



# Writing Well

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.....In this issue, I review an unusual style guide, but to fully understand it, you should know about—and I hope look at—four other books, which I discuss briefly in the “Related Works” sidebar.

*The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person’s Guide to Writing in the 21st Century* by Steven Pinker (Viking, 2014, 368 pp., ISBN 978-0-670-02585-5, \$27.95)

Steven Pinker is a cognitive scientist, linguist, and—as the dust jacket of his book announces—public intellectual. He is the author of many well-known books, and he chairs the usage panel of the *American Heritage Dictionary*. With these credentials in hand, he sets out to solve one of the most vexing problems of our day: bad writing. Not just any old bad writing, but bad writing by smart, well-educated people with significant things to say.

Pinker loves reading and writing English. He reads style guides and plays with words. The title of his book is a play on two senses of the word “sense.” He wants to help you develop an intuition for how to write well, but he also wants to explain how stylistic choices arise from underlying principles of cognitive psychology and an understanding of English grammar. By “grammar,” he does not mean the hodgepodge of rules, shibboleths, and hobgoblins formerly taught in schools and still perpetuated by most traditional style guides. He means the

research-based discoveries and formulations of Rodney Huddleston and Geoffrey K. Pullum’s *Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*, which substantially revises the vocabulary of English grammar. If you do not want to invest \$250 and many hours of your time to read a 1,200-page grammar book, turn to the glossary of Pinker’s book for a summary of the grammatical categories and functions that underlie the Cambridge system. Reading that glossary before reading the main text helped me understand Pinker’s arguments more quickly as I went along.

### Bad writing and how to fix it

So, how does Pinker hope to stanch the torrent of bad writing? If you want the punch line without Pinker’s significant contributions, start by reading Francis-Noël Thomas and Mark Turner’s *Clear and Simple as the Truth*. The authors describe the classic style, in which the writer knows the truth about some subject and presents it to the reader without bias, as if in a conversation between equals. The reader may not previously have noticed this truth, but immediately recognizes it. The presentation is like a clear, undistorting window. The writer shows but never explicitly tries to persuade. Pinker says that the classic style is the strongest cure he knows of for “the disease that enfeebles academic, bureaucratic, corporate, legal, and official prose.”

A great virtue of the classic style is that it describes its subjects with fresh wording and concrete images. Pinker quotes a few paragraphs from a book by physicist Brian Greene to show that the style can be a perfect vehicle for explaining highly complex and abstract topics. Greene makes the abstractions concrete without oversimplifying them.

Incidentally, the classic style is close to the style that technical writers aspire to, as exemplified in Jean-Luc Doumont’s *Trees, Maps, and Theorems*. But the styles differ in that technical writers and readers are not engaged in conversations between equals. Readers seek specific information, and technical writers, as experts, provide it. They often use standard, predictable structures to enable readers to find information quickly, whereas classic style does not dictate specific formats. Also, most technical writers are taught to avoid passive voice, but the classic style freely uses the passive when it improves clarity.

So, what is the disease for which the classic style is the cure? Pinker calls it the “curse of knowledge,” a term he borrows from economics. All writing guides tell you to consider your audience, but audiences are made of different people with different levels of knowledge. The set of things we can safely assume they know is far smaller than most writers think. As Pinker puts it, “The main cause of incomprehensible prose is the difficulty of imagining what

## Related Works

*Trees, Maps, and Theorems: Effective Communication for Rational Minds* by Jean-Luc Doumont (Principiae, 2009). I reviewed this book in the Sept./Oct. 2011 Micro Review column, and it is still the book to read if you can only read one book about technical communication. Doumont focuses on how to organize and present technical information. He has almost nothing to say about grammar or word choices.

*The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* by Rodney Huddleston and Geoffrey Pullum (Cambridge University Press, 2002). The authors describe it as “a synchronic, descriptive grammar of general-purpose, present-day, international Standard English.” This would be a good example of the curse of knowledge, but the authors mercifully explain all of those terms.

*Clear and Simple as the Truth: Writing Classic Prose* by Francis-Noël Thomas and Mark Turner (Princeton University Press,

1994). Thomas and Turner describe the classic style in terms of the choices it makes about certain basic elements, such as the relationship between the reader and writer and whether truth can be known. They provide many examples of the classic style and contrast it with others.

*Style: Toward Clarity and Grace* by Joseph Williams (University of Chicago Press, 1990). The author’s stated goals are to help writers move from a first draft to a version crafted for readers, diagnose the causes of bad writing and overcome them, and handle complexity. Williams began the work as a textbook and was approached by the University of Chicago Press to make it available to a wider audience. Although most popular guides are aimed at beginners, Williams addresses the issues that seasoned writers must master to move to the next level.

it’s like for someone else not to know something that you know.” There are other causes, of course, but Pinker argues that the best-known suspects—in the words of a Calvin and Hobbes cartoon, “to inflate weak ideas, obscure poor reasoning, and inhibit clarity”—are minor contributors, as are stodgy academic style guides.

The curse of knowledge puts specific pitfalls in a writer’s path: jargon and abbreviations, chunking, and functional fixity. Every field has its own vocabulary, but replacing jargon with a plain term can often improve the clarity of your prose without making you seem less credible to your peers. Some acronyms and abbreviations can be replaced with their fully spelled-out forms—wasting a little space but helping many readers grasp the material more quickly. Your peers know less than you think they do, and even those who have seen a technical term or abbreviation may not recognize it instantly.

Chunking is gathering simpler concepts into more abstract ones with their own names and properties (for example, the Federal Reserve Bank buys risky mortgages to make bankers’ lives easier, and we refer to that action as “quantitative easing”). Chunking is essential to thinking clearly about complex subjects, but it often leads you to substitute nouns for verbs, thus making prose harder to under-

stand. And if you mention a chunk that a reader doesn’t recognize, that reader may be unnecessarily derailed.

Functional fixity is focusing on how you use something, rather than seeing it as the kind of tangible object that the classic style calls for. Pinker gives the example of a researcher who showed people sentences followed by the words “true” or “false.” In the paper that described this research, the researcher called that action “the subsequent presentation of an assessment word.” But research shows that people remember facts presented in concrete terms better than they do the same facts presented abstractly. Pinker suggests, for example, changing a functional phrase like “participants were tested under conditions of good to excellent acoustic isolation” to a concrete phrase like “we tested the students in a quiet room.”

One easy antidote to the curse of knowledge is to ask someone else to read what you’ve written (or, as you should not put it, conduct informal usability studies on your composed output). You don’t have to accept every suggestion—your friends have blind spots and hobbyhorses, too—but you may be surprised at how hard your prose is for them to understand.

As you strive to overcome the curse of knowledge, your next challenge is to put together comprehensible text. A style

of syntax diagramming created in the 1870s was taught in American schools recently enough that many people still remember it and bemoan its loss. Pinker, however, celebrates its loss, because it is unintuitive, ambiguous, and based on an outmoded view of grammar. The *Cambridge Grammar* syntax diagrams, which Pinker uses, are based on psycholinguistic studies of how people process language. They are the first of the trees Pinker uses to map the words and concepts in our heads into text understandable by others. The syntax trees show how to map the interconnected words in our minds into syntactically correct English sentences. They give Pinker a way to show graphically why some sentences are incorrect or hard to understand and to explain how to correct those problems. They also help him illustrate how poorly some writers of style guides understand English grammar.

One problem made evident by considering syntax diagrams is what Pinker calls “garden paths.” Here, the same sequence of words might result from two different diagrams. For example, “fat people eat accumulates” has two readings, one of which can be eliminated by inserting the word “that” before “people.” Pinker advocates inserting such “needless words” into sentences to make them clearer. He also advocates techniques for

reordering text to support what he calls monumental principles of composition:

- Save the heaviest or most difficult information for last.
- Introduce the topic before commenting on it.
- If the sentence contains both old and new information, put the old information first.

Chief among these reordering techniques is the passive voice. Pinker recognizes the problems that have given passive voice a bad name, but he also provides examples in which the passive-voice version is clearer and more graceful than active-voice alternatives.

The second kind of tree describes the structure of a document and helps us organize our thoughts into coherent arguments. A weak understanding of modern English grammar may give rise to lots of nonsensical stylistic advice, but a bigger cause of bad writing is fuzzy thinking. The document-level trees are outlines of coherent themes, deductions, and generalizations. Even if you don't commit either kind of tree to paper, keeping them in mind can help you construct texts that readers can easily understand and follow. Incidentally, the document-level trees are essentially the ones Doumont talks about in *Trees, Maps, and Theorems*.

Document-level trees help solve a problem that Pinker describes as follows: "Even if every sentence in a text is crisp, lucid, and well formed, a succession of them can feel choppy, disjointed, unfocused—in a word, incoherent." An outline, which Pinker calls a tree lying on its side, shows the hierarchical structure of your ideas, but while English grammar limits word order in sentences, no syntax rules control the order of ideas in a document. Nor must all documents be hierarchical. Sometimes you want to develop several themes in parallel, and even if you have only one theme, the sentences you produce are related to the sentences around them in various ways. You have a complex network of ideas in your head, and you hope that by writing sentences you enable readers to

integrate parts of that network into their own mental networks. Pinker uses the term "arcs of coherence" to describe the parts of a document that don't follow the tree structure but, as he puts it, drape themselves from the limbs of one tree branch to the limbs of another.

To help explain how to construct coherent texts, Pinker focuses on the idea of a topic. The point of a sequence of ideas is the topic. If readers don't know the topic of the sentence they are reading, they are no longer on the same page as the writer. Pinker picks apart an incoherent introduction to a highly regarded book to make this point with excruciating clarity.

Pinker refers to Joseph Williams' *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace* as a source of practical advice on how to manage the complexity of multiple themes running through a document. One important technique is to call the same thing by the same name. Another is to explain how each theme relates to the topic, so readers understand why you're talking about it. For example, if you think Jamaica is like Cuba because it is a Caribbean island and that China is like Cuba because it has a communist government, you can't just write "countries like Jamaica and China" without saying that you're lumping them together because each shares a characteristic with Cuba.

## The style guide

The final third of Pinker's book is devoted to the topics that arise in traditional style guides: rules of correct grammar, word choice, and punctuation. It gives Pinker a chance to express some of his own pet peeves and to add a little prescriptivist seasoning to the descriptivist underpinnings of the book. This section is not meant to replace the *Chicago Manual of Style*, but rather to provide data and principles to help you make choices.

Pinker ridicules the supposed war between descriptivists and prescriptivists, in which the prescriptivists fight to stave off the obvious decline of our language, while the descriptivists accelerate the decline by endorsing abominations like ain't, brang, and can't get no.

According to Pinker, the purpose of prescriptive rules is not to tell people how to speak or write but to codify the tacit conventions of a specialized form of the language, namely, standard written English. While explaining the importance of prescriptive rules, he rejects the idea that "every pet peeve, bit of grammatical folklore, or dimly remembered lesson from Miss Thistlebottom's classroom is worth keeping." He calls these *bubbe meises*, Yiddish for grandmother tales, and he cites their principal sources:

- English should be like Latin.
- Greek and Latin must not mix.
- Backformations are bad.
- Meanings can't change (the etymological fallacy).
- English must be logical.

I don't have room to go into his debunking of these "rules." Read the book for that.

Pinker provides "a judicious guide to a hundred of the most common issues ... in style guides [and] pet peeve lists." He groups the issues into grammar, expressions of quantity and quality, word choice, and punctuation, and he brings his expertise to bear on them. For example, he talks about problems that arise from the fact that coordination is headless in the syntax tree. Thus, Bill Clinton said, "Give Al Gore and I a chance to bring America back," and few people registered it as unusual. If he had said, "Give I and Al Gore a chance," everyone would have been startled. I found all 100 issue discussions fascinating, and I hope you'll get the book and read them.

This book is not a traditional style guide. You can't go to it for definitive rules or cite it to defend your stylistic choices. But it does provide a framework and basis for thinking about stylistic issues. It gave me a lot to think about, and if you want to write English prose, it will probably give you plenty to think about, too. I recommend it.

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