

DISSERTATIONS WITH FEWER TEARS: II

How to Write

by Harry Roberts

Many years ago Jim Lorie used to deliver a five-minute pep talk on writing style. Unlike most talks it often had an immediate and drastic effect: incoherent students became coherent virtually overnight. I tried delivering the lecture and found that it worked for me, too. Over the years I have added some embellishments learned from Allen Wallis and Jimmie Savage. In the hope that two hours' work now may save me many five-minute lectures in the future, I have tried to set all this down for the benefit of incoherent doctoral students and others.

I begin with an example of good expository writing:

This summer I raised a black swallowtail butterfly. It all started when we found a little caterpillar. We found it on a carrot top so I fed it carrot tops. Four days later it shed its skin and became a larger striped caterpillar. I kept on feeding it fresh carrot tops each day. It grew bigger and bigger. Two weeks later it stopped eating and got smaller. Then it spun a thread and hung itself on a stem. The next day it shed its skin and turned into a chrysalis, still attached to the carrot stem. Eight days later when we came to breakfast we found instead of a chrysalis a female black swallowtail butterfly.¹

The author of this passage had a great advantage over most who will read this: he was only eight years old. His writing style, I confidently predict, will steadily deteriorate as his schooling progresses. Whether by design or not, our educational system encourages, develops and rewards poor writing.

Why is this good writing? It employs all the simple Lorie rules. The sentences are short, simple, declarative sentences. Each sentence gets over a point. The point of one sentence leads to the point of the next sentence. There are no useless words. There are no vague, abstract words and only one "big" word, "chrysalis." ("The pupa state of certain insects, especially of butterflies, from which the perfect insect emerges.") The big word is not there for show: it is the right word. The result is a clear, vivid, and concise exposition.

An acceptable prose style requires nothing more than application of these simple rules. Any intelligent person can write acceptable exposition once he understands them. Good creative writing requires genius. A distinctive style of expository writing requires practice and some talent. Acceptable exposition demands only intelligence and determination, and this will do for doctoral dissertations.

¹ John Erickson, Junior Natural History (Vol. 24, 1959), p. 19.

The danger for most of us is saturation with academic jargon and double-talk. Jargon is insidious, for it soon robs us of our ability to use our intelligence. We think we are saying something and we are not, or at best we are saying something that we do not intend. Words displace thought, and the weight of words makes it hard for the reader to see that no, or little, thought is present. I once saw Lorie reduce a four-page dissertation proposal to the single sentence: "Sales response depends on sales effort."

You will find it helpful to study carefully academic writing of good style. Pick up anything written by Henry Simons, Dennis H. Robertson, or Paul Halmos, and study a haphazardly chosen paragraph. (My friends Lorie, Wallis, and Savage, mentioned in the first paragraph, will do just as well.) These men are real stylists and you -- or I -- will never touch them, but we can learn much from them. They write as well as John Erickson, and about more difficult things.

For contrast, pick haphazardly chosen paragraphs from academic journals, especially in psychology. Try putting them in English to see what they really say: boil them down, cut out the repetition, replace the jargon and clichés with plain language, straighten out the logical structure. Then pick up something that you yourself have written and do the same thing. Whenever you write anything in the future, keep revising it in just this way until you are satisfied or exhausted.

You must care about the kinds of words and sentences you write. You must realize that you can learn to write. After that it takes only hard work.

The next lesson concerns logical structure for a longer piece of work, like a proposal or a dissertation. Here the job is to fit paragraphs into a larger structure. An outline is helpful, whether you write it down or keep it in your head. Whether or not you use an outline, however, your paragraphs should effectively create one as you go. You should ask yourself: What does this paragraph add? How does it fit in? What does it lead to? You should fight the easy acceptance of the first organization of ideas that you set down on paper.

I find the advice of this last paragraph much harder to execute than that of the previous ones, and I do not hold out hope of overnight improvement here. Again, however, I have faith that determination and intelligence will help, once the need is seen.