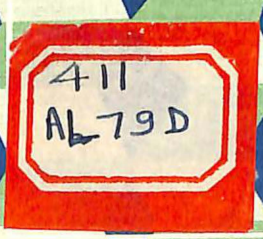
aspects of english

DICTION AND STYLE IN WRITING

Richard D. Altick



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DICTION AND STYLE IN WRITING

Let us do a little detective work:

1. "When I told Dad how I'd goofed that exam, he literally blew his top." Who is writing (or speaking)? In England or America? At the present time, or at some time in the past? How sure a sense of words has he (or she)?

2. "There was a constable on point duty just where we stopped, and he came over and lifted the bonnet and made ineffectual motions with a spanner. And then—what do you think? —we found we were out of petrol!" What is the nationality of the speaker?

3. "We don't keep nothing like that here, but maybe we could order it for you special. Not in a hurry for it, was you?" How well educated is the speaker?

4. "I had him on the ropes in the fourth, and if one of those short rights of mine had connected, he'd have gone down for the count. I was aiming for his glass jaw, but I couldn't seem to reach it." What activity has the speaker been engaged in?

5. "A close examination and correlation of the most reliable current economic indexes justifies the conclusion that the next year will witness a continuation of the present upward market trend, though this may be accompanied by seasonal fluctuations in respect to certain areas of the economy." How much of a gift for clear, concise expression has this writer?

6. "We were loading hay in the west forty when we saw the twister in the distance." From what section of the United States does the speaker come?

7. "Both the Oriental romance and the picaresque narrative have been favorite vehicles for the satirist, the romance because it permits a handy and vivid way of contrasting western manners with those of a very different culture, the picaresque tale because the hero's adventuresome career, spiced as it is with all sorts of roguery, gives an excellent excuse for pungent comment on the errant ways of mankind." What can you infer about the education, professional interests, and writing skill of the author?

8. "The female operatives in this mill seemed well content with their lot, laughing and singing as they emerged at the end of the day." When was this sentence written?

9. "Have you noticed how perfectly lovely the sunset is?" What is the sex of the speaker?

10. "The ominous final movement begins with a toccata in the horns, punctuated by glissando effects in the tympani, and then develops, in the middle section, into a lyric coda." How much does the writer know about music?

If we have a moderately dependable sense of language, we should have no trouble answering these questions somewhat as follows:

1. That this sentence probably was spoken, not written, is suggested by the presence of a contraction (*I'd*) and of slang (*goofed, blew his top*). Contractions and colloquial or slang expressions are used more often in informal speech than in writing. Still, it is perfectly conceivable that the sentence occurred in a letter. That the speaker (or writer) is young is revealed not only by the reference to an exam but by the use of current slang; older people normally do not pick up and use contemporary slang, but rather retain the slang that was in fashion when they were younger and their language habits more flexible. There is no sure evidence whether the speaker is a young man or a girl. He (or she) is Amer-

ican and speaking at the present time. Finally, the use of *literally* indicates a certain carelessness in language, though it is an error common to many presumably well-educated people, including professional writers. If Dad "*literally* blew his top," he was lucky to escape with his life. *Literally* never belongs with an expression intended merely as a figure of speech; the correct adverb, if any is needed, would be *figuratively*. Keep this in mind whenever you read, and you will soon amass an entertaining collection of howlers. ("The audience literally sat on its hands through the whole show." "The tennis champion literally blasted his opponent out of the court." "It's literally true to say that 'our language is a cemetery of dead metaphors.' ")

2. The speaker is British. A *constable on point duty* is an English traffic cop; *bonnet, spanner,* and *petrol* are, respectively, the English equivalents of the American *hood* (of a car), *wrench,* and *gasoline*.

3. The speaker is poorly educated: note the double negative (*we don't keep nothing*); the use of an adjective (*special*) where an adverb would be correct (or, better yet, the speaker should say, "We could get it for you on special order"); and the mismatching of verb and subject (*was you*).

4. The speaker is, or has been, a boxer. He uses five terms associated with prize fighting.

5. This writer has no gift at all for plain communication. What he says in forty-five words could be said, far more clearly and economically, in seventeen: "The present signs are that stock prices will continue to rise, though certain stocks may temporarily decline." The original sentence is an example of what we call inflated writing.

6. The speaker—or writer—is from the Middle West. *Forty* designates a forty-acre tract, a customary division of land in that region, and *twisters* (tornadoes) are most common in the Midwest.

7. The writer is well educated, has a greater-than-ordinary interest in various types of literature (the Oriental romance, the picaresque narrative), and writes clearly. He may be a professional critic or literary historian. The sentence, though fairly long, is maturely constructed; observe how the opening clause (down to *satirist*) is developed by what follows—two parallel elements, the first expanding on the idea of the Oriental romance, the second on the idea of the picaresque tale. The words chosen are familiar

to any reasonably experienced reader, and convey accurately the point the writer wishes to make.

8. This sentence was written perhaps a hundred years ago; certainly not in recent times. *Female operatives* is an old-fashioned way of referring to "girls and women who tend the machines."

9. The speaker probably is a woman. *Perfectly lovely* is a characteristically feminine expression.

10. The writer is either simply deceiving himself or trying to deceive others; in either case, the sentence is nonsense. A *toccata* is a "touch-piece" designed to exhibit the dexterity of an organist or a pianist, not of a horn player; nor is it likely to appear in an "ominous" musical passage. Tympani cannot produce *glissando* effects (see your dictionary). A *coda,* being the concluding portion of a composition, would not occur in the middle section.

From these examples we can draw one extremely important conclusion: that words not only connote shades of meaning, but also contain valuable clues to the background, the personality, and often the attitude and the intention of the writer or the speaker. Thus it is possible to supplement what we are told outright with data shrewdly inferred from the *manner* in which the information is given.

The material in this pamphlet is intended primarily to help you achieve a good writing style by the selection of words and idioms that are appropriate to your purposes. Ways by which you can make your writing more lucid and economical will be pointed out, as well as the methods by which you can more accurately suit your writing to the particular readers you may have in mind. Whereas in speaking you can rely on the many nonverbal clues of gesture, inflection, and the like to convey the intended denotations and connotations of words and phrases, in writing only the words themselves and their particular order can give meaning. It is to help you communicate precisely the information and ideas that you have in mind that this material is presented.

ELEMENTARY CLUES OF DICTION

1. GEOGRAPHICAL CLUES: Though both are called "English," there is a great difference between the British and American vocabularies. No constant reader of British essays or fiction can long remain unaware that our *electric cord* is the Englishman's

flex, our *wheat* is his *corn,* and, in turn, his word for what we call *corn* is *maize.* In Britain, *a biscuit* is our *cracker* (but one of the largest American producers of crackers is the National Biscuit Company!); at the same time, the British *cracker* refers to one of those party favors that give a loud pop when pulled apart. An American *house trailer* is known in England as a *caravan,* and on the British Railways a *luggage van* is what we call a *baggage car.* American and British idioms differ also: an American is said to be *in the hospital,* but in British usage the *the* is dropped. Americans take (subscribe to) newspapers, the British take them *in.**

Similarly there are vocabulary differences between the various sections of the United States. In the Boston area, a soda fountain is a *spa;* in certain parts of the Midwest a chocolate sundae is a *dope,* but in the South a *dope* is a Coca-Cola. A New England *stone wall* is a *stone row* in northern New Jersey, a *stone fence* in Pennsylvania, and a *rock fence* from West Virginia southward. What is known in general American usage as a *baby carriage* is called by other names in certain localities—*baby coach, baby buggy, baby cab.* North of the Mason-Dixon line one *wheels* the baby; south of the line, one *rolls* or *rides* him.

2. OCCUPATIONAL CLUES: Every profession and occupation has its own slang as well as its own technical vocabulary. If a woman speaks of being on *O.B.* duty she is probably a nurse in the obstetrical section of a hospital. (However, someone else using the same abbreviation may turn out to be a school psychologist; *O.B.* is also a polite abbreviation for "orthogenic-backward"—i.e., "problem"—children.) If a doctor speaks of a colleague as "a good G.I. man" he does not mean the latter is a soldier; *G.I.* is medical shorthand for *gastrointestinal.* Mention of a *widow* or a *river* identifies the printer; *fluff* or *snow* the television repairman; *feather-bedding* or *highballing* the railroad man; *tailgating,* the truck-driver or the Dixieland jazz musician.

Often, however, what began as a term peculiar to one occupation or another ends up in the general vocabulary. *On the beam,* which in the sense of *in the right direction* originated in radio navigation, now is common slang; *top brass,* originally an Army term, is widely used for bosses, executives; the noun *com-*

* Long and interesting lists illustrating this difference are printed in H. L. Mencken's *The American Language,* 4th edition (New York, 1936), pp. 233–237, and *Supplement One* thereto (1945), pp. 457–487.

plex, recently the possession of psychologists, has been taken over and manhandled by the general public. Sometimes, therefore, what seems at first glance to be a clue to a man's occupation actually has no value as such.

3. EDUCATIONAL CLUES: Poor grammar, such as the use of the double negative, the placing of the object of a verb in the nominative case, and the mismatching of verb and subject ("she don't"), marks the man or woman who either has never had an opportunity for education or has failed to profit by his advantages. It would not do, of course, to go further and say that a person using such poor grammar is obviously a member of the poorer classes. In practice, however, this is often true, if only because there is a certain amount of pressure higher up in society which requires people to speak correctly.

It must be remembered that modern standards allow the genuinely literate person quite generous leeway in English usage. Only those who have been reared in outmoded, unnaturally rigid traditions of language censure the splitter of infinitives or the supposed ignoramus who ends a sentence with a preposition. Probably no reputable modern grammarian will deny that "It is me" is perfectly good colloquial English or that there are many situations in which it is conspicuously awkward not to split an infinitive. Only when a writer or speaker indulges in errors which are not condoned, even by the most liberal arbiters, are we justified in calling him uneducated. In the case of the person in Example 3, page 1, we are amply justified.

Grammar is the most obvious clue to a person's educational background. Another, equally important, clue is vocabulary. The writer or speaker who uses words accurately and appropriately, as does the writer of Example 7, is well educated beyond question —whether formally, in college or university, or informally, by wide and thoughtful reading, is immaterial. On the other hand, the person who strays beyond the confines of his established vocabulary and misuses words, either by mistaking their meaning or by insensitivity to connotation, is not soundly educated, because one of the first purposes of education is to teach people to use their native language with accuracy. The verbose market prophet in Example 5, although he uses words correctly, is no better off than the man who uses words of whose meaning or connotation he is not sure, for he fails to understand that stilted

language is entirely out of place in a simple statement. The only way we can be fair judges of another person's use of language is to be accurate users of it ourselves. Only when we are ourselves certain of the meaning and connotation of a word can we justly call someone else to account for his clumsiness in expression.

4. TIME CLUES: Words shift in meaning through the years. Many words, once in common use, have disappeared except in historical references, either because the object they designated has itself vanished or become simply a museum piece (*Dundreary whiskers, sponging house, carpet bag, gig*), or because other words took their place (*rubberneck wagon, watering place, dead beat, pantaloons, counting house*). The occurrence of a word used in an obsolete sense, or of a word that is itself obsolete, is a clue to the date of the passage in question. If we know approximately when the word, or the old meaning, was current, we have an approximate dating for the passage. The *Oxford English Dictionary* and its American counterpart, the *Dictionary of American English,* are the standard sources of information on this subject.

The occurrence of slang or colloquialisms is a particularly important clue to the time background of a passage. A letter in which a young man speaks of a fraternity stag party or a musical comedy as having been "bully" can be dated with fair accuracy about sixty years ago; Theodore Roosevelt was particularly addicted to the use of the word as a general mark of enthusiastic approval. A young lady's characterization of a picnic supper as "elegant" would probably belong to the nineteenth century; *elegant* once served all the purposes which *swell* or *super* served more recently. *Hooch, lounge lizard, tin lizzie, make whoopee, sheik, the cat's pajamas, banana oil, baloney* suggest that a certain piece of writing dates from the 1920s, although if they occur in dialogue they may simply show that a more recent author wants to represent the flavor of talk in that era. *Boondoggle, corny,* and *zoot suit* are slang of a more recent vintage. It would be interesting to gather a list of all the words that have been used, at one time or another, to designate the activity once known as *sparking* or *spooning,* later as *pitching woo,* and still later as *smooching.* What are the current slang terms? What are the terms now popular among students to express strong approval or

disapproval of a member of the opposite sex? In the 1920s, for example, it was high praise to say of a *flapper* that she had plenty of "it." "It" later became the more specific *sex appeal.* Twenty years later, the girl would speak of the *dreamboat* she was dating, or of the *drip* or *goon* or, still more recently, of the *weirdie* she wouldn't think of dating.

CLUES TO PERSONALITY AND INTENTION

Just as slang comes and goes, so does another kind of language—the "intensive," or the simple exaggeration. These are words intended to step up the emotional voltage of an idea, to make a fairly commonplace or mild statement seem more dramatic or important than it really is. Every few years there is a new crop of such words, which quickly become overused and thus lose whatever power they originally possessed. Nobody responds to them any longer, and the person who persists in using them can fairly be said to be vocabulary-poor. Habitual, indiscriminate use of what were once high-powered words of praise or wonder (*fabulous, fascinating, tremendous, intriguing, astonishing, terrific*) or of condemnation or shock (*horrible, awful, terrible, dreadful*) is a sign that one cannot think of words that are more appropriate to the situation and less threadbare, or is too lazy to use them. It is not a sign that he lacks a college degree, but it does suggest that in this respect, at least, his education has been deficient.

Used cautiously, and with the realization that they are nothing more than indications, all of the preceding types of clue can throw light upon the social, occupational, and educational background of the writer or speaker. But language also contains subtle clues to the writer's character, personality, and intentions. "Style is the man" once remarked a famous critic; and it is true that a person's habitual manner of speaking or writing, or the manner he assumes for a particular occasion, reflects more of him than he is aware.

For example, compare two ways in which a man might express his desire to borrow five dollars: (1) "Listen, slip me a fin, will you? I'm in a jam. I'll pay you back Saturday." (2) "I'm awfully sorry to bother you, old man, but I wonder if you could possibly lend me five dollars. I'm in a sort of predicament. I will repay you on Saturday." The language in which the first appeal is couched suggests that the speaker is the kind of person to whom slang is the normal mode of expression. The meaning of

the second appeal is identical, and the general approach is the same: "chummy" might be the word for it. But whereas the first speaker is unabashed and forthright, the other is diffident and, in the slang sense of the word, "smooth." The personalities of the two men, one is tempted to say, are as different as the connotations of *jam* and *predicament*. Would it be safe to say that the first man is used to borrowing from his friends, while the second is embarrassed to do so? Or is the seeming hesitancy of the latter just an affectation?

Again, take these two versions of another idea: (1) "She don't think much of him, but believe me, if I ever got my hooks into him, nobody else wouldn't ever have a chance at him." (2) "Poor Elsie treats him rather frivolously, I'm afraid. I confess I have a different feeling about men like him. I find them quite fascinating." What a difference between the two women, at least on the surface! The first, whatever the shortcomings of her grammar, is blunt, outspoken: let her once get that man into her clutches. . . . The second girl, however, tries to disguise her eagerness for the man by a studiedly light, offhand manner of speaking. She does not even come right out and say she wants *that* man—she merely is fascinated by his type! One could conclude, then, that she places more store upon outward appearance; she does not want to admit her feelings as candidly as does the plain-speaking girl. The *rather* and the *quite*, for their part, suggest that she is of a different social class from the other girl; they are mannerisms characteristic of a certain upper stratum of society, or of what would like to think of itself as being an upper stratum. It is also possible, of course, that she is merely putting on airs.

Connotations are used to influence others to pass judgment upon a given idea or person. They also reveal the writer's or speaker's own judgment, often without his knowledge or desire. This is one of the most valuable phases of intelligent reading—the analysis of a person's language to discover his true feelings about a matter. We often find that even though a man asserts he has no prejudice in a certain matter, his choice of words betrays his bias; or we may find that his true feelings on a question, as reflected by his diction, are the direct opposite of his alleged feelings. Examination of diction, therefore, helps us see the truth even through a writer's attempts to conceal it.

Suppose the second woman quoted above—the one who had designs on the man Elsie didn't appreciate—remarked, in another

connection, that she came from a family of "simple, good-hearted mountain people." Quite plainly she would have been patronizing them—acknowledging their humble goodness while implying (by what she left unsaid) that they were, after all, a pretty uncultivated lot, whatever their rough native virtues. In other words, by casting emphasis upon the traits of simplicity and good-heartedness she avoided expressing a judgment, which might have been by no means flattering, upon their intelligence, social charm, cleanliness, and other characteristics. From her choice of words, therefore, we can infer something of her own personality: she has a definite sense of personal superiority but at the same time she wants to *appear* tolerant. But what if, on the other hand, those same "simple, good-hearted mountain people" had been described as being "one generation removed from the baboons, and they still feel uncomfortable when they sit in a chair"? Here the writer makes no effort to disguise the revulsion which these people breed in him; he even magnifies it by humorous exaggeration. He is also prejudiced, but at least he does not conceal his bias.

It is impossible to lay down any rules for this sort of character-reading through diction. It requires, far more than rules, two gifts: a sense of the implications of words—in what situation they would most likely be used, and by just what sort of person, and for what purpose—and, equally important, a shrewd sense of human nature. And there is always the possibility of error. We are dealing here with probabilities, never certainties. But the attempt to read deeper into a passage of writing—to discover, by a careful consideration of the way in which the writer expresses himself, more than he chooses to tell you—often pays rich dividends.

EXERCISES

1. Use clues of diction to infer as much as you can about the person who wrote (or spoke) each of the following statements:
   a. 1. He has no spunk.
      2. He has no guts.
      3. He has no intestinal fortitude.
      4. He is regrettably lacking in determination.

5. The trouble with him, he's invertebrate.
6. I could make a better backbone out of a banana.

b. Just our luck. Don dug the obit out of the morgue a week ago and we had it in type, all ready for the word from Mac, who was standing the death watch at the hospital. So what happens? He calls ten minutes after the last edition has gone to bed.

c. I rang through to the theatre, but they couldn't give me anything but two seats in the stalls a fortnight from Boxing Day.

d. Oh, *Doris!* What a *delightful* surprise! I hadn't *known* you were coming to the *reunion!* My *dear,* why haven't I *heard* from you? It's been *years* and *years!*

e. I sure was aggravated when I heard he hadn't turned in that theme for me. When I saw him last night, he inferred that he had.

f. Despite the dark and ominous clouds that seem to hover everywhere we look, we can forge ahead to ever greater achievements if we but retain our faith in the eternal verities to which our grandparents clung and refuse to be daunted by the prophets of gloom and doom.

g. You take a very handsome guy, or a guy that thinks he's a real hotshot, and they're always asking you to do them a big favor. Just because *they're* crazy about themself, they think *you're* crazy about them, too, and that you're just dying to do them a favor. It's sort of funny, in a way.

h. Look you, forsooth, I am, as it were, bound for the land of matrimony; 'tis a voyage, d'ye see, that was none of my seeking, I was commanded by father, and if you like of it mayhap I may steer into your harbour. How say you, mistress? The short of the thing is, that if you like me, and I like you, we may chance to swing in a hammock together.

i. My friends, Peace be on this house! On the master thereof, on the mistress thereof, on the young maidens, and on the young men! My friends, why do I wish for peace? What is peace? Is it war? No. Is it strife? No. Is it lovely, and gentle, and beautiful, and pleasant, and serene, and joyful? Oh yes! Therefore, my friends, I wish for peace, upon you and yours.

j. When I struck the town I see there warn't nobody out in the storm, so I never hunted for no back streets but humped it straight through the main one, and when I begun to get towards our house I aimed my eye and set it. No light there; the house all dark—which made me feel sorry and disappointed, I didn't know why.

2. Each of the following groups is composed of words and phrases which, while having the same general denotation, vary in connotation. Examine each member of ten groups for clues to the kind of person who would use such a term (sex, occupation, age, and so forth), his attitude toward whatever the word refers to, and his probable reason for selecting that particular term rather than another. Some words, of course, are richer in clues than others.
   a. drinker, alcoholic, sot, inebriate, drinking man, drunkard, dipsomaniac, drunk, wino
   b. inventory adjustment, recession, decline, depression, slump, dip, leveling off, hard times
   c. belly, stomach, abdomen, nether regions, gut, breadbasket, midriff, tummy, midsection
   d. cinema, flickers, movies, show, motion pictures, picture show, film
   e. whopper, fib, lie, story, prevarication, misrepresentation
   f. senior citizen, codger, old gentleman, old man, elderly man, geezer, oldster, octogenarian
   g. kid, boy, lad, urchin, brat, young person, tyke, member of the rising generation, future citizen, juvenile
   h. village, community, crossroads, whistle stop, jerkwater town, Podunk, rural settlement, hick town
   i. nonintellectual type, dope, plodder, backward student, dull pupil, knucklehead, member of a slow group, dunce
   j. undergarments, lingerie, unmentionables, underwear, underthings, intimate apparel, undies
   k. derelict, bum, gentleman of the road, hobo, person with no fixed abode, tramp, vagrant, drifter
   l. traveling salesman, commercial traveler, drummer, pavement pounder
   m. peace officer, law enforcement officer, policeman, cop, copper, flatfoot, the law, gendarme
   n. corpse, body, remains, carrion, carcass, stiff, subject
   o. colleague, ally, associate, sidekick, partner, mate, confederate, comrade, buddy, accomplice

TALKING THE LANGUAGE OF THE AUDIENCE

Every writer who wishes to be understood must take care to select words that connote the same thing to his audience generally that they do to him personally; otherwise his message will

not be received as he sent it. Not only must words be used whose connotations can be depended upon to convey the same shades of meaning from writer to reader; in addition, the writer's vocabulary must be that of his audience, and the way he says things—his use or avoidance of slang, for example—must accommodate the habits of his audience. Only then can he be certain that he is establishing rapport with those whom he wishes to inform or persuade.

The way in which vocabulary is selected to suit the experience and limitations of the audience can be illustrated by the obvious differences between history books written for fourth graders, for high-school students, for college students, and for historians. As you read the following excerpts from four such books, try to discover how each differs from the others in simplicity or complexity of vocabulary. In your estimation, do the authors accurately adapt their language to the capacities of their respective audiences? Are there any words or phrases that you feel are too difficult for the intended readers, or, on the other hand, any that suggest oversimplification or "talking down"?

1. (*Fourth Grade*) The army camped at Valley Forge. During the terrible, cold winter of 1777–1778, Washington and his men were camped in a few log cabins on the snowy plains of Valley Forge, just twenty miles outside of Philadelphia.

   The men were half starved, for their food was nearly gone. They were cold, for their uniforms were ragged and thin, and their shoes were torn. Their feet were cut and bleeding and often left bloody tracks in the snow. The soldiers wrapped their feet in old cloth or paper when they could, but this was not warm or comfortable. Hundreds of soldiers lay wounded or sick. There were only a few doctors and very little medicine to help them.

   Washington was indeed saddened at his men's suffering. When would the states send him the supplies he and his soldiers needed so badly? He could not wait. He spent thousands of dollars of his own fortune to buy provisions, and wrote many letters to his friends begging for help.

Things seemed to be going from bad to worse for the Americans, so they decided to look for help outside their own country. Benjamin Franklin went to France to ask for help.*

2. (*High School*) The spot which Washington chose for his winter encampment on the Schuylkill River, twenty miles above Philadelphia, has become a name to immortalize the sufferings and endurance of the American army. While the British were making the winter gay with balls and pageants in the captured city, Washington's eight thousand men, housed in rude huts which they built from the trees of the surrounding forest, shivering from lack of clothing and blankets, and leaving their bloody footprints on the snow as they toiled, dragging the cannon or foraging for firewood, presented a harrowing picture of distress. Valley Forge was a terrible test of their great commander's courage too. Not only did he suffer from the hardships of his soldiers but he had to endure also personal humiliation. The Congress (which had fled to York before Howe's army) criticized him for retiring from Philadelphia. This treatment drew from Washington one of his few sarcastic replies to Congress: "I can assure those gentlemen that it is much easier and less distressing to draw remonstrances in a comfortable room by a good fireside than to occupy a cold, bleak hill, and sleep under frost and snow without clothes or blankets." Odious comparisons were made between the failures at Brandywine and Germantown and Gates's brilliant success at Saratoga. A group of generals and members of Congress joined in a cabal against Washington headed by the inspector-general Conway, to supplant him by Gates. His repeated supplications for supplies went unheeded.†

* Quoted from Gertrude Stephens Browns, *Your Country and Mine* (Boston, 1958), by permission of Ginn and Company.

† Quoted from David S. Muzzey, *A History of Our Country*, new edition (Boston, 1955), by permission of Ginn and Company.

3. (*College*) During the winter of 1777–78 Washington's army was quartered at Valley Forge. While here the soldiers were subjected to extreme hardships owing to a shortage of food and clothing. These sufferings could have been avoided if proper arrangements had been made for bringing in supplies; for there was an adequate stock of food in the country. The failure to meet the needs of the army was due mainly to a lack of transportation facilities, and this handicap was aggravated by the inefficiency of Congress. Another cause was the depreciated paper money. British gold enabled Howe's army in Philadelphia to live in luxury, whereas the Pennsylvania farmers refused to supply Washington's soldiers with food in exchange for their cheap paper money. Over this scene of unnecessary distress, Washington's grandeur of character shed the one bright gleam of splendor. He was daily confronted with the sufferings of a justly complaining army, the intriguing efforts of some of his subordinate officers to displace him, the impotence of the government, and the unconcern and lack of patriotism exhibited by the civilian population. In this atmosphere of envy and selfishness he stood erect and exhibited a faith and composure which stamped him as one of the world's noblest characters.*

4. (*Historians, and well-educated general readers*) Through the worst of the ordeal, even in the dreadful third week of February, 1778, Washington had retained outwardly his unshaken composure, "his calm and firm behavior," as one officer styled it; and he did not lose that self mastery as the days of late winter dragged by, and the hour-by-hour uncertainty and concern over provisions was aggravated by a hundred vexations in

* From O. P. Chitwood and F. L. Owsley, *A Short History of the American People* (Princeton, N.J., 1955), D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc.

> the problems of things material and in the management of men. His was the task of planning for the victorious long life of an Army that might die of starvation the very next week. Washington had, fortunately, the companionship of Martha who lightened the long evenings and directed the spartan entertainment at headquarters, where, on occasion, she had the assistance of Mrs. Nathanael Greene, Lady Stirling, Lady Kitty Stirling and others. Simple as were the diversions in officers' quarters, they represented some unhappy hours because they were in heartrending contrast to the life of the soldiers. Washington made the best of what he could not change, and as his duties multiplied, he used increasingly the service of a staff he now was free to augment as he saw fit though actually he added no members. Col. Alexander Scammell, the new Adjutant General, proved competent and highly diverting as a humorist but he had to confess that his duties were intolerably heavy.*

Almost every book that is published, whether it be a textbook or a novel or a how-to-do-it manual, is deliberately written for a particular audience. And so with magazines. To appeal to the audience for which it is designed, every magazine must be carefully edited so that its language is the one with which its readers are most at home. *Boys' Life,* the Boy Scout magazine, must avoid difficult, unusual words because its audience is composed largely of teen-aged boys. *Vogue* may allow itself more freedom in this respect, but on the other hand it must be careful always to use the diction most natural to women—for example, adjectives that appeal most strongly to feminine taste: *pert, charming, sophisticated, youthful, alluring,* and so on. (One can imagine the results were the *Vogue* style to be transferred to *Boys' Life*—or *Esquire.*) The diction of a writer for *Good Housekeeping* must differ from that of a writer for *The American Scholar.* An article written for *Fortune* would be out of place in the pages of *True Detective.*

* From Douglas Southall Freeman, *George Washington: A Biography* (New York, 1948–1958), IV, Charles Scribner's Sons.

This constant requirement, that the writer adapt his style to the tastes and habits of his audience, is most important when he is attempting to move them to a course of thought or action. Now he not only has to tell them something by way of information: he has to make them think and act in a way he desires. And there is no more effective device for doing so than speaking to them in their own language. "He speaks my language" is no empty compliment; it means that one likes a certain person because his manner of expression identifies him with one's own group. Suppose a professor of economics addresses a meeting of a steelworkers' union. If he speaks to them in the language in which he is accustomed to speak to his classes or to his colleagues, his chances of persuading the steelworkers are slim. If, however, he has the knack of talking their own language—without their feeling that he is deliberately "talking down" to them—he can be a great success. As they leave the hall, they will be saying that he is a swell guy, even if he is a college prof—he didn't put on the dog but talked to them straight from the shoulder. And (and this is the important thing) they will be inclined to react favorably not only to his manner but to what he was saying to them.

The use of appropriate diction to establish rapport between the writer or speaker and his audience can often be abused. Just as in the case with words of highly emotional connotation, the employment of words and idioms designed to promote a fellow-feeling between the two parties can divert attention from the unreasonableness of an argument. "We're pals, we see eye-to-eye, and of course you'll believe what I'm telling you."

BULL SESSION

. . . Sometimes it doesn't take much to get a guy wondering.

You probably never heard of me. I'm just a plain guy. Name of Joe Smith. But in a way I'm a pretty important fella. At least that's the way Doc Hibbard put it.

Guess I must have been really spouting off. But Doc just looked at me with those twinkling eyes of his. "Business profits too big?" he said, chuckling. "Why, son, they're as American as apple pie."

He pointed to little Tim Taylor—he's Ed Taylor's boy—selling newspapers on the corner.

"Tim there, for instance. When you talk about monopolies and more taxes on big business, that's the fellow you're attacking. 'Cause if you wrap up every big question about our free-enterprise economy, what he does answers it.

"Tim knows what the American Way is, all right. Lots of folks seem to think you can get something for nothing. Not Tim. No siree, you don't catch him running to the government for handouts. Don't hear him hollerin' about security, either."

Doc tapped his pipe and went on. "There was a fellow once put it pretty well—'Let not him who is houseless pull down the house of another.' "

Doc paused a moment and then, very softly, continued, "The codger who said that, son, was a fellow called Abe Lincoln."

I guess that's when I began to see things differently. And brother, take it from me, maybe it's time all of us did.

Maybe it's time we stopped biting the hand that feeds us. Maybe it's time we got behind the Tim Taylors.

Let's let the snake-oil peddlers yell all they want about their isms and their "security." Me . . . I'll take vanilla.

Yes siree, it doesn't take much to get a guy to wondering these days.

The man responsible for this ad, a sophisticated writer, has a message to deliver—something about the superiority of "our free-enterprise economy," "the American Way," over the "isms" vended by the "snake-oil peddlers." His intended audience is composed of "plain guys." And so he writes in the way he thinks plain guys talk. Count the number of times he uses words designed to make the reader identify himself with the supposed speaker: *guy, plain guy, fella, folks, brother*. . . . Note the free use of colloquialisms and slang, beginning with the title of the piece and including *spouting off, no siree, take it from me, I'll take vanilla*. . . . Sometimes the speaker omits the subject of his sen-

tence, as is often done in informal talk: "Guess I must have been really spouting off," "Don't hear him hollerin' about security, either." Note, too, the short sentences and the frequent contractions (*doesn't, I'm, they're*).

The "logic" behind this cracker-barrel discourse is: (1) I talk like you. (2) Therefore (!) I'm really like you; we're buddies. (3) If we're buddies, neither of us is a high-dome intellect. We're just ordinary fellows, with plenty of horse sense. Like you, I wouldn't deceive anybody. And, since you have plenty of horse sense, I can depend on you to realize the truth of my argument. (4) So listen to what I tell you—man to man!

The reasoning is weak in every link. The advertiser's manner—his diligent attempt to say his say in just the language that will make you feel most at home with him—has nothing at all to do with the soundness of his ideas. Maybe he is 100 percent right; but has he proved to you that he is—or, indeed, given you any solid reason for believing that he is? Homely, familiar talk can often be a device for evading or concealing the real issue, for inducing the reader to relax his vigilance and take ideas on faith alone. The reader is in danger of buying a worthless package simply because it is attractively wrapped.

The same device is dear to all politicians, and for exactly the same reason. No candidate who cherishes votes can afford to allow himself to be thought of as several notches loftier than the common run of men. He therefore takes pains to convince his prospective electors that he is wood from the same fine block from which they themselves were carved. The baby-kissing expeditions, the clam bakes, the publicity given to the simple, affectionate, moral domestic life of the candidate—all are designed to encourage the people's conviction that he is one of them, has the same tastes and hobbies—and therefore (that long-suffering word!) must be wise and honest, too. His language is designed to serve the same end, especially when he is meeting the electorate face to face. Public education has progressed to the extent that every politician above the rank of ward-heeler is expected to be reasonably grammatical in his public utterances; but his choice of words must convince the audience that this man talks their language and thinks their thoughts.

The most famous example in recent history of the careful cultivation of rapport between speaker and audience was President Franklin D. Roosevelt's fireside chats. The magic of those

radio talks lay not merely in the inspired name that was given to them (analyze the connotations of *fireside* and *chat*); it lay in the way that Mr. Roosevelt's whole manner—his invariable use of simple words, his homely illustrations and analogies, his frequent use of the pronouns "you" and "I" instead of the impersonal diction of the statesman—fulfilled the promise of the name. Time after time he won public support for his side of a controversy by talking "with" the people, in their own language.

EXERCISES

1. What requirements of diction should be observed in writing the following items?
   a. An advertisement of a new antibiotic, to be published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.
   b. Directions for assembling the components of a high-fidelity record player.
   c. A booklet, entitled "So You're Going to Have an Operation!," to be given to patients admitted to the surgical section of a hospital.
   d. A story in a magazine intended for kindergarten-age children.
2. Write at least two of the following assignments, choosing your words and phrasing your sentences to suit the particular person or group you are addressing:
   a. A direct-mail advertisement of this book, addressed to teachers who might adopt it in their classes.
   b. Directions for assembling a model airplane bought through an ad in a teen-age boys' magazine.
   c. A letter to your congressman, protesting his announced stand on a certain issue.
   d. A bread-and-butter letter to your hostess after a recent week end spent at her home.
3. Compare the accounts of a single newsworthy event as it is reported in several periodicals. What kind of audience does each one address itself to, and how does it adapt its reporting to its readers' tastes and interests? How successful is each periodical in reporting the news and in adapting it to a particular audience?
4. From one of the volumes of *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, select one of the fireside chats (or several of Mr. Roosevelt's informal speeches to people along the route of

his train tours) and analyze the means by which he kept "the common touch."

5. The Democratic Presidential candidate in 1952 and 1956, Adlai E. Stevenson, was criticized by some for allegedly talking over the heads of his hearers and for indulging in inappropriate wit and humor. Look into two or three of his speeches, collected in *Major Campaign Speeches of Adlai E. Stevenson: 1952* (1953) and in *The New America* (1957), and decide whether or not the level and tone of his addresses may have contributed to Mr. Stevenson's two defeats.

THE CLUES OF UNNECESSARILY DIFFICULT LANGUAGE

We have remarked that every author, if he is to succeed in communicating his ideas, must address himself to his chosen audience in its own language. This may suggest to you that the obligation is all on the writer's side; that all you have to do is allow him to impart his information and his arguments to you, in your own terms. This is not true. You must go halfway to meet your author, whoever he is; as should be abundantly clear by now, intelligent reading is in no sense a process of passive absorption. Every reader, however, may expect a writer to express himself as clearly and directly as he can. Whenever he encounters language which seems unnecessarily difficult, he should follow this procedure:

1. Find out what is said—by use of context, dictionary, and brains.

2. Try to restate the meaning in simpler terms, without using much more space—using less, if possible—and without changing or sacrificing any essential idea. If this experiment is successful, two preliminary conclusions may be made: (a) The difficult language is not justified because it saves space. Sometimes oversized words are chosen because the ideas they embody can otherwise be expressed only by awkward, space- and time-consuming clauses or sentences. Rightly used, this is a perfectly legitimate sort of shorthand. But if the big words can be replaced by short synonyms, obviously no space has been saved. Furthermore, if some words or phrases can be omitted without loss, space is being wasted. (b) The difficult language is not called for by the complexity of the idea. In a culture like ours there are certainly many ideas which cannot be expressed by the familiar, short words of

our everyday vocabulary; they require the use of longer words, many of which were created expressly to stand for such ideas. But when your paraphrase preserves the sense of the passage, you have demonstrated that the language is unjustifiably complicated.

If after conscientious effort you have failed to simplify the language of the passage, you probably have proved that the difficult wording which the author used was necessary—and you have no choice but to dig in and try to understand him by learning his terminology. He cannot come any farther to meet you, so you must work toward rapport with him by equipping yourself with his vocabulary.

But what if your experiment has proved that the author's use of difficult language was not justified? Several inferences may follow:

1. The writer's mind does not function clearly and precisely, and this lack of clarity and precision is reflected in his attempts at communication. If a man's thinking is muddled, his writing is likely to be muddled, too.
2. The writer may be a fairly incisive thinker, but he honestly assumes that he can convey his ideas only by the use of outsized words and roundabout expressions. He should be listened to with respect, because his ideas may be valuable; but he should be pitied for his ignorance of the art of communication.
3. The writer knows better than to clothe his ideas in language that is too big for them, but he goes ahead and does it anyway because he thinks he will impress his audience. He may be right. The uncritical reader will think, "My, what complicated language; he must be a brilliant man to be able to write like that." But the critical reader will be impatient and suspicious: "Who do you think you are? I can write like that too, but I have more sense."
4. The writer is deliberately using such language, not to display his own talents (which may be pretty dubious anyway) but to hide something—perhaps his own ignorance, perhaps an idea of which his audience would not approve were he to express it so that they would immediately recognize it.

There is also a fifth inference, which may well accompany any of the preceding four. That is, the writer who uses an unnecessarily wordy or obscure style may have little sensitivity to the beauties of language. Writing that is full of polysyllabic words and

hard knots and clusters of phrases is likely to offend not only the intellect but also the ear. We shall say more later about the rhythm of language.

This brings us to the important topic of jargon, which is defined by a noted English critic of language as "talk that is considered both ugly-sounding and hard to understand; applied especially to the sectional vocabulary of a science, art, class, sect, trade, or profession, full of technical terms . . . and the use of long words, circumlocution, and other clumsiness." Or, to put it in terms familiar to you from handbooks of composition, jargon is that kind of bad writing which prefers the roundabout expression to the direct one, the unnecessary long word to the short, the high-sounding word to the plain one, the abstract term to the concrete, the noun to the verb, and the "weak" passive to the "strong" active voice.

JARGON

Wordiness

In every handbook of composition at least one section is devoted to directions for expunging so-called "dead wood" from one's writing. Dead wood—words and phrases that add nothing to the meaning of a sentence or that could be drastically simplified—is the most obvious form of jargon. Strewn carelessly across the straight highway of thought, it forces constant and perfectly unnecessary detours. "The condition of redundancy that exists in such a great number of themes produced by high school students should be eliminated by every means that lies at the disposal of the person who teaches them."—There is a sentence full of dead wood. Such phrases as *the condition of, the quality of, the state of, the nature of,* can nearly always be omitted without loss. *That exists, situated in, serve to,* and many similar locutions are usually redundant. *Such a great number of* is a roundabout way of saying *so many. Produced by* is unnecessary, and *that lies at the disposal of,* like the concluding clause, can be greatly condensed. Thus the sentence could be revised to read, "The redundancy found in so many high school students' themes should be eliminated by every means known to the teacher." This sentence, though much improved, is still not perfect; we shall return to it before long for further simplification.

It is a profitable exercise to make a list of the most frequent stereotyped phrases that clutter up our government documents, our newspaper articles, our business letters, our student themes. Among the most common and indefensible space-wasters are *due to* (or *in view of*) *the fact that* (= *because*) and *despite the fact that* (= *although*). The simple *the fact that* often is equally superfluous (*the fact that he was ill* = *his illness*). Here are some other chunks of dead wood, together with their simple equivalents:

in the matter of (in respect to)	about
a long period of time	a long time
in the capacity of	as
resembling in nature	like
in many instances	often

One especially common sort of wordiness is that which provides a whole verb phrase where a single verb would do as well, or better:

make an attempt	try
reach a decision	decide
met with the approval of Jones	Jones approved
signed an agreement providing for	agreed to
announced himself to be in favor of	said he favored
it is the belief of	he believes
will be hostess . . . at a dinner party	will give a dinner for
paid a compliment to	complimented
is in the process of being	is being
exhibits a tendency	tends

Such roundabout expressions seldom cause much confusion; their principal offense is that they waste space and the reader's time and eyesight. And when we observe that a writer or speaker habitually clogs his discourse with unnecessary words and phrases, we are well justified in concluding two things about him: (1) He is inefficient; zealous though he may be, in other respects, to accomplish things with the utmost dispatch and the least possible waste of motion, his language cries out for the attentions of a so-called time- and motion-study expert. (2) He is a slave to custom; he has absorbed these stereotyped expressions from his associates and from his routine reading—and he has never stopped to examine and criticize them. What an exhilarating experience it

would be for him to break with hallowed custom and train himself to say things simply, tersely, directly!

Big Words, Stock Words

A more serious enemy of clarity is the jargonist's predilection for big words where shorter ones would do as well. Because so many people are superstitiously afraid of all big words, it will not hurt to repeat here what we said on page 21. It is not true that short words are always better than long ones. Many ideas cannot possibly be conveyed in words from the common vocabulary; and in addition, although two words, one short and one long, may seem to be synonymous, practiced readers and writers know that their connotations are substantially different, and therefore that if the longer word conveys the idea more precisely than does the shorter, it must be used. It is a foolish reader indeed who shies away from a book that contains long words because he thinks they are always merely ostentatious. Perhaps they are; but in the use of language, as in the eyes of the law, a man is presumed innocent until he is proved guilty. If the reader resents a writer's use of big words, he must prove that he, the reader, could say the same thing more simply.

The jargon-addict, however, is fatally fascinated by the unnecessary polysyllable. He says *activate* instead of *form* or *establish* (whether he is referring to a new army division or a branch factory), and *inactivate* instead of *disband* or *shut down;* to him employees are always *personnel;* the business of buying something is *procurement,* and that of hiring new help is *personnel procurement.* (Nowadays, too, in some educational circles, the *personnel counselor* has taken the place of the old-fashioned *student adviser.*) An order is a *directive;* to manage or direct is to *coordinate;* to carry out (an order) is to *implement;* to hurry up is to *expedite;* to attend to is to *process;* to join or adjust (as advertising campaigns, company plans or policies) is to *integrate.* Equally overworked, and therefore increasingly ineffective, are words that once were metaphors, such as *bottleneck* and *ceiling.* And everywhere nowadays, in business and civic and charitable campaigns, one encounters the tiresome *Operation* ("Operation Traffic Safety," "Operation Sales Record")—once, in World War II, a handy formula for a code name, but now degenerated into a shopworn last resort for promotion men who can't think of anything fresher.

Jargon of this kind has clogged communication in business and government for many years. Closely associated with it is a vocabulary of stock words which presumably save the harassed businessman from having to find the exact word he needs to fit each contingency. Such a word is the grossly abused *setup,* which rushes in to fill the gap whenever one is too busy (or too lazy) to select *situation, scheme, arrangement,* or *plan.* Another is *picture* ("Do you get the picture?" = "Do you understand?"; "Let me fill you in on the over-all picture" = "Let me give you a summary"; "What's the picture?" = "What's the situation?").

The picture here is that in many organizational setups the personnel, particularly on the junior-executive level, show a trend toward acting like automatons when they are contacting other personnel—and to treat those whom they contact as automatons, too. Language like this is language of the machine: it is language as standardized and impersonal as something stamped out by a die. Individuality, freshness, even humanity itself are rigidly excluded from such discourse. It suggests that the human touch has no place in business; that people who write and talk in the course of their duties must be as mechanized as a production line. There is as little excuse for robot-language in business as there is for a man who, in "contacting" his "junior partner" by telephone late in the afternoon, says, "Darling, I regret very much to inform you that the termination of my day's responsibilities will be somewhat delayed. A cutback in the secretarial staff has resulted in unavoidable pyramiding of dictation for Miss Bardot, who is therefore unable to process my interoffice communications as per schedule. Will you please convey my best regards to the younger members of our organization, and promise them I will contact them before they are transferred to bed? By the way, was Jackie upgraded in school? And will you please send me information as to whether you have succeeded in procuring a replacement in our food preparation personnel for Lizzie?"

Overworked Nouns

Another constant element of jargon is the overuse of nouns and the accompanying neglect of verbs. In all written and spoken discourse, verbs, and verbs alone, furnish the power by which the sentence moves. They are like locomotives: their function is to pull along the nouns (cars), which have no power unit of their own. But even the strongest locomotive stalls if it is given too

heavy a load to pull—and that is exactly what happens in jargon. "The EFFECT of the OVERUSE of NOUNS in WRITING *is* the PLACING of too much STRAIN upon the inadequate NUMBER of VERBS and the resultant PREVENTION of MOVEMENT of the THOUGHT." One verb—and you can count the nouns for yourself. Forms of the verb *to be* are hard workers, but they cannot possibly do everything that is demanded of them by people who apparently know few other verbs. As in the sentence above, the linking verb (*is*, and so forth) is too often required to pull a subject loaded down with nouns and noun phrases and at the same time to push a predicate that is also loaded down with them. The result is a sentence that creaks and groans when it moves; and you can hear it groaning, too. For the presence of so many nouns requires one to use many prepositional phrases, especially *of*-phrases, to the detriment of smooth rhythm. Any intelligent writer, if he has committed a sentence like the one quoted, will replace some of the noun phrases with clauses, thus adding verbs which will help share the load: "One who overuses nouns in writing places too much strain upon the verbs and thus prevents the thought from moving along."

Good judges of English style strongly object to the overuse of nouns in modern writing not only because their cumulative weight can overtax the single verb or two that the sentence may contain. They also point out that many of the favorite nouns used by businessmen, lawyers, and other kinds of more or less specialized writers end in *-tion, -ity, -ment, -ness,* and *-ance*. Words ending with these suffixes are not notably lovely in sound, and if used to excess they grate upon the ear. Listen to this sentence from a professional educators' journal: "Merely to enumerate these five outstanding characteristics of an urban community, namely, chaotic stimulation, mechanization, impersonalization, commercialization, and complexity of organization, suggests many implications for the city school." (It is too bad the last word was not *education*.)*

* Literary men sometimes are guilty of the same fault. Read aloud this sentence by Evelyn Waugh, the well-known contemporary English novelist: "He began to concern himself with the foundation of a literary reputation; considered, and at the last moment rejected, the project of a publication for private circulation; contributed sonnets to the *Fortnightly Review* and to a pamphlet review of the pictures of the year." Pay particular attention to the sound of the middle clause. It would be unfair to conclude from a sentence like this that Mr. Waugh has no ear. Still, one of the tests of a good writer is his ability to detect and get rid of unpleasant repetitious of sound, whether they are caused by too many suffixes or by excessive alliteration, assonance, or an unintentional rhyme ("jingle"). He should not only see what he

One other abuse is the habit, whose origin seems to have been in headline writers' practice, or piling noun upon noun, sometimes intermixed with adjectives but without even the mortar of prepositions. "SLUM PROJECT FINANCE PLAN ANSWER SOUGHT," exclaims a headline. In the written vocabulary of the advertising business, the Neilsen, Hooper, and other "surveys" are called "program audience size measurement services." A news item a few years ago told of a man's being elected to the board of directors of the Perishable Agricultural Products Processing Equipment Manufacturers Institute. Since he was also made a member of the Canning Machinery Manufacturers Industry Advisory Committee of the National Production Authority, he must have had a considerable burden to bear.

The Overused Passive

Another prominent aspect of jargon is the overused passive construction. The passive voice is usually less effective than the active; that is, it is less vivid to say that "a letter is dictated" than it is to say that "Mr. Barnes dicates a letter." In the first instance, attention is fixed upon the act itself, which is hard to visualize, since apparently no one is around to perform it; the letter is just there, being dictated. But in the second instance, attention is fixed not upon the abstract idea of the act itself but upon the concrete presence of someone who is performing it.

You will recall that we had not finished correcting a sentence upon which we were working (p. 23). We had left it in this form: "The redundancy found in so many high school students' themes should be eliminated by every means known to the teacher." We now get rid of ("eliminate") the weak passive, and the sentence becomes much more vigorous: "The teacher should use every method he knows to get rid of the redundancy found in so many high school students' themes."

Like all legitimate grammatical constructions, the passive voice has its uses. In particular, it allows one to express ideas without attributing them to a specific personal source. That is why it is so widely used in government communications, in which decisions and opinions are presumed to be those of the bureau or agency as a whole and not of individual officials. But legitimate use can

writes; he should hear it, too. The student who wrote this sentence obviously did not reread it aloud: "Thus in 'Andrea del Sarto' the mood of subdued tension precludes the selection of a crucial moment or situation."

easily turn into abuse. While the convention by which governmental edicts come from an impersonal entity can be defended, the indiscriminate use of the passive as a grammatical camouflage can also be a sign of moral weakness. Anyone who does not wish to assume personal responsibility for his statements finds an "out" by writing "it is directed that" instead of "I direct that," or "it is the opinion of the firm" instead of "I think." Readers must distinguish carefully between those writers who use the passive because of well-established convention, as in the armed forces, and those who use it because it is a convenient way out of a tight spot.*

THE USES AND ABUSES OF TECHNICAL LANGUAGE

We are far from wishing to suggest that unnecessary complication of language is a sin confined to businessmen and government employees. We have chosen to speak first of business and "bureaucratic" jargon because it is the most commonly encountered of all types and because, in addition, it can be most easily analyzed to show the folly of overaffection for long, abstract nouns, for circuitous expressions, and for constructions dominated by nouns and *of*. But we must turn now to another wide domain in which jargon flourishes—jargon of a much wilder species. We are speaking of the jargon of the various professions.

Here we must inject another word of caution, to reinforce what we said a while ago about the necessity for discriminating between the unavoidable and the superfluous use of oversized and involved language. Since every trade and profession has its own special ideas, methods, materials, and tools, obviously it must have a special vocabulary to designate these things. The medical vocabulary, which may seem completely unintelligible to the layman, is absolutely essential to a doctor, for it enables him to speak concisely and accurately of such things as diagnoses, medicines, surgical procedures, courses of treatment, and clusters of symptoms which could otherwise be described only by most indirect and time-wasting paragraphs. Furthermore, most medical terms have an antiseptic freedom from emotional connotations—

* The sort of language we have been discussing thus far under the name of "jargon" is also familiarly known as "gobbledygook." This expressive word (what does its sound suggest to you?) was coined by the late Congressman Maury Maverick of Texas, who meant it to refer specifically to the prose used by government officials. Now, however, *gobbledygook* is applied to all unnecessarily involved language regardless of its habitat, whether in government, business, or the learned professions.

a great advantage in the field of human anatomy and physiology, where so many of the common words used to describe the parts, functions, and diseases of the body involve problems of modesty, taste, and even intense repulsion. Thus a doctor can speak briskly of *palpating* a patient's abdomen, when the word *feeling* would arouse a host of irrelevant responses; and whereas to *drool* conjures up a usually unpleasant image, to *salivate* simply states a physiological fact. To the layman, at least, *carcinoma* is a far less disturbing word than *cancer*.

Similarly with all other men and women who have their own occupational vocabularies—the electronic engineer, the dress designer, the psychologist, the food chemist. Their special vocabularies enable them to think more precisely when they are at work and to communicate with their fellow workers with the greatest possible ease and exactness. This is, after all, but a logical extension of our earlier principle that men must address their hearers in a language intelligible to both parties.

But by the same token, the use of technical language in addressing a nontechnical audience is not only inappropriate but also inefficient and, it may be, actually dishonest. The willful use of technical double talk is important to the success of quacks in every field. Every man who sets himself up as a psychologist catering to the emotional ills of newspaper readers and the buyers of popular books cultivates the glib use of such terms as *complex, neurosis, frustration, sublimation, fixation, compensation, phobia* —terms which have immense prestige value with the public because they are associated with the "mysteries" of the psychological science. Ideally, nobody but a trained psychologist or psychiatrist should use such terms, because they represent complicated ideas which cannot easily be grasped by the layman; but they have become part of the popular vocabulary, even though their meanings are seriously distorted in common usage.

Thus technical language should be kept for times when there is no other way of concise, exact communication. It should not be used as an elaborate disguise for the simple thoughts of those who wish to impress the layman, or as an easy escape for those who are too indolent to express themselves simply.

This is a classic anecdote on the subject:

> A foreign-born plumber in New York City wrote to the Federal Bureau of Standards that he had found

hydrochloric acid did a good job of cleaning out clogged drains.

The bureau wrote: "The efficacy of hydrochloric acid is indisputable, but the corrosive residue is incompatible with metallic permanence."

The plumber replied he was glad the bureau agreed.

Again the bureau wrote: "We cannot assume responsibility for the production of toxic and noxious residue with hydrochloric acid and suggest you use an alternative procedure."

The plumber was happy again at bureau agreement with his idea.

Then the bureau wrote: "Don't use hydrochloric acid. It eats hell out of the pipes."

Workers in the physical sciences have a crisp, clear professional language which seldom deserves to be described by a word with the negative connotations of *jargon*. In scientific writing, certain nouns and verbs which look strange and meaningless to the unpracticed eye actually convey meaning with the utmost exactness and economy. But the social scientists have evolved a language bedecked with terminology which often degenerates into the worst kind of jargon. Of course there are many specialized terms in these fields as well which are necessary for an adequate expression of meaning. To the sociologist such words as *status, ethnic, mobility, institution, ecological,* and *culture* are indispensable, because they embody basic sociological concepts; and while the student may feel affronted by the constant use of such terms in his textbooks, he has no alternative but to learn exactly what they mean—otherwise he will know nothing about sociology. But many writers in these fields go to unwarranted extremes, preferring to describe the phenomena of human behavior in inhuman language. The sentence "More and more city people nowadays are moving to the suburbs" states in plain English the idea which many sociologists would prefer to set forth in these terms: "In recent years there has been discernible in the urban population an accelerating tendency toward decentralization into the adjacent semirural areas."

The following passage might well have appeared in a journal for sociologists or social workers:

Recent studies have revealed that there exists a large complex of sociological, as distinguished from psychological, sources of marital disharmony. Three factors may be singled out as being especially influential in militating against the optimum adjustment which partners in the marriage relationship should experience. The first is a wide disparity between the two partners in respect to previous socioeconomic environment. The second, occurring in marriage situations in which the wife is gainfully employed or is otherwise the recipient of substantial sums of money, is the existence of a broad discrepancy between the income of the wife and the husband, with the former being responsible for a larger proportion of the joint family income than is normally considered acceptable in a cultural pattern in which the female is expected to contribute less in terms of monetary support than the male. The third is a conspicuous divergency between the terminal educational levels attained by the woman and the man respectively. When any or all of these factors are present, the tendency is for one spouse to harbor feelings of resentment and inferiority, which, though initially suppressed, may in time become overt, leading to increasingly sharp conflicts between the two, and, unless the deterioration of the relationship is arrested by attempts at readjustment, especially with the aid of a disinterested outside agent such as a marriage counselor, the total dissolution of the marriage, either formally, as by divorce, or informally, as by separation, may be the end result.

Rough translation:

When a husband and a wife have radically different backgrounds, one coming from a poor home and the other from a well-to-do one, or when the wife has more money than the husband, or when one of them hasn't had as much schooling as the other, their marriage may go on the rocks. The one who has fewer advantages begins to feel inferior

and resentful, and things may get so bad that the couple ends up in the divorce court.

Now try *your* hand at translating this further paragraph:

> The crux of the "adolescent problem" is the disparity between achievement and aspiration, the internal conflict between the drives to be emancipated and to be dependent, the externalized conflict between peer-approved and parent-approved behavior, the drives and the doubts concerning self-validation, and the uncertainty as to just when an adolescent becomes an adult. These factors are conducive to feelings of anxiety, inferiority, and insecurity. The generally compensatory behavior of adolescents is a reasonable consequence. The concurrence in adolescence of the emerging sex interest and the culturally determined needs for self-validation and for emancipation from parental control makes a liaison with a seemingly superior person of opposite sex a pleasant and reassuring adjustment to the insecure situation. One aspect of this insecurity is that the person individualizes it, and conceives of himself or herself as being more insecure, inferior to, and weaker than most others. Our adolescent, therefore, is looking to another person for strength, for reassurance concerning his own weakness, for acceptance. It is clear that such needs can be met only by someone who is—or, more important, is thought to be—clearly superior to oneself. Thus the dynamics of the adolescent's situation necessitates his defining a love-object as superior to him- or herself. Hence projection of the ego-ideal is the psychic basis for idealization and for the aphorism that "beauty is in the eye of the beholder."

The "educationists" are as infatuated with jargon as are the sociologists—if not more so. We have found writers for educational journals speaking of *instructional personnel* when *teachers* would have been just as good a word, and of *homes of low socioeconomic status* when *poor homes* would have adequately em-

bodied the meaning. Professional books and articles are filled with such terms as *acceleration, activity, instructional, skill, tool, orientation, relatedness, situation, experience, frame of reference.* Use of these words is justified only if and when they stand for more or less well-defined concepts—concepts which could not be described in simpler language.

Although the emphasis here has been upon the jargon of the social sciences, to be just it must be confessed that people who write about the arts—critics of literature, music, painting, architecture—are by no means guiltless. The books and articles of some contemporary critics are as filled with grandiose terminology and involved sentences, and as lacking in grace, as anything the social scientists turn out. And once the reader has hewed his way through the tangled jungle of words, he often finds that the idea he has labored to expose is simple enough.

EXERCISES

1. Each of the following passages is stuffed with unnecessary words and phrases. Rewrite it in the most condensed and economical form possible.
   a. In this little twelve-line poem, which is entitled "Nothing to Wear?" and was first published in the volume *Brimming Over,* dated 1959, the author, Meighan Bruce, points out the fact that some members of the female sex, particularly those in the younger age brackets, take an exaggerated and really undue interest in the clothes they wear. Writing in a lighthearted, satirical vein, he seems to want to make the point that in the course of anybody's life, there are some things that are in actual reality of much greater importance than the question of how an individual looks. To take only one example out of many that come to mind, a young woman should also have a sincere and honest concern in the direction of cultivating her mental equipment so that she does not ever have to fear being called a brainless beauty. This is the point which the author of this poem, which is in a rather rollicking style of verse, is bent upon making, and it is one which in my humble estimation is well worth making.
   b. In regard to your welcome inquiry of recent date, I want to take this opportunity to make what might be called an interim re-

port. You will understand that this must not be regarded as the final and definitive answer to the question you raised, since certain key members of our research staff happen to be on vacation or are at present engaged in assignments which have been given high priority. This case is such that it would be unwise to be content with a snap judgment. However, based upon such information as is available at this moment, I think I can say with some confidence that the side effects you report some of your patients have noticed in connection with the oral administration of Diathorazanarcotomine are not due to the nature of the drug itself, which was subjected to two full years of clinical testing before being released to the medical profession. Our best consensus of opinion, at least for the time being, is that the side effects must be derived from the circumstance that the patients are also taking some other type of medication in addition to our product, and that the conjunction of the two would result in the kind of side effects you describe. However, the entire matter will be examined more thoroughly in the next week or ten days, and I trust you will bear with us until I can return a fuller report to you on the basis of these further discussions.

c. In the past number of years, libraries in every corner of the world have shown great and praiseworthy interest in extending their resources for patrons engaged in research through the purchase of collections reproduced in the form of microtext. Microtext takes three different forms, namely, microfilm, microprint, and microcards. Works that are reproduced in one or another of these forms can be read only when special machines are made available into which they can be inserted for that purpose. In these machines, the image of the printed page is enlarged through magnifying lenses and projected onto an illuminated screen which is built into the machine. There is a considerable amount of eyestrain involved in a reader's spending long continuous hours reading microtext through these machines, and so for that reason libraries as a matter of policy usually do not purchase microtext reproductions of books unless the actual full-size book, which can be read without the use of a machine, is not easily available on the market. In quite a few libraries, files of unbound journals, such as newspapers and periodicals, which in many instances take up valuable shelving space and are very expensive to bind for preservation, are replaced by microfilm reproductions of the same for the purpose of saving storage space and binding cost.

2. After reading them aloud, rewrite the following paragraphs in simple, *pleasant-sounding* English:
   a. The real question is whether the idea is acceptable politically. Undoubtedly the immediate reaction of most people to the suggestion will be a vehement rejection. But it is worth recalling the bitter opposition and blind incomprehension that accompanied the announcement of two other decisions of the Conservative Government to use the price mechanism to remove congestion and frustration—namely the Rent Act and the introduction of parking meters.
   b. American newspapers and magazines have, for decades, exhibited the characteristically totalitarian monolithicism of thought, concentration of control, and artistic as well as ideational vacua, that declared their former progressive heritage, such as it was, to be forfeit. The cinema, radio, and television, born in a world in retrogression, manifested from the very first, and in pure outline, the quantification and moronization which have marked their development ever since.
   c. The term *public opinion* is given its meaning with reference to a multi-individual situation in which individuals are expressing themselves, or can be called upon to express themselves, as favoring or supporting (or else disfavoring or opposing) some definite condition, person, or proposal of widespread importance, in such a proportion of numbers, intensity, and constancy as to give rise to the probability of affecting action, directly or indirectly, toward the object concerned.
   d. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that media influence a function of the receptiveness of message recipients to communications in general. It is also to show that this receptiveness is a scalable predispositioning attitude which is directly and positively correlated with the number of types of media to which message recipients are exposed, the impact these media have, and the overt behavior induced by media exposure and impact.
3. Read and report on one of the following:
   James Thurber, "The Psychosemanticist Will See You Now, Mr. Thurber," in his volume *Alarms and Diversions* (first printed in *The New Yorker,* May 28, 1955; on "our national predilection for ponderous phraseology").
   Malcolm Cowley, "Sociological Habit Patterns in Linguistic Transmogrification," *The Reporter,* September 20, 1956, (on "the verbal folkways of the sociologists").

Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff, *The Modern Researcher,* Chapter 12 ("Plain Words: The War on Jargon and Clichés").

Samuel T. Williamson, "How to Write Like a Social Scientist," *Saturday Review of Literature,* October 4, 1947.

George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," in his volume *Shooting an Elephant and Other Essays.*

CIRCUMLOCUTION AND EUPHEMISM

One more important way in which diction may obscure truth is the use of circumlocutions and euphemisms. A circumlocution is a roundabout expression which takes one on a pleasant detour around a disagreeable idea; a euphemism is a device, usually consisting of a single word, by which the objectionable idea is given a more attractive appearance as we pass it. Both are based on the interesting psychological principle that an idea itself can be made unattractive if it is spoken of in words possessing as pleasant, or at least as neutral, a connotation as possible.

The most obvious examples of such whitewashing devices come to mind immediately: the host of expressions which soften the idea of death (*to pass away, to enter into rest, to expire, to be deceased*—and the less sentimental, more facetious ones, *to kick the bucket, to turn in one's checks, to give up the ghost*); those which attempt to gloss over the unpleasant truths relating to disease (*mental illness, rest home, malignancy, lung affliction*); and those which attempt to cover up other unlovely phases of life (*halitosis* for *bad breath, expectorate* for *spit, plant food* for *manure, county home* for *poor house, intemperance* for *drunkenness, infidelity* for *adultery, visually handicapped* for *blind, medically indigent* person for one who, while not a pauper, is unable to pay medical and hospital expenses, *public assistance* for *dole*).

Euphemisms are commonly used, also, in referring to occupations, where they serve either to conceal a definite unpleasantness, or to improve social status. There are now relatively few *foremen, bookkeepers, office girls, rat-catchers, undertakers, pawnbrokers, shoemakers, press-agents, hired girls,* or *janitors;* they have become, respectively, *plant superintendents* (or, collectively, *supervisory personnel*), *accountants, secretaries* (or *receptionists*), *exterminators, morticians* (or *funeral directors*), *proprietors of loan offices, shoe-rebuilders, public relations counselors,*

domestics, and *custodians.* In the school system of at least one large American city, the *head truant officer* is dignified by the title of *director of pupil personnel.* An example of double promotion (or *upgrading!*) by use of euphemisms is found in the case of *salesman.* To add prestige to the calling, businessmen began to speak instead of *sales* (or *customers'*) *representatives,* or even of *sales engineers.* But the word *salesman* was not thereupon retired, for it then was used to designate the former *milkman* (*route salesman*), *door-to-door canvasser* (*brush salesman*), and even *gas station attendant* (*service salesman*). When discussing the inefficiency of business jargon, we referred to "time- and motion-study experts." The term is a euphemism developed to fit a need. Some years ago the efficiency experts who were introduced into manufacturing plants to increase production by getting more work out of the employees became, among those employees, the object of ridicule if not of actual indignation. The term *efficiency expert* thus acquired an irretrievably bad connotation. And so the new terms, *time study* and *motion study,* were created. Perhaps in time they too will acquire the negative connotation of the older term.

Business euphemisms and circumlocutions are not limited to names for occupations. *Termination of employment* is a common euphemism for the *firing* or *laying-off* of ordinary workmen. On the white-collar level it is perhaps more frequently pointed out that *opportunities for advancement are limited.* A similar desire to take maximum advantage of the connotations of words is found in merchandising ("selling"). The *budget* (or *economy*) *shops* of department stores are places for the disposal of cheap goods; the installment plan is *deferred payment;* artificial ("fake") material is *simulated;* a floorwalker is an *aisle manager,* a clerk a *sales person;* a place at which to register complaints, an *adjustment* (or *service*) *desk.* Advertisements, of course, are filled with such attempts to escape the negative connotations of certain familiar words.*

Circumlocutions and euphemisms are very useful means of oiling the wheels of social relationships. They are the best friends one can have in situations where tact and courtesy are required instead of bluntness; they are the soft words that can head off wrath. Not long ago, a faculty committee in a New York City

* See the lively pages on euphemisms in Mencken's *The American Language,* 4th edition, pp. 284–294, and *Supplement One* thereto, pp. 565–595.

junior high school compiled a list of phrases by which teachers could convey their complaints about pupils to the pupils' parents without causing offense:

Lies . . . Shows difficulty in distinguishing between imaginary and factual material
Steals . . . Needs help in learning to respect the property rights of others
Cheats . . . Needs help in learning to adhere to rules and standards of fair play
Insolent . . . Needs guidance in learning to express himself respectfully
Lazy . . . Needs ample supervision in order to work well
Rude . . . Needs to develop a respectful attitude toward others
Selfish . . . Needs help in learning to enjoy sharing with others
Coarse . . . Needs assistance in developing social refinement
Noisy . . . Needs to develop quieter habits of communication
Awkward and clumsy . . . Appears to have difficulty with motor control and muscular coordination
Does all right if pushed . . . Accomplishes tasks when interest is frequently stimulated
Too free with fists . . . Resorts to physical means of winning his point or attracting attention
Could stand more baths, is dirty, has bad odor . . . Needs guidance in development of good habits of hygiene

In the same list of tactful expressions, the teachers recommended ways of telling the parents that their child had disgusting eating habits, was a bully, was babyish, associated with gangs, was disliked by other children, was often late, or played hooky. What do you think was the expression recommended in each case?

The elaborate phrases undoubtedly are more genteel than their shorter, more forthright equivalents. On the other hand, there is about them an unpleasant flavor of pussyfooting, of "nice-Nellyism"; and certainly the sacrifice of directness is a consider-

able price to pay for delicacy. Putting aside the question of hurt feelings, which expression—the one that minces no words, or the one that couches the teacher's complaint in teacup language —is more likely to stimulate the parent to corrective action?

Roundabout expressions should be used only when there is a clear practical reason for preferring them to their more direct equivalents. No attempt at humor falls flatter than the facetious use of euphemisms—*head-shrinker* for *psychiatrist, charms* or *endowments* for aspects of a girl's beauty. People who habitually talk that way may fairly be described as mealymouthed (perhaps because of unwarranted embarrassment?) and unaware that such phrases have long since been drained of whatever humor they once possessed. They are striving, with dismal lack of success, to be cute. Whatever smile rewards them springs from pity, not from spontaneous enjoyment of a joke.

EXERCISES

1. a. Why is the word *institute* used so often to designate establishments devoted neither to education nor to research, as in Good Housekeeping Institute and American Iron and Steel Institute?
   b. Why is the word *family* frequently used in the advertisements of great corporations, when referring to their employees or to the subsidiary companies of which the corporation is made up? (And why do some large firms, including department stores, refer to their employees as *associates?*)
   c. Why do many establishments, such as restaurants, which sell hard liquor confine themselves to signs reading LEGAL BEVERAGES SERVED?
   d. "And now, a brief message from our sponsor." Why *brief message,* rather than *advertisement, plug* or *commercial?*
   e. What kind of "film entertainment" is implied in the terms *art movie* and *adult picture?* Did they always have the present connotation?
   f. The federal official formerly known as the Collector of Internal Revenue is now called the Director of Internal Revenue. Why the change?
2. a. Very often, slang has euphemistic intent (*bump off* for *kill, whopper* for *lie*). How many of the following terms are euphemistic slang? How many are euphemisms without being slang?

nut house, madhouse, booby hatch, insane asylum, private sanitarium, mental hospital, institution for the treatment of nervous diseases, loony bin, lunatic asylum, retreat

b. How many euphemisms can you find in Exercise 3 (p. 12)?
c. Make a list of modern euphemistic synonyms for the old-fashioned *saloon*.
d. The words *synthetic, imitation, artificial, simulated,* and *ersatz* all describe materials or products that differ from the "genuine" article. What is their relative acceptability for purposes of department-store advertising?
e. What is the difference, if any, between

grease job / lubrication service
foundation garment / corset
field underwriter / insurance salseman
false teeth / denture
house trailer / mobile home
automatic coin machine / juke box
slum clearance / urban renewal
principal / headmaster
toothpaste / dentrifice?

3. Listen to two disc-jockey shows on radio: one that is aimed at a teen-age audience and one for older adult listeners. Compare the disc-jockeys' uses of circumlocutions and euphemisms. What are some of the common phrases they use? What does this tell you about the announcers' conceptions of what their listeners are like? Do you agree with their conceptions?
4. In late years, there has been a noteworthy relaxation of language taboos both in conversation and in print. Contemporary novels now freely use words which they could not have printed only a few years ago. What have been your own observations in this matter? Do you think the change is for the better? Write an essay called either "The Decline of Prudery in Language" or "The Disappearance of Restraint in Language," depending on the position you adopt.
5. If you have personal knowledge of a business or industry involving different grades of employees and a variety of jobs, you could write an informative brief essay on the special terms used to give employees a sense of elevated status and responsibility (for example, *group leader* for *subforeman, table service man* for *bus boy, utensil maintenance man* for *dishwasher*).

CLICHÉS

Thus far we have seen that we, as readers, can reasonably demand that those who write for us express themselves as clearly as the subject matter warrants. Those who fail to do so lay themselves open to charges of windiness, cloudy thinking, egotism, or deliberate deceitfulness. We have also seen that there is a common characteristic among users of jargon: they are nearly all imitators. Unable or unwilling to clothe their thoughts in their own words, and thus to give individual distinction and force to what they have to say, they adopt the phraseology that others use, regardless of its effectiveness or its aptness.

The stock expressions we have cited in the preceding pages were preliminary samples of the vast treasury of clichés, to which we must now pay more specific attention. The word *cliché* is French for stereotype, a metal plate cast from a page of type, which makes it possible for a printer who wants to make more copies of a certain book to do so without the expensive and time-consuming labor of resetting all the type. Whenever he wants to reissue a book, he simply puts the plates on the press and touches a button. In English usage, by a neat transfer of meaning, *cliché* means a ready-cast, or stereotyped, expression—a prefabricated phrase—which saves a writer or speaker the trouble of inventing a fresh new way of saying something.

Superficially it might seem that the cliché is an admirable device, for insofar as it economizes on time and effort, it is undoubtedly efficient. But good writing is not merely efficient: it is effective. Effective writing must be fresh. It must impress readers with the sincerity of the author. It must bear the marks of being written for a particular occasion. The big drawback of form letters is that they fail to meet these requirements of individuality and freshness; and clichés are nothing but form letters in miniature. One who uses clichés is writing mechanically; his phrases smell of mimeograph ink.

Nor is fondness for the cliché a sign simply of indifference. It may be that a writer's affection for threadbare words is a clue to the quality of his thinking. In the first place, fresh new ideas by their very nature require fresh new language—they cannot be expressed in any other way. Ready-made language can be fitted only to ready-made thoughts. Again, since there is a demonstrable relationship between general intelligence and effective use of language, it is likely that a writer who fails to recognize stale terms

when he uses them also fails to recognize stale ideas. Therefore, readers who can quickly detect hackneyed phraseology are forearmed against tired thinking. If, for instance, a man begins a letter to the editor or a luncheon-club address in this manner "The talk about the abolition of the smoke nuisance reminds me of what Mark Twain once said about the weather: everybody talks about it but nobody does anything about it"—the audience is entitled to wonder whether this could possibly be the preface to anything worth listening to. Is the writer or speaker not sufficiently intelligent to realize that the story about Mark Twain and the weather was a chestnut sixty years ago? Similarly with the speaker who must somehow drag in Ole Man River, who just keeps rolling along—and with the one who insists upon involving the hapless Topsy in his description of how a city or a business or a club, instead of developing according to a plan, just grew.

The willful or ignorant use of trite language, then, can expose a writer to suspicion of being intellectually as well as verbally imitative. A writer does not have to be a coiner of flamboyantly "original" phrases that might be welcomed in the "Picturesque Speech" department of the *Reader's Digest;* indeed, one can err almost as far in that direction as in the other. But readers have a right to expect that his style will unobtrusively provide traction for their minds rather than allow them to slide and skid on a slippery surface paved with well-worn phrases.

It would be pedantic, not to say foolish, to insist that good writers never, never use clichés; let him who has never sinned cast the first stone. But good writers, if they use clichés at all, use them with the utmost caution. In informal discourse, furthermore, clichés are almost indispensable. When we are relaxing with our friends, we do not want to be bothered to find new or at least unhackneyed ways of saying things; we rely upon our ready supply of clichés, and if we do not overdraw our account, no one thinks the worse of us. So long as we succeed in communicating the small, commonplace ideas we have in mind, no harm is done.

When does an expression become cliché? There can be no definite answer, because what is trite to one person may still be fresh to another. But a great many expressions are universally understood to be so threadbare as to be useless except in the most casual discourse. They have been loved not wisely but too well. A good practical test is this: If, when you are listening to a

speaker, you can accurately anticipate what he is going to say next, he is quite obviously using clichés; otherwise he would be constantly surprising you. "Such a precautionary measure would stand us—" ("in good stead," you think—correctly, as it turns out) "—in our time—" ("of need," you think, and you win). "We are gathered here today to mourn" ("the untimely death") "of our beloved leader. Words are inadequate" ("to express the grief that is in our hearts"). Similarly when you read; if one word almost inevitably invites another, if you can read half of the words and know pretty certainly what the other half are, you are reading clichés. "We watched the flames" ("licking") "at the side of the building. A pall" ("of smoke") "hung thick over the neighborhood. Suddenly we heard a dull" ("thud") "which was followed by an ominous" ("silence"). Clichés, in brief, are phrases that are self-completing.

The degree to which a reader is aware of clichés depends on the scope and sensitivity of his previous reading. If he has read widely, in both good books and bad, and has carefully observed authors' styles, he has probably become quite alert for trite language. Clichés to him are old but exceedingly tiresome friends. But if a reader's experience of books and magazines has been limited, he will not recognize so many overripe expressions; in his eyes most clichés still have the dew on them.

Many familiar clichés are figures of speech. Now a figure of speech is useful only so long as it makes an idea more vivid, enabling the reader to visualize an abstract concept in concrete terms. If the reader has become so accustomed to it that it no longer stimulates his imagination, it has no more value than a nonfigurative expression. That is what has happened to many such images. Some are similes (a comparison directly stated): *common as dirt, warm as toast, old as the hills, sell like hot cakes, sleep like a dog*. . . . Others are metaphors (a comparison implied): *a bolt from the blue, politics makes strange bedfellows, blackout of news* (or *the iron curtain of censorship*), *left high and dry, variety is the spice of life, point the finger of suspicion*. . . .

The variety of clichés that have sprung from a single source—the desire to suggest a resemblance between some aspect of man's behavior and that of animals—is illustrated by this paragraph from a witty leaflet issued periodically by the Columbia University Press. Occasionally we will omit a word to show how automatically the mind supplies the missing element in a cliché:

"Man," says *The Columbia Encyclopedia,* "is distinguished from other animals by his brain and his hands." But there the difference would seem to end because he is chicken-livered, lion-hearted, pigeon-toed. He is treacherous as a snake, sly as a fox, busy as a _____, slippery as an _____, industrious as an ant, blind as a bat, faithful as a dog, gentle as a lamb. He has clammy hands, the ferocity of the tiger, the manners of a pig, the purpose of a jellyfish. He gets drunk as an owl. He roars like a _____; he coos like a dove. He is still as a mouse; he hops around like a sparrow. He works like a horse. He is led like a sheep. He can fly like a bird, run like a deer, drink like a _____, swim like a duck. He is nervous as a cat. He sticks his head in the sand like an _____. He acts like a dog in a manger. He is coltish and kittenish, and stubborn as a _____. He plays possum. He gets hungry as a bear, and wolfs his food. He has the memory of an elephant. He is easily cowed. He gets thirsty as a camel. He is as strong as an _____. He has a catlike walk, and a mousy manner. He parrots everything he hears. He acts like a puppy, and is as playful as a kitten. He struts like a rooster, and is as vain as a peacock. He is as happy as a _____ and as sad as an owl. He has a whale of an appetite. He has a beak for a nose, and arms like an ape. He has the eyes of a _____ and the neck of a bull. He is as slow as a tortoise. He chatters like a magpie. He has raven hair and the shoulders of a buffalo. He's as dumb as an ox, and has the back of an ox—he is even as big as an ox. He's a worm. His _____ is cooked. He's crazy like a bedbug (or fox or coot). He's a rat. He's a louse. Of course, he is also cool as a cucumber, fresh as a _____, red as a beet, etc.—but *The Columbia Encyclopedia* doesn't suggest that he differs in any way from vegetables and other flora, so we won't go into that.

One large category of clichés is composed of those which insist upon associating a particular descriptive adjective with a given

noun. Such stereotyped word associations include *clockwork precision, checkered* (or *meteoric*) *career, whirlwind courtship, tight-lipped* (or *stony*) *silence, level best, crushing defeat, intrepid explorer, skyrocketing costs.* Is there any reason why a formidable task should habitually be described as *Herculean?* None at all, except that people have adopted such phrases as a way of evading their obligation to make their own language.

Other common types of clichés are verb and noun phrases. Outworn verb phrases include *to live to a ripe old age, to grow by leaps and bounds, to withstand the test of time, to let bygones be bygones, to be unable to see the woods for the trees, to eat crow, to upset the applecart.* Noun phrases that have outlasted their freshness include *ace up his sleeve, the full flush of victory, the patter of rain, the fly in the ointment, a diamond in the rough, part and parcel, the old song and dance.*

Nowhere is the cliché more to be avoided than in descriptive and narrative writing, the whole success of which depends upon the freshness and exactness with which the writer communicates his impressions to the reader. A virtually certain mark of the inexperienced writer is his willingness to see his settings and characters through the eyes of someone else—to wit, the man who has used his clichés before him. "He walked with catlike tread" . . . "they were drenched by mountainous waves" . . . "the child was bubbling over with mirth" . . . "there was a blinding flash" . . . "he made a convulsive grab for the rope" . . . "they heard a rustle of leaves" . . . "the flowers nodded in the gentle breeze" . . . "the shadows were lengthening" . . . "he looked at her with a glassy stare." The only delight we can find in such writing is that of seeing old familiar faces. Surely we are allowed to participate in no new experience; we cannot see things from any new angle, or receive a fresh interpretation of their meaning. A "creative" writer who depends upon clichés is really not creating anything. His stock in trade is not genuine experience, and without genuine experience no writer can succeed. All he has to offer is words—*mere* words, empty shells incapable of meaning.

Many of our clichés are derived from books that have had the greatest influence upon the common speech. *To kill the fatted calf, his name is legion, covers a multitude of sins, the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak, the blind leading the blind, the parting of the way*—all have their beginning in the Bible, even though in most cases their original Biblical connotations have

been forgotten. Many sermons are tissues of such clichés, and their dullness is due to the fact that these phrases, originally so full of flavor and meaning, have lost their charm through unremitting use. Few people react to them as deeply as did those to whom the English Bible was a new and wonderful book, the phrases shining like coins from the mint. And that is true, unfortunately, of many of the finest things that have ever been said in the world. The opening sentences of the Declaration of Independence, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, certain portions of Gray's *Elegy*—some of the most moving poems and political documents have become hackneyed through constant use.

The alert reader can watch clichés in the very process of being made. For example, words associated with atomic developments have quickly become standard clichés in all sorts of usages. The verb *to mushroom,* admittedly, was a fairly common cliché even before 1945, when it meant "to grow as fast as mushrooms" or "to assume a mushroom shape" ("the suburbs of the city mushroomed," "the bullet mushroomed against the steel plate"). But once the typical "awe-inspiring" cloud produced by an atomic explosion was designated as mushroom-shaped, the cliché achieved new popularity and in the process lost its characteristic metaphorical suggestions. Nowadays *mushrooming* is applied to everything from a dam under construction to a sudden burst of public sentiment on some issue. *Chain reaction,* originally a technical term in nuclear physics, now is a handy way of describing a series of events that are (or are supposed to be) causally connected, in the manner of a bowling ball knocking down Pin A, Pin A in turn knocking down Pin B, and so on. And the verb *to trigger,* first applied to the action of an atomic bomb in setting off the far greater explosion of the hydrogen bomb, has already become a tiresome cliché to describe any analogous action, no matter how remote the resemblance may be: "The protest of the home owners' delegation triggered a full-dress investigation by City Council"; "the heavy rains of the past three days triggered flood conditions."

EXERCISES

1. Fill in the blanks:
   a. First and _____, in my search I will leave no stone _____. It will be a labor of _____.

b. He passed the exam with _____ colors; it was a red-letter _____ in his life. He could point with _____ to his achievement. The news spread like _____.

c. By prompt action she was _____ from the jaws of _____, otherwise she would have gone to a watery _____.

d. After the quarrel she left him, bag and _____. She said she wouldn't come back to him for _____ or money. At the party the next day, she was conspicuous by her _____.

e. I was so burned up that I threw caution to the _____. I should have known that it doesn't pay to _____ with one's chin.

f. He did a landoffice _____ the first month he was open, but the wear and _____ on his health was too great. So he took a vacation in Florida, saying that the change would either _____ _____ or cure him. Underneath, though, one could detect that he was whistling in the _____.

g. Last but not _____, to make a long story _____, he is caught between the _____ and the deep blue sea. Such is _____.

2. In their *Dictionary of Contemporary American Usage* (1957), Bergen and Cornelia Evans learnedly and wittily discuss many hundreds of clichés—their original meanings (many of which are surprising) and their present state of fatigue. For an essay, select one letter of the alphabet, go through the Evanses' pages devoted to this letter, and read all the articles dealing with individual clichés, which the authors frequently designate by the terms "hackneyed," "stale," or "trite" rather than by the word cliché itself. Then, in your essay, sum up, with examples, what you have learned about the natural history of clichés and the reasons why it is often advisable to avoid them.
3. Listen to the lyrics of some popular songs. How much do the lyrics of each song depend on the strength of original phrases? How much do they depend on the appeal that the music and the total sound give to lines that are actually clichés?
4. *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* is a rich treasury of oft-repeated expressions, a great many of which have become cliché. With its aid, make a list of familiar phrases which entered the common speech because of the popularity of a single author.
5. One often reads complaints about "cliché situations" or "cliché characters" in plays, movies, novels, and television shows. What do these terms mean? Give examples of plots or situations that seem to you to be cliché, and describe a few cliché characters (for example, the "Good Guys" and the "Bad Guys" in western movies).
6. Some clichés are enduring; they pass from generation to generation

without ever seeming to quite wear out their welcome. Some of them were already old favorites in Chaucer's time, the later fourteenth century. Others, the products of contemporary events and fashions, are short-lived. They spring from politics, popular songs, comic strips, television. They are the froth on the sea of language; they have their brief life and then disappear as suddenly as they appeared. The following assignments illustrate both the longevity of some clichés and the ephemerality of others.

a. As early as 1738 Jonathan Swift satirized the human propensity for talking in clichés and stale witticisms in his *Complete Collection of Genteel and Ingenious Conversation,* which can be found in most collections of his works. Go through this amusing series of dialogues and pick out all the clichés that are still current today, after more than two centuries.
b. In 1923 George S. Kaufman and Marc Connelly wrote a successful play, *Dulcy,* whose charming but bird-brained heroine talks brightly in clichés and platitudes. Read the play if it is available in your library. How many of Dulcy's expressions are *not* in ordinary use today?
c. Browse in the several volumes of Mark Sullivan's *Our Times* (1926–1935) and in Frederick Lewis Allen's *Only Yesterday* (1931) and *Since Yesterday* (1940) to discover what were the favorite catch phrases and slang clichés in the years between 1900 and 1939. What proportion of them have survived to the present day? How many do your parents or grandparents still use?
d. The humorist S. J. Perelman makes great use of current clichés, especially those with a quasi-literary flavor. Gather a harvest of them from his book, *The Most of S. J. Perelman* (1958).
e. Another contemporary humorist, Frank Sullivan, has written a well-known series of dialogues starring the "cliché expert," Mr. Arbuthnot. This gentleman has at his fingertips, or on the tip of his tongue, a glittering array of clichés, both old and new, which enable him to discourse on any subject at the drop of a hat. Look up these pieces in Sullivan's volumes, *A Rock in Every Snowball* (1946) and *The Night the Old Nostalgia Burned Down* (1953). Which are the seemingly permanent clichés and which seem to be recent in origin (and perhaps are already on the way out)?

"NEWSPAPERESE"

The jargon peculiar to newspapers is a combination of the cliché, dead wood, and the weak passive or impersonal construc-

tion. The great objection to it, as to all jargon, is that it is machine-made. It is written according to formula, and material written to formula inevitably loses much of its color and interest. Here is a short sampling of newspaper clichés together with their simpler equivalents:

The death toll rose to ten today in the wake of the disastrous fire . . . (*or:* Death today claimed four more victims . . .)	Four more people died as a result of the fire . . .
The mercury soared to a record high for the year (*or* plummeted to a new low) . . .	Today was the hottest (*or* coldest) day of the year . . .
At an early hour this morning the identity of the victim had not yet been established . . .	Early this morning the body was still unidentified . . .
Traffic was snarled (*or* paralyzed, *or* at a standstill, *or* moved at a snail's pace, *or* crept bumper to bumper) as snow blanketed the metropolitan area . . .	The snowfall slowed traffic . . .
State Police, aided by local law enforcement officers, today were combing the area adjacent to Center City in search of clues that might lead to the solution of the mystery of the murder-kidnaping . . .	State and local police were looking for clues to the man who kidnaped and murdered . . .
Three persons suffered injuries when the automobile in which they were riding figured in a collision with a large truck . . .	Three persons were hurt when their car hit a big truck. . .
As he completed his investigation, the coroner said it was his opinion that death was instantaneous . . .	The coroner said he thought the man had been killed instantly. . .

In addition, there are numerous single words, especially epithets and verbs, which are seemingly indispensable to newspaper reporting. Any better-than-ordinary fire or auto accident is *spectac-*

ular; an accident that is more peculiar than disastrous is *freak;* when public men approve of something they *hail* it, when they disapprove of it they *attack* it, and when they want something they *urge* it; when two factions have a disagreement they *clash;* when anything is announced it is *made public;* and when men accuse others of wrongdoing they *allege.* (*Assert,* another newspaper war horse, has a slightly less negative connotation.)

The weak passive is used in newspaper writing for essentially the same reason it is used in governmental correspondence: to achieve the impersonal note, and thus, in many instances, to disclaim direct responsibility for statements that are based on hearsay. When newspapers send a reporter for an eyewitness story of a disaster or a court trial, or when they quote a press release or statements made during an interview, they can state positively that this and that are true. But much news cannot be treated in so open and confident a fashion—news based on private information picked up by reporters or on rumors circulating in the city hall or the stock exchange. Although the papers wish to relay this news, they cannot do so on their own authority; the man who gave the reporter his information refuses to be quoted, and the public will be suspicious of anything plainly labeled "rumor." The solution, then, is to use weak passive or impersonal constructions which do not require an agent: "It is revealed (*or* learned *or* reported)" *(not:* the City Commissioner told our reporter but warned him not to use his name); "indications increased"; "a survey today showed" (*not:* our reporter asked several people, and their replies, when put together, suggested). Another device of passing on news without revealing its source or without revealing that it has no source outside the mind of an inventive reporter is the use of those mysterious oracles, the "officials who asked that their names be withheld," "spokesmen," "informed quarters," "observers," and "sources usually considered reliable." Judged from the viewpoint of clear, accurate communication, "newspaperese" has as little to recommend it as does any other kind of roundabout, machine-made language.

One particular brand of newspaper jargon, the language of the sports page, deserves special study. Sports writers, perhaps because they deal with lively, entertaining matters that seldom have dead-serious implications, have greater freedom, and indeed a greater necessity, than do other reporters to invent new ways of saying things. Sports pages are filled with metaphorical language.

When first used, such terms add a welcome novelty to the narration of what are, after all, fairly routine events. (One baseball game differs from another only in details, not in general pattern: usually a game has nine innings, each inning is divided into halves, a side is always retired after the third out.) But, like all clichés, sports-page terms soon lose their vividness through overuse. Reporters keep on employing them just the same: *four-bagger* or *circuit clout* for *home run, coveted pasteboards* for *hard-to-get tickets, grid classic* for *big game, thin-clads* for *track team, signal-caller* for *quarterback, tankmen* for *swimmers, century* for *100-yard dash, swivel-hipped pigskin toter* for *agile ball-carrier,* and so on.

EXERCISES

1. Here is a news story, written in standard newspaperese. Rewrite it in simple, unhackneyed English.

> Police in the metropolitan area today spread a dragnet for the killers of numbers racket czar Frankie R_____, slain early this morning in typical gangland fashion. A seven-state alarm has been broadcast for two men in a late model Imperial sedan, reported to have been in the North Side neighborhood at the time of the slaying.
>
> R_____, 43, who lived at the Fort Amity Hotel, was riddled by bullets as he entered his foreign-make sports car, parked in front of 4659 Summit Blvd. He had been visiting the apartment of a woman acquaintance, blonde Jackie B_____, 22, at that address.
>
> Miss B_____, a dancer at the Cafe Regale, was intensively questioned by detectives after the shooting and then released. Pale and sobbing, she maintained that R_____ brought her home from the night spot and stayed an hour, talking. "He seemed to be nervous," she said, "like he was scared somebody was out to get him."
>
> Investigators on the homicide squad have found no witnesses to the actual shooting. Residents in the exclusive neighborhood, aroused by the sound of gunfire, found R_____ slumped over the wheel of his car. Jack Little,

31, well-known local television personality, who lives across the street from the scene, told police he had just turned the corner of Oak St. when he heard four or five shots and saw a big car leaving the scene at a high rate of speed. He was unable to note its license number or color.

Prime objects of the manhunt are several out-of-town hoodlums who police say are members of a crime ring that has been seeking to break R_____'s hold on gambling activities in this area. Observers at police headquarters today recalled that a previous attempt on R_____'s life was made last March as he crossed a downtown intersection.

At that time, a car driven by a man with a swarthy complexion swerved into the wrong traffic lane and knocked him down. It was pursued by a traffic policeman who commandeered a passing car, but was lost in the maze of alleys near the waterfront. R_____, treated for minor injuries, is reported to have told underworld intimates that he knew who the driver was but he would take care of things in his own way. He is survived by his estranged wife, Irma, and two small children.

2. Translate each of these headlines into a good, clear declarative sentence that even someone who never reads the newspapers could understand:

SUMMIT PARLEY ENDS; U.S.-RUSS PACT OFF
SOLONS BAN TEACHER PAY HIKE; G.O.P. CLAIMS DEMS IN DEAL
COPS NAB SLAYING SUSPECT AFTER WILD CHASE
MAYOR ORDERS PROBE OF AIDE'S JUNKET; COUNCIL ROW ENDS IN DEADLOCK

3. Translate these facts into attention-getting, paper-selling headlines. Use no word of more than two syllables; select the most dramatic verbs and nouns possible.

A fire badly damaged a downtown department store, and six firemen were treated for smoke inhalation.

A jury acquitted a woman accused of trying to poison her husband.

The United States House of Representatives approved the biggest tax bill since 1956.

The President issued a strongly worded statement on a current disagreement with the French government.

The Governor refused to intervene in the scheduled execution of the murderer of a policeman.

4. Comb current newspapers for examples of the coloring of news by newspaperese. Try to find instances of the use of such words as *plot, hit* (meaning "disapprove of"), *fear, flay, nab, probe, vice ring, assail, menace, smash, deadlock, expose, edict, grill, demand, block, warn, grab, storm* (of protest), *spending spree, around the clock vigil, love triangle, front* (in nonmilitary uses), and so on. Substitute words with less dramatic connotation and determine how far each substitution affects the reader's reaction to the news.
5. Make a collection of sports-writers' jargon from the pages of your local newspaper—and don't neglect your school newspaper.
6. Translate the following into sports-page terminology:

made a successful shot (in basketball)
to strike out
touchdown
prevented the other team from scoring by holding firm on the two-yard line
a close finish (in horse racing)
the coach
withdrawn from the game
last place in the league
an outstanding player

GENERAL REVIEW EXERCISES

1. The following four versions of a famous American speech illustrate, sometimes by obvious exaggeration, many of the points made in the text. For what audience and what sort of medium (oral delivery, magazine article, etc.) might each have been designed? How competent would you say each writer, or speaker, is in the use of language? It goes without saying that the Gettysburg Address as Lincoln himself wrote it is infinitely superior to all these versions. But exactly why?
   a. Friends, it is now eighty-seven years since our beloved nation saw the light of day. Behind it was a new idea, the idea that one man is as good as another and every man deserves the blessings of liberty.

We are met here today while the war clouds hang heavy over us. Our brothers, husbands, and sons are giving their all to defend the sacred principles upon which our country was founded. On this solemn occasion it is our purpose to do homage to them by setting aside a portion of the rolling countryside about us, in which they were recently locked in mortal combat, as a last resting place for the departed heroes.

When we give way to reflection, however, it becomes plain that we, who have not fought and bled here, are not the ones to "dedicate" this cemetery. It has already been dedicated by the valorous warriors who clashed in fierce struggle here last July Our program today will not go down in the annals of time. That honor is reserved, and justly so, for the magnificent deeds of those soldiers. Let us turn our thoughts instead to the unfinished business remaining before us. We must carry on, with every ounce of determination at our command, so that the great ideals that our fallen brethren cherished in their stout hearts shall be fulfilled. Let us therefore partake of fresh inspiration from the sacrifices they have made. Let us make a solemn vow that their deaths were not in vain. The finest monument we can erect to them will be the triumph of the high cause for which they laid down their lives—the cause of democratic government. Then we can rest assured that they are gone but not forgotten.

b. The present occasion of commemoration and dedication is an appropriate moment at which to offer several observations. These are as follows: (1) The current state of belligerency between two sections of the nation is traceable to a regrettable divergence of opinion as to whether the aforesaid nation has an indefinite life expectancy, predicated as it is upon certain novel principles laid down 8.7 decades ago, viz.: that all members of the commonwealth are (a) equal in status and (b) entitled to freedom of intellect, expression, and action. (2) The ceremonies attendant on the allocation, in perpetuity, of the acreage environing us as a memorial to the casualties of the late battle, while they are indisputably honorable in intent, nevertheless must not detract attention from the fact that the memorializing has already been implemented by the sanguinary activities which occurred here last July. (3) In view of this circumstance, it is highly desirable that our motivations be directed instead toward the finalization of the procedure which is already under way. (4) Such finalization should consist of an intensified appication to the program for in-

suring the future stability of the nation, namely, for guaranteeing that the principles of liberty shall be resuscitated and that the concept of government, deriving its authority from, and operating through, the agency and in behalf of the best interests of the constituents shall be indefinitely preserved.

c. IN MEMORIAM

Today, in the typically American countryside south of Gettysburg, Pa., a soldiers' cemetery is being dedicated.

Think what that means. Only a few months ago, a great battle was fought there. A battle that probably marked the fateful turning point of the war—a war fought to preserve a free America—an America that owes its very being to the sacrifices of our grandfathers who believed, as we do, that all men are brothers.

The ceremonies at Gettysburg are a fitting gesture, but still only a gesture. We mustn't flatter ourselves that they are history-making. History has already been made there, and we can't possibly match that.

The *real* dedication must take place within ourselves.

The soldiers of the Union Army have done a wonderful job. But they can't do it all. We, who survive, must become, in a sense, their comrades-in-arms.

Every patriotic American must take a greater part in the affairs that concern us all. Every public-spirited citizen must contribute, in the way he is best fitted, to furthering the cause of freedom and democracy.

Join the great crusade—*today!*

d. I haven't checked these figures but 87 years ago, I think it was, a number of individuals organized a governmental setup here in this country, I believe it covered certain Eastern areas, with this idea they were following up based on a sort of national independence arrangement and the program that every individual is just as good as every other individual. Well, now, of course, we are dealing with this big difference of opinion, you might almost call it a civil disturbance, although I don't like to appear to take sides or name any individuals, and the point is naturally to check up, by actual experience in the field, to see whether any governmental setup with a basis like the one I was mentioning has any validity and find out whether that dedication by those early individuals will pay off in lasting values and things of that kind.

Well, here we are, at the scene where one of these disturbances between different sides got going. We want to pay our tribute to those loved ones, those departed individuals who made the supreme sacrifice here on the basis of their opinions about how this thing ought to be handled. And I would say this. It is absolutely in order to do this.

But if you look at the over-all picture of this, we can't pay any tribute—we can't sanctify this area, you might say—we can't hallow according to whatever individual creeds or faiths or sort of religious outlooks are involved about this very particular area. It was those individuals themselves, including the enlisted men, very brave individuals, who have given this religious character to the area. The way I see it, the rest of the world will not remember any statements issued here but it will never forget how these men put their shoulders to the wheel and carried out this idea.

Now frankly, our job, the living individuals' job here, is to pick up the burden they made these big efforts here for. It is our job to get on with the assignment—and from these deceased fine individuals to take extra inspiration for the same theories for which they made such a big contribution. We have to make up our minds right here and now, as I see it, that they didn't put out all that blood, perspiration and—well—that they didn't just make a dry run here, and that all of us here, under God, that is, the God of our choice, shall beef up this idea about freedom and liberty and those kind of arrangements, and that government of all individuals, by all individuals and for the individuals, shall not pass out of the world-picture.

2. In the spirit of the preceding exercise, select a paragraph or two from a well-known speech or historical document, such as the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, or Patrick Henry's "Give me liberty or give me death" speech, and rewrite it in the idiom of a particular audience—for example, a convention of business men, a group of teen-agers, or a company of soldiers.

   After you have written your version, exchange it for one by a classmate. Read his selection, identify its source and determine the audience for which it was written, and outline exactly what your classmate did to adapt the original document to its new audience.

3. Discuss the bearing the substance of each of the following quotations has upon matters discussed in this text, and then examine the language for all the clues that it offers to the personality and intention of the author and the time when it was written.

a. There is a busybody on your [newspaper] staff who devotes a lot of his time to chasing split infinitives. Every good literary craftsman splits his infinitives when the sense demands it. I call for the immediate dismissal of this pedant. It is of no consequence whether he decides to go quickly or quickly to go or to quickly go. The important thing is that he should go at once.

By the way, would you convey my compliments to the purist who reads your proofs and tell him or her that I write in a sort of broken-down *patois* which is something like the way a Swiss waiter talks, and that when I split an infinitive, damn it all, I split it so it will stay split, and when I interrupt the velvety smoothness of my more or less literate syntax with a few sudden words of barroom vernacular, this is done with the eyes wide open and the mind relaxed but attentive. The method may not be perfect, but it is all I have.

b. Do but take care to express yourself in a plain, easy manner, in well-chosen, significant, and decent terms, and to give an harmonious and pleasing turn to your periods; study to explain your thoughts, and set them in the truest light, labouring, as much as possible, not to leave them dark nor intricate, but clear and intelligible.

c. How can an answer in physics or a translation from the French or an historical statement be called correct if the phrasing is loose or the key word wrong? Students argue that the reader of the paper knows perfectly well what is meant. Probably so, but a written exercise is designed to be read; it is not supposed to be challenge to clairvoyance. My Italian-born tailor periodically sends me a postcard which runs: "Your clothes is ready and should come down for a fitting." I understand him, but the art I honor him for is cutting cloth, not precision of utterance.

d. As soon as certain topics are raised, the concrete melts into the abstract and no one seems able to think of turns of speech that are not hackneyed: prose consists less and less of *words* chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more and more of *phrases* tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated henhouse.

e. *Too* startling words, . . . *too* just images, *too* great displays of cleverness are apt in the long run to be as fatiguing as the most overused words or the most jog-trot cadences. That a face resembles a Dutch clock has been said too often; to say that it resembles a ham is inexact and conveys nothing; to say that it

has the mournfulness of an old smashed-in meat tin, cast away on a waste building lot, would be smart—but too much of that sort of thing would become a nuisance.

f. Every man speaks and writes with intent to be understood; and it can seldom happen but he that understands himself might convey his notions to another, if, content to be understood, he did not seek to be admired; but when once he begins to contrive how his sentiments may be received, not with most ease to his reader, but with most advantage to himself, he then transfers his consideration from words to sounds, from sentences to periods, and as he grows more elegant becomes less intelligible.

It is difficult to enumerate every species of authors whose labors counteract themselves: the man of exuberance and copiousness, who diffuses every thought through so many diversities of expression, that it is lost like water in a mist; the ponderous dictator of sentences, whose notions are delivered in the lump, and are, like uncoined bullion, of more weight than use; the liberal illustrator, who shows by examples and comparisons what was clearly seen when it was first proposed; and the stately son of demonstration, who proves with mathematical formality what no man has yet pretended to doubt.

There is a mode of style for which I know not that the masters of oratory have yet found a name; a style by which the most evident truths are so obscured that they can no longer be perceived, and the most familiar propositions so disguised that they cannot be known. Every other kind of eloquence is the dress of sense; but this is the mask by which a true master of his art will so effectually conceal it, that a man will as easily mistake his own positions, if he meets them thus transformed, as he may pass in a masquerade his nearest acquaintance. This style may be called the *terrific,* for its chief intention is to terrify and amaze; it may be termed the *repulsive,* for its natural effect is to drive away the reader; or it may be distinguished, in plain English, by the denomination of the *bugbear* style, for it has more terror than danger, and will appear less formidable as it is more nearly approached.

g. It is a natural, simple, and unaffected speech that I love, so written as it is spoken, and such upon the paper as it is in the mouth, a pithy, sinewy, full, strong, compendious and material speech, not so delicate and affected as vehement and piercing.

, free, loose, and
body; not pedan-
ownright, soldier-

ound,

preads on ev'ry place;
The face of nature we no more survey:
All glares alike, without distinction gay.
But true expression, like th' unchanging sun,
Clears and improves whate'er it shines upon;
It gilds all objects, but it alters none.
Expression is the dress of thought, and still
Appears more decent as more suitable;
A vile conceit in pompous words expressed
Is like a clown in regal purple dressed;
For diff'rent styles with diff'rent subjects sort,
As sev'ral garbs with country, town, and court.
Some by old words to fame have made pretense,
Ancients in phrase, mere moderns in their sense;
Such labored nothings, in so strange a style,
Amaze th' unlearn'd, and make the learned smile.

4. The final test of your understanding of the contents of this pamphlet will be the uses to which you put whatever you have learned here. Select two or three essays that you have written for English or any other class. Exchange them for a classmate's and prepare an analysis of his essays that is based on the points of diction and style that have been discussed in the text. Be specific, quoting parts of the essays and of the text, if you wish, and give your reasons for any comments and recommendations that you make. When your own essays and an analysis of them have been returned to you, study them carefully. Then revise your essays, accounting for your classmate's recommendations and corrections. Finally, return the original essays, your revisions of them, and the analysis to the person who reviewed your original work for his criticism of the rewritten versions.

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