code. A few brief examples:

- Subordinate clauses are predicted by subordinating signs: *How* we reward the winner of the race *that* was unscheduled is up to the committee chairman *who* made the error.
- Nouns are predicted by articles and adjectives: *the* dog, *a* rat, *great* poet, "*Silent Running*" (movie title).
- A verb is predicted by the appearance of a subject: A woman _____ us that she _____ that job.

Such examples give us only the beginning of a discussion of predictability as it is built into the language. It would take a book to do justice to the subject.

I will discuss one more method of gaining control over the sentence—*chunking*. Ordinarily, all but the shortest messages shoved (from left to right) through the jail of the sentence should be broken up into units so that the reader can process the information. As a result of chunking, the writer creates a sentence unit which can be a single word, phrase, clause, or recognizable cluster of these. For some reason, most of us tend to write long sentence units that the reader has trouble processing:

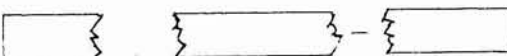
There have been no flu deaths from even the most virulent types of the disease for the past ten years in the county.

If you break that sentence into smaller units, the reader can process it more easily (note *punctuation*, which shows where units start and stop):

For the past ten years , there have been no flu deaths in the county — not even from the most virulent types of the disease.

In the act of chunking, the writer creates recognizable units and separates them with punctuation marks:

Not this: 

But this: 

Observe that the issue is not just one of sentence length, although length has something to do with readable writing. The more readable of the two sentences on flu deaths is actually one word longer than the less readable one. More important, usually, is the length and clarity of the unit, which should be kept short and perfectly fitted to its idea. That is, the form and the content of the unit should mesh.

One useful premise about readability I have left till last. You must put yourself and your reader into the message, explicitly if possible, implicitly if not. Every word must be written *by* and *for* somebody. If we Americans took this idea seriously, our writing would improve overnight. A lot of prose is unreadable because it is empty of life, of human beings and humanness, as if it were written by and for computers. The way things are going, one of these days instead of *I love you*, one hupersonthing is going to say to another: *There is a state of lovingness extant*. Such English is more than just unreadable. It may also be the best kind of birth control yet devised.

RULES

So much for the premises. Now for the ten rules.

1. Every day, read some great writing: fiction, poetry, drama, essays, speeches.

Writing is an art. Like any other art, it is full of strategy and technique. But it is also full of mystery and wonder, which do not take kindly to being chopped up and then scrunched down under numbered rules. You need to gain a *feel* for words: the weight, shape, sound, and taste of them.

I read somewhere that Henry Luce hired poets to write on business subjects in *Fortune* on the theory that they could be taught economics easier than economists could be taught writing. Whether the story is true or not, it ought to be.

And every day, try to read the front page and editorial section of the *Wall Street Journal*. The *Journal* is the best daily textbook of business writing in the United States. When you consider that its reporters are writing under firm deadlines, the high quality and humanness of their work are remarkable.

2. Use genuinely familiar words.

This replaces the old rule that said Use short words. For the length of a word is less important than its genuine familiarity. Why *genuine*? Many words, particularly those presently

in vogue or in some way faddish, are familiar more as noises than as representations of exact meaning. When *detente* was in every headline, I asked many educated people what it meant. Almost no one knew. Later I asked ten people who worked professionally with language what the familiar term *passive* meant. The only person who came close was our secretary and office manager, Louise Steele. On thousands of highway signs you'll find the expression *trauma center*. I asked 20 educated Americans what that meant, and no one knew for certain although four made good guesses.

The genuinely familiar word is often homely and plain. The finest geophysicist I worked with (back when I was an engineer) often used the words *high* and *low* instead of *anticline* and *syncline*. His reports were wonderfully readable and the envy of other engineers. Of course he had good ideas, without which the best words are useless.

An idiot doctor of medicine started a discussion with these unfamiliar words:

Symptomatology relative to impending or incipient onset of illness generally manifests itself initially via a marked chill, following which a rapid rise of temperature to the 103°–105° range is characteristically observed. Cutaneous palpation demonstrates . . . [1].

By contrast, here is the great physician and teacher, Sir William Osler, writing on the same subject in a medical tome:

We know but little of the incubation period in acute lobar pneumonia. It is probably very short. There are sometimes slight catarrhal symptoms for a day or two. As a rule, the disease sets in abruptly with a severe chill, which lasts from fifteen to thirty minutes or longer [1].

3. Break sentences into clearly defined units, separated by punctuation.

Example:

(1) Police had arrested Chadwick and his companions at a Boston train station for possession of marijuana. (2) After incarcerating the suspects at the federal building, the police searched a footlocker which Chadwick had been carrying. (3) Significantly, the search—which occurred at the federal building—was conducted one and one-half hours after the arrest. (4) The police did not have a warrant allowing the search. (5) At his trial, Chadwick challenged the admissibility (into evidence) of the marijuana found in the footlocker, claiming that the search violated the fourth amendment. (*Written by a young lawyer.*)

Here you have *five* sentences broken into *eleven* units. There is no magic ratio, of course, between sentences and units. Nor is there any rule about how many interrupting and closing units a writer should use. But we do know that punctuated openers (sentences 2, 3, 5) are of particular value. The writer needs them for predictability, to help prepare readers for ideas coming up and to create necessary transitions. A style with too few openers will not be read easily.

4. Use sentence signals.

Signals are words like *since*, *because*, *while*, *when*, *but*, *so*, *before*, etc. For good predictability they should be placed

early in the sentence, either as the first word in the opening unit or as a word coming just before the main clause:

Because he liked pickles, he bought two jars.
But the president changed her mind.

When signals appear later in the sentence, as they sometimes do, they are designed to enhance the reader's predictions:

Napoleon loved only himself, *but unlike* Hitler he hated nobody. (J. C. Herald)

5. Make the subject and verb (S → V) of every clause absolutely clear.

The S → V of a clause is several things wrapped in one: a piece of logic, a grammatical structure (the most important one in the language), and the main part of a statement in the sentence. As the arrow suggests, the S → V is unitary, a single driving force. And this force is the catalyst for the production of ideas and grammatical forms in the sentence.

Typically, unreadable sentences begin to be unreadable *on the left*, in the crucial *subject* of the S → V in the main clause. Start wrong and you will end wrong:

Functional *microspace* implies the
Symptomatology relative to . . . manifests
 A conceptual *relationship* as a means to an end is

If you combine a poor choice of subject with a poor choice of verb, the sentence will just lie there comatose, perhaps dead:

Behavior *problems act out* their relationships. (A *problem* can't *act out*.)
Isolation stigmatizes the individual . . . (*Isolation* can't *stigmatize*.)

It is in the S → V that we often see most clearly the value of certain premises about readability. The subject and verb cannot do their proper job of catalyzing the sentence (a) if they aren't *familiar words*; (b) if they don't make sense as an S → V statement as you read from *left to right*; (c) if, separately and together, they fail to *predict* ideas; and (d) if they don't bring (when necessary) the writer and reader into the sentence. An example of bringing them in:

Not this: Union viability is a necessity for continued economic development. (As an S → V, *viability is* is wretchedly weak.)
But this: Do you want more money? Then join the union.
Or this: Workers who want more money should join the union.

Editors are forever tinkering with the S → V of sentences to make them more readable [2]:

Bad S → V: The government's *investigation* into the shipment of wheat by the exporter *was met* by his refusal in regard to an examination of his method of payments for its domestic transportation.

Better S → V: The *government investigated* the shipment of wheat by the exporter *But he blocked* the investigation by refusing to

Bad S → V: The *causes* of the mutation of the genes *received* analysis from the scientists.

Better S → V: The *scientists analyzed* the causes of the mutation of the genes.

6. Use parallel structure as a positive tool for readability.

In her computer study of parallel structure [3], Professor Mary Hiatt demonstrated that balancing of sentence elements is far more important than we thought. More than 50 percent of standard English sentences contain *doublets*, *triplets*, and *series*. If the computer can be programmed to catch more parallelism than it presently can, we might find the percentage rising significantly.

Unreadable prose tends to hide or mask its own parallel ideas:

Weak: Also clear in the activity between the students in the Senate are their wish for clarifying pass-fail, the need for better discipline procedures, and for watering the plant of faculty-student relationships.

Edited: Students in the Senate want to *clarify the pass-fail option, create better procedures for discipline, and improve faculty-student relationships generally*.

Weak: None of the principal uses of the Freudian method in personality analysis is the determination of personality defects and utilization of their cures.

Edited: When they analyze personality, Freudians ordinarily do not wish to *determine defects or suggest cures*.

7. Treat nouns, particularly abstract ones, as creatures of the devil.

Unless the construction is familiar and idiomatic, don't modify nouns with nouns. These are bad: *ramification potentials, resource use, attitude myopia*. Another sign of noun disease (the phrase is an example of its own condition) is a trail of prepositions:

English teachers agree that personal ownership and use of a good dictionary is a prime necessity *for* every student in obtaining the maximum results *from* the study *of* English.

We can edit this by cutting some nouns and altering others. In the new sentence we reduce the prepositions from five to none, the nouns from ten to three:

English teachers agree that students should own and use a good desk dictionary.

8. Where possible, use *who does what* and *what does what*.

If a sentence goes bad on you, ask, Who is doing what here? (Just as useful, sometimes: What *is* what here?) And keep asking and rewriting until the sentence gives you an answer.

Bad: Accordingly, there is a tremendous emphasis on PE and recreation beginning in the junior high which accounts for the significant increase in the accident rate for grades 7-12.

Better (after three rewrites): Beginning in junior high, schools emphasize PE and recreation for the first time. For example, about 40 percent more students play touch football, softball, and soccer. So, starting in grade 7, the accident rate in school increases.

