Miscellanea

Style

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Why do we perk up when we see names such as William Osler, Harvey Cushing, Wilfrid Trotter, Richard Asher, Earle Scarlett, Peter Quince, William Bean, George Dunea, Michael O'Donnell, William Ober, Stephen Jay Gould, and Lewis Thomas on the spine of a book or in a table of contents? What, on the other hand, makes us groan, shift weight from one ischial tuberosity to the other with increasing frequency, and, against ingrained politeness, walk out while a lecturer is still on his feet flashing slides of varied hue on the screen? Why does the same subject taught by one evoke applause and by another, boos and cat calls?

Style, the pedant tells us, is what makes the difference. He goes on to say that style comprises the collective characteristics of the writing, diction, or presentation (of data, concept, or opinion) of an individual. The cultivation of style, then, has as its goals sparkling speech and captivating prose. To reach these goals we must learn to dress our thoughts simply and effectively and in doing so may have to change the habits of our minds.

Components of style

Sir Herbert Read, professor of fine arts at Edinburgh, discussed English prose style under two heads: composition and rhetoric. Under composition he listed words, epithets, metaphors, the sentence, the paragraph, and arrangement. Under rhetoric he grouped exposition, narrative, fantasy, imagery, invention, intelligence, personality, eloquence, and tradition. There is much to be learnt from this grand old teacher.¹

The poet and critic F L Lucas dilated on some aspects of rhetoric.² His lectures started off with a ringing declaration—the foundation of style is character. Three lectures dealt with courtesy to the audience and emphasised the need for clarity, brevity and variety, urbanity and simplicity. He advocated good sense and sincerity and harmony of prose. His plea for good humour and gaiety may surprise the medical scientist but a little reflection and study of the works of Richard Asher, George Dunea, or Michael O'Donnell will prove the Cambridge don right. As we subject the contents of medical tomes to analysis using Lucas's benchmarks it is obvious that much of current prose is turgid, pompous, unclear, and discourteous to the reader and singularly devoid of humour and gaiety. I strive to keep in focus Lucas's warning: a style, like a person, may be perfectly correct yet perfectly boring or unbearable.

E B White, who spun a captivating web of words in the *New Yorker* and elsewhere, dealt with a less tangible component of style.³ Despite thorough dissection of the style of a distinguished author we are left with a mysterious element. "Who can confidently say what ignites a certain combination of words, causing them to explode in the mind?" asked White. We are now off solid ground and as we search for the secret of genius we find the stars by which we steer disturbingly in motion. To prove that style is something of a mystery, White suggested rephrasing a familiar sentence and seeing what happens. I applied this test to a sentence immortal in my country. On 14 August 1947 Jawaharlal Nehru addressed us on the

eve of our independence. He started with a reference to history. "Long years ago, we made a tryst with destiny." Simple words were strung into a stirring statement. After considerable effort I composed three variations:

"Decades ago, we made an appointment with fate."

"Many years ago we decided to rendezvous with destiny."

"In years long past, we decided, one day, to confront the powers that be."

Although each of my sentences is grammatically correct and voices the same statement, Nehru's magic is missing.

Rabindranath Tagore.

[Camera Press.]

Faulty prose

In 1667 Bishop Thomas Spratt (one of the founders) found vicious abundance of phrase, tricks of metaphor, and volubility common failings at the meetings of the Royal Society and lamented the resultant noise.⁴ Little has changed since.

Uncontrolled outpourings of words, especially when associated with a dearth of ideas and fumbling, antagonises the audience. Monotony, affectation, sentimentality, abuse of adjectives and adverbs, the use of nouns as adjectives, faulty grammar, archaic words, jargon, gobbledygook, and the injection of opinion are other

common faults. Inappropriate breeziness and the use of new or fancy words can also alienate listeners. Especially irritating is the use of masked words which few really understand but many use. A familiar example is parameter.⁵ Redundant phrases and clichés clutter up language.

An internationally reputed medical journal featured the following question and answer. "Is anything known about the physical and bodily changes that result from emotional reactions? Among these is the electric shock that people feel in contact with those with whom they are in love, the sensation of warmth in the chest when very happy and the tightness in the chest—even pain—prompted by unhappiness." Richard Asher would have chuckled as he read this and if asked to reply would have rubbed his hands in eager anticipation. The answer published by the anonymous expert, however, was: "These sensations are caused mainly by hyperventilation, muscular tension and arousal of the autonomic nervous system, acting alone or in combination. All three mechanisms seem to be manifestations of a primitive 'fight or flight' response that has been changed by civilisation into a seemingly counterproductive reaction to stress. Emotional reactions may cause various other symptoms—particularly in patients with depression—and are thought to play a part in the aetiology of many physical diseases, particularly gastrointestinal conditions. The sciences of psychophysiology and psychosomatic medicine have studied such phenomena ever since the first diagnosis of lovesickness was made by Erasistratos in the third century BC but the fine details of the nervous pathways and hormonal mechanisms causing these symptoms remain obscure."

The answer lacks music, colour, and laughter and fails to launch the reader on the sunstream of speech.

Admirable prose

A study of the classics can be illuminating. Over 22 centuries ago the ancient Indian physician Çaraka described the attributes of a good text: "From among the many works of medicine available choose that approved by wise men. It should be comprehensive; free from repetition; arranged in well made aphorisms, commentary and summary; well authenticated; free from vulgar usages and difficult words; rich in synonyms; concerned with determining the true nature of things; relevant and enriched by definitions and illustrations."⁶

This is how Çaraka defined insanity: "An unsettled condition of the mind, understanding, consciousness, perception, memory, inclination, character, behaviour and conduct." He also identified those prone to loss of sanity: "The fainthearted, those suffering from mental shock, those abusing the rules of healthy living, those who are exceedingly wasted or affected by severe disease and those whose minds are impaired by injury, lust, anger, greed, infatuation, fear and regret."

The ancient Indian surgeon Susruta described rhinoplasty thus: "Now I shall deal with the process of fixing an artificial nose. First find a leaf long and broad enough to cover fully the severed part. A patch of living flesh, equal in shape and size to the leaf should be cut from the forehead and swiftly stuck on the severed nose. The cool headed physician should ensure perfect adhesion of the newly applied flesh and insert two small pipes into the nostrils to permit breathing. A firm bandage is then applied."⁷

Tibetan medicine emphasised the examination of urine. The *Gyu-zhi* (*rGyud-bhzi*), principal ancient text, describes normal urine thus: "White, with a yellowish tinge like the colour of freshly melted butter; light . . . the steam is normal and remains for a while after the urine is passed. . . . The sediment has a yellow tinge, neither thick nor thin. The scum is fine and settles around the edge of the container after the steam and warmth have disappeared."⁸

My final example from ancient India is from Santideva's *Bodhicaryavatara* and could well be adopted by physicians everywhere as their credo: "In reward for all this righteousness I have won by my work, I would fain become a soother of all the sorrows of all creatures. May I be a balm to the sick, their healer and servitor, until sickness comes never again. My own being and pleasures, all

my good deeds in the past, present and future I surrender indifferently that all creatures may win through to their end."⁹

Western masters of medicine—William Harvey,¹⁰ Charles Darwin,¹¹ Leopold Auenbrugger,¹⁰ and Josef Francois Babinski,¹² to give but four examples—have also used simple, unaffected language; they infused it with strength and conveyed bold statements and ideas in such a way that the reader soon forgot that he was reading and knew only that he was absorbing powerful, persuasive matter.

Jawaharlal Nehru.

[Camera Press.]

Towards better prose style

The great masters teach us by example. Babinski teaches us brevity. His historic contribution was made in 28 lines. (He was intolerant of confused, obscure, or imprecise writing and railed against chieftains d'encre or ink shits.) Asher, while narrating the tale of "A woman with the stiff-man syndrome" or telling us the dangers of going to bed, inculcates in us the art of injecting gentle humour into medical texts. He could, in all honesty, say, "I can write things which most people can understand and some people enjoy."¹³ Osler teaches us the usage of such classics as the Bible in conveying our meaning memorably. We can also draw on lay masters of the written word. John Milton, William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, Samuel Johnson, R L Stevenson, and P G Wodehouse in Western literature and Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Dr Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan, Rabindranath Tagore, and R K Narayan in India are some mentors. Doubtless you will have your own favourite teachers.

We must then practise the craft. At the peak of his career Richard Asher spent over 40 working hours preparing "Aren't I lucky? I can write!" for the *Central Middlesex Hospital Nurses' Magazine*.¹³ John Fulton's biography of Harvey Cushing will give the neophyte some idea of the time and labour Cushing spent over each of his publications.¹⁴ Small wonder that most of them are now classics.

Should we, brashly, insist on rushing our first drafts to overburdened editors, an admonition similar to that delivered by Tagore may return: "The dust of dead words clings to thee. Wash thy soul in silence."

Having absorbed the teachings of these grey eminences and practised their precepts, as you are about to complete the final

version of your text, you may, like me, benefit from Scarlett's prescription of alteratives (which, you will recall, restore healthy function and balance) and carminatives (to relieve flatus and blown up, gassy states).¹⁵

Saying it clearly and effectively

While principles of style in writing apply when we speak, talking is not just writing out aloud. The speaker unwrapping his thick manuscript to read it verbatim in a monotone induces sleep.

Contrast the dread on seeing the above experience unfold with the joy of lending an ear to one who adds sound to sense to make words bloom.

The techniques of the mime can be profitably used. Marcel Marceau places himself squarely under the spotlight to command attention. Stance, movement, gesture, facial expression, and timing

Mahatma Gandhi.

[Camera Press.]

are used to stir imagination, move the audience to laughter or tears, and convey volumes without a word being said.

The late Emyln Williams reading from Dickens and Hal Holbrook reading from Mark Twain are also worthy of study. Even their recordings weave magic. Mark well their lilting voices, varying diction, well placed emphasis, and the dramatic use of the pause. You are led from a captivating beginning to a dramatic climax.

As we study speakers at medical meetings we can identify common faults. While one buries his head in his papers, "having an intimate love affair with his own handwriting,"¹⁶ another turns his back to the audience and addresses himself to the projection screen.

They deny themselves an understanding of what the audience feels and needs.

Unskilled use of the microphone also puts the audience off. Richard Leech referred to the electronic thunderstorms that follow rapid variation in the distance between the microphone and the lips of the speaker as the speaker, lost in his notes and slides, peers first in this direction and then in that.¹⁶ Entanglement of pointer or feet in the cables strewn about the floor produces hilarity of the unwelcome kind.

The counterpart of the fumbling and incoherent author is the mumbling and equally incoherent speaker. Leech's advice deserves attention.¹⁶

Mannerisms, be they vocal ("ah," "eh," "you know," "basically") or physical (jangling the key ring, shuffling cards or papers), distract and irritate. The use of abbreviations and acronyms can kill the message. Lack of familiarity with the pointer, lights on the desk, and system of projection causes delays. The stream of thought is broken.¹⁷ Beware most of all of too long a talk. Speakers of note ensure that they finish before the time is up. Ludwig has drawn an all too familiar picture of what happens if we fail to do so. The speaker, realising that he is running out of time, speaks faster and faster. As the orange light flashes in front of him he speeds up further, the slides now producing blurs on the screen. The audience, long past caring, await the end of their agony. Ludwig points out that no speaker has ever been blamed for completing in seven minutes a talk for which 10 were provided.¹⁸

We must never lose sight of the fact that style is merely the vehicle and must bear substance of value if it is to be truly effective. It is the unity of style and substance that provokes thought and awakens enthusiasm.

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