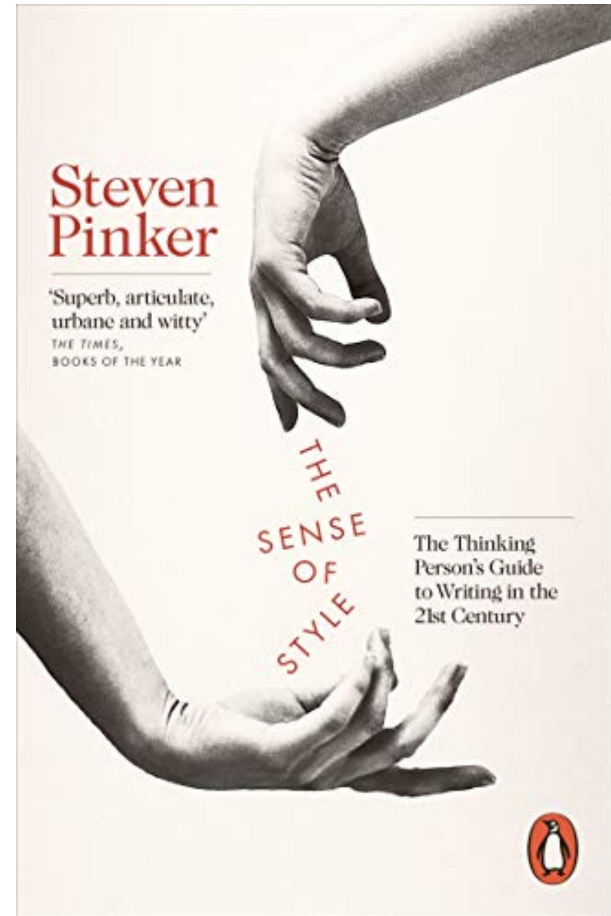


Writing tips from
The sense of style

Adrien Bousseau

- Written by a cognitive scientist, psycholinguist
- Not just a set of guidelines, also an explanation of why they work
- “Distinguish the rules that enhance clarity, grace, and emotional resonance from those that are based on myths and misunderstandings”



Writing tips from *The sense of style*

- Study the great masters
- Classic style
- The web of ideas
- The arcs of coherence

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Study the great masters

- Spot, savor and reverse-engineer good prose
 - Develop a writerly ear
 - More fun than obeying a set of commandments
- See writing as a form of pleasurable mastery, a perpetual quest for improvement

We are going to die, and that makes us the lucky ones. Most people are never going to die because they are never going to be born. Certainly those unborn ghosts include greater poets than Keats, scientists greater than Newton. We know this because the set of possible people allowed by DNA so massively exceeds the set of actual people. (Richard Dawkins)

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-> Good writing starts *strong*. Not with “Since the dawn of time...”, not with “Recently, scholars have been concerned by...”, but with an observation that provokes curiosity.

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-> *Parallel* construction, easy to parse

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-> A vivid *image* to convey the abstract idea of all possible combinations of genes

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-> Inverted parallelism (avoid monotony)

As Cosmopolitan's editor from 1965 to 1997, Helen Gurley Brown was widely credited with being the first to introduce frank discussions of sex into magazines for women. The look of women's magazines today – a sea of voluptuous models and titillating cover lines – is due in no small part to her influence.

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-> The best words not only pinpoint an idea better than any alternative but echo it in their sound and articulation, a phenomenon called *phonesthetics*.

Good to read aloud!

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Classic style

- The writer can *see* something that the reader has not yet noticed, and he orients the reader's *gaze*
- The writer knows the truth before putting it into words; he is not using the occasion of writing to sort out what he thinks
- The writer does not have to argue for the truth; he just needs to present it. That is because the reader is competent and can recognize the truth when she sees it.

Classic style

- The metaphor of showing implies that there is something to *see*. The things the writer is pointing to are *concrete*.
- The metaphor of conversation implies that the reader is *cooperative*. The writer can count on her to connect the dots, without his having to spell out every step in his train of thought.
- Classic writing, with its assumption of equality between writer and reader, makes the reader feel like a genius.

Classic style

- ... but in science, it is hard to know the truth, our theories must constantly be scrutinized for hidden biases!
- Good writers don't flaunt this anxiety in every passage they write; they artfully conceal it for clarity's sake.

Classic style

- ... but in science, it is hard to know the truth, our theories must constantly be scrutinized for hidden biases!
- Good writers don't flaunt this anxiety in every passage they write; they artfully conceal it for clarity's sake.
- Many writers cushion their prose with wads and fluff that imply that they are not whiling to stand behind what they are saying, including “almost”, “apparently”, “fairly”, “in part”, “nearly”, “partially”, “relatively”, “to some extent”, “We would argue” ...

Classic style

- If there is a risk that readers misinterpret a statistical tendency as an absolute law, the writer should insert a qualifier like « on average », together with a « slightly ».
- But the best is to convey the magnitude of the effect and the degree of certainty explicitly.

Classic style

- Paradoxically, intensifiers also work like hedges:
“John is a honest man” vs. “John is a *very* honest man”
- As soon as you add an intensifier, you are turning an all-or-none dichotomy into a graduated scale

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The web of ideas

- Writing requires turning a *web* of ideas into a *string* of words, which is parsed as a *tree* of nouns, verbs, clauses
- Each word added to a sentence imposes not one but two cognitive demands on the reader: understanding the word, and fitting it into the tree
 - > Omit needless words!

The web of ideas

- But redundant words are sometimes helpful to parse a sentence
- Little words like « the », « are » and « that » can give the reader some breathing space

As linguist Geoffroy Pullum has noted, sometimes the passive voice is necessary.



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The web of ideas

- A syntactic tree lingers in memory a few seconds after the words are gone, and is available as a template for the reader to use in parsing the next sentence.

-> **Parallel** constructions!

“We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills, we shall never surrender” (W. Churchill)

The curse of knowledge

- It is very difficult to imagine what it is like for someone else not to know something that you know

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- Explain technical terms, illustrate with examples
- Use concrete, visual language

The measuring gauge was
covered with dust



The oil-pressure gauge was
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show a draft to yourself
have someone else write for you

The danger of nominalization

- Take a perfectly spry verb and embalms it into a lifeless noun:

Comprehension checks were
used as exclusion criteria



We excluded people who failed
to understand the instructions

- Often combined with passive voice
- Often combined with “It is” or “there is”

There is competition between
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Groups compete for resources

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Then, why do those exist?

The web of ideas

- Topic, then comment
- Given, then new
- People learn by integrating new information into their existing web of knowledge
- A major contributor to coherence, the feeling that one sentence flows into the next rather than jerking the reader around

The web of ideas

- Topic, then comment
- Given, then new
- Value of **passive voice**: allows the doer to be mentioned later in the sentence than the done-to

The web of ideas

- Topic, then comment
- Given, then new
- Some verbs have a counterpart which narrates the same scenario in a different order:

The vandals fled the police



The police chased the vandals

Morris sold a watch to Zak

Zak bought a watch from Morris

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The arcs of coherence

- Whenever one sentence comes after another, readers need to see a connection between them
- So eager are readers to seek coherence that they will often supply it when none exists:

Dog for sale: eats anything and is fond of children

- Writer should string the units into a natural order that allows readers anticipate what they will encounter next

The arcs of coherence

- Coherence begins with the writer and reader being clear about the topic
 - A writer might think that it is unsubtle to announce the topic upfront
 - Or she might discover her topic after she has finished laying her ideas on paper, and forget to go back and revise the opening
- The reader also needs to know the point
 - Writers often resist telegraphing the point at the outset, they feel it would spoil the suspense.
 - Or they don't know the point until they have written a first draft, and never go back to reshape the essay so that the point is clear at the beginning.

The arcs of coherence

- Structure every section as an “issue” (the topic) followed by a “discussion”, and state the point of the text at the end of the issue.
- As a reader works his way through the text, the challenge is to keep track of the ideas that run through it and to discern the logical relationship between one idea to the next.

The arcs of coherence

- Repeating a name can confuse readers by making them think that someone new has walked into the stage
- On the other hand, if new characters walk into the scene in the interim, a pronoun or definite noun can leave them wondering who the “he” or “the man” is.

The arcs of coherence

- Avoid naming things with different words when they are mentioned multiple times
- But there are times when a writer really does need to avoid repeating words in close succession.
 - When a noun is repeated in quick succession, readers may assume that the second mention refers to a different individual
 - The natural way to refer to an individual is with a pronoun
 - But a pronoun can be ambiguous

The arcs of coherence

When wording is varied, only certain variations will be easy to track:

- The second label should be more generic than the original noun (given always precedes new)

A bus came roaring around the corner. The vehicle nearly flattened a pedestrian.

A vehicle came roaring around the corner. The bus nearly flattened a pedestrian.

The arcs of coherence

When wording is varied, only certain variations will be easy to track:

- The second label should be more generic than the original noun (given always precedes new)
- **Nominalization** allows a writer to refer to something a second time:

The governor canceled the convention today. The cancellation was unexpected.

The governor canceled the convention today. The fact that the governor canceled the convention was unexpected.

The arcs of coherence

- *Similarity* and *contrast* link two propositions that are similar in most ways but different in at least one way.
- Use **parallel** syntax, and vary only the words that indicate the difference!

In the ten nations with the largest online populations, non-domestic news sites represent less than 8% of the 50 most visited news sites, while in France, 98% of all visits to news sources are directed to domestic sites.



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« While » can mean « at the same time » (similarity), or « although » (contrast)!

The arcs of coherence

- There is a greater danger of prose being confusing because it has too few connectives than too many.
- Prose becomes stuffy when an insecure writer hammers the reader with redundant indicators of connection.

Perhaps the reason so many people are in the dark is because they want it that way.



Perhaps the reason so many people are in the dark is that they want it that way.

We separately measured brainwide synchronization in local versus long-range channel pairs.

We separately measured brainwide synchronization in local and long-range channel pairs.

The arcs of coherence

- If you try to repair an incoherent text and find that no « therefores », « moreover » and « however » will hold it together, that is a sign that the underlying argument may be incoherent, too.

The arcs of coherence

- For us to conclude that something is not the case, we must take the extra cognitive step of pinning the mental tag « false » on a proposition.
- Every negation requires mental homework

For the first time, Sub-Saharan Africa is not the world's least peaceful region.



For the first time, Sub-Saharan Africa is not the world's most violent region.

The arcs of coherence

- An important principle in composition is that the amount of verbiage one devotes to a point should not be too far out of line with how central it is to the argument.
- Of course, writers have to deal with counter-arguments. But if there are enough of them to merit an extended discussion, they deserve a section of their own.
- This devise-and-conquer strategy is better than repeatedly allowing counter-examples to intrude into the main line of argument.