A longer, completer, and duller version of these remarks will be published in Fall, 1981, in Working Papers: A Teacher's Observation on Composition (Scott, Foresman).

Ten Rules for Writing Readably
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These rules form a set of suggestions that I use for all my writing courses, graduate and undergraduate. I also use them, or most of them, when acting as a consultant for public and private organizations.

I

First, some premises. In my teaching, I usually do not state any premises at the beginning. Instead we dive into the rules and examples, getting a feel for editing techniques. We “sandwich” the premises in with the rules wherever they seem to fit best. This helps to avoid lecturing and artificiality. The main point is not to separate theory from practice but to let them develop from each other as we inspect and discuss examples. Here, I put the premises in a lump at the beginning because they are easier to deal with that way.

“Readability” is not one thing, but many; not simple, but complex. A readable style is created by a number of things—by proper handling of ideas, words, phrases, clauses, logic, syntax, rhythm, personality. And by voices, by the sound and shape of all these in your ear. Also in your mouth, because if a style is to be readable it should also be utterable. This is another way of saying that unreadable writing is (literally) unspeakable.

If you write speakably, you will have a good chance of writing readably. Never write a sentence that twists your tongue, strains your throat, or gives you no place in it to breathe. Read all your stuff aloud, and listen. If necessary, as one fine writer told me three decades ago, take voice lessons.

Style is found mainly in the English sentence, which is relatively controllable. Reduced to written form, your ideas have a tendency to become ruly. After all, you have imprisoned them
in the small, narrow space of a sentence, which in size is ordinarily only a few inches long and less than a quarter-inch high:

Here is an English sentence.

It is greatly to the writer's advantage that sentences are placed in small, narrow jails. The ideas thus imprisoned can be manipulated—combined, separated, shortened, lengthened, switched, taken out, put in. The jail forces the sentence to keep its basic outer form, but you as writer control almost everything else about it.

A part of your control is created by a strange truth, one which is very important but usually unrecognized by writers. This is that the English sentence is read from left to right. "Dog cat the a bit" is meaningless, but "The dog bit a cat" makes sense. What does the left-to-right premise mean?

It means, first, that reader and writer have something in common. They both start at the left of the sentence, and fight their way rightwards through its narrow prison:

Reader and writer are in jail together. And the more they cooperate, the more easily they can move together through the complex masses of verbal symbols and levels of grammar that we call "writing."

Second, the left-to-right premise means that a writer should supply what the reader predicts. Suppose you write: The _____ said something ____________ when he _______ his thumb with a ____________. Since he is familiar with the grammatical "code," the reader of this sentence can rather easily predict what kinds of words might appear in the empty spaces. To write readably, you should be predictable on all the overlapping levels in the grammatical code. A few brief examples:

- Subordinate clauses are predicted by subordinating signs:
  How we reward the winner of the race that was unscheduled is up to the committee chairman who made the error.

- Nouns are predicted by articles and adjectives:
  the dog, a rat, great poet, "Silent Running" (movie title)

- A verb is predicted by the appearance of a subject:
  A woman ________ us that she _______ that job.
Such examples give us only the beginning of a discussion of predictability, as it is built into the language. It would take a book to do justice to the subject.

I will discuss one more method of gaining control over the sentence—chunking. Ordinarily, all but the shortest messages shoved (from left to right) through the jail of the sentence should be broken up into units so that the reader can process the information. As a result of chunking, the writer creates a sentence unit which can be a single word, phrase, clause, or a recognizable cluster of these. For some reason, most of us tend to write long sentence units that the reader has trouble processing:

There have been no flu deaths from even the most virulent types of the disease for the past ten years in the county.

If you break that sentence into smaller units, the reader can process it more easily (note punctuation, which shows where units start and stop):

For the past ten years , there have been no flu deaths in the county — not even from the most virulent types of the disease.

In the act of chunking, the writer creates recognizable units and separates them with punctuation marks:

Not this:

But this:

Observe that the issue is not just one of sentence length, although length has something to do with readable writing. The more readable of the two sentences on flu deaths is actually one word longer than the less readable. More important, usually, is the length and clarity of the unit, which should be kept short and perfectly "fitted" to its idea. That is, the form and the content of the unit should mesh.

One useful premise about readability I have left till last. You must put yourself and your reader into the message, explicitly if possible, implicitly if not. Every word must be written by and for somebody. If we Americans took this idea seriously, our writing would improve overnight. A lot of prose is unreadable because it is empty of life, of human beings and human-ness, as
if it were written by and for computers. The way things are going, one of these days instead of I love you, one hyperson-
thing is going to say to another: There is a state of lovingness extant. Such English is more than just unreadable. It may also be the best kind of birth control yet devised.

II

So much for the premises. Now for the ten rules.

ONE: Every day, read some great writing: fiction, poetry, drama, essays, speeches.
Writing is an art. Like any other art, it is full of strategy and technique. But it is also full of mystery and wonder, which do not take kindly to being chopped up and then scrunched down under numbered rules. You need to gain a feel for words: the weight, shape, sound, and taste of them.

I read somewhere that Henry Luce hired poets to write on business subjects in Fortune on the theory that they could be taught economics easier than economists could be taught writing. Whether the story is true or not, it ought to be.

And every day, try to read the front page and editorial section of the Wall Street Journal. The Journal is the best daily textbook of business writing in the United States. When you consider that its reporters are writing under firm deadlines, the high quality and humanness of their work are remarkable.

TWO: Use genuinely familiar words.
This replaces the old rule that said: Use short words. For the length of a word is less important than its genuine familiarity. Why genuine? Many words, particularly those presently in vogue or in some way faddish, are familiar more as noises than as representations of exact meaning. When detente was in every headline, I asked many educated people what it meant. Almost no one knew. Later I asked ten people who worked professionally with language what the familiar term passive meant. The only person who came close was our secretary and office manager, Louise Steele. On thousands of highway signs you'll find the expression trauma center. I asked twenty educated Americans what that meant, and no one knew for certain although four made good guesses.

The genuinely familiar word is often homely and plain. The finest geophysicist I worked with (back when I was an engineer)
often used the words *high* and *low* instead of *anticline* and *syncline*. His reports were wonderfully readable, and the envy of other engineers. Of course he had good ideas, without which the best words are useless.

An idiot doctor of medicine started a discussion with these unfamiliar words:

Symptomatology relative to impending or incipient onset of illness generally manifests itself initially via a marked chill, following which a rapid rise of temperature to the 103°-105° range is characteristically observed. Cutaneous palpation demonstrates . . . .

By contrast, here is the great physician and teacher, Sir William Osier, writing on the same subject in a medical tome:

We know but little of the incubation period in acute lobar pneumonia. It is probably very short. There are sometimes slight catarrhal symptoms for a day or two. As a rule, the disease sets in abruptly with a severe chill, which lasts from fifteen to thirty minutes or longer.

THREE: *Break sentences into clearly defined units, separated by punctuation.*

Example:

(1) Police had arrested Chadwick and his companions at a Boston train station for possession of marijuana. (2) After incarcerating the suspects at the federal building, the police searched a footlocker which Chadwick had been carrying. (3) Significantly, the search—which occurred at the federal building—was conducted one and one-half hours after the arrest. (4) The police did not have a warrant allowing the search. (5) At his trial, Chadwick challenged the admissibility (into evidence) of the marijuana found in the footlocker, claiming that the search violated the fourth amendment.

(written by a young lawyer)

Here you have *five* sentences broken into *eleven* units. There is no magic ratio, of course, between sentences and units. Nor is there any rule about how many interrupting and closing units a writer should employ. But we do know that punctuated openers (see sentences 2, 3, and 5 above) are of particular value. The writer needs them for predictability, to help prepare readers for ideas coming up and to create necessary transitions. A style with too few openers will not read easily.
FOUR: Use sentence signals.

Signals are words like since, because, while, when, but, and, so, before, etc. For good predictability, they should be placed early in the sentence, either as the first word in the opening unit or as a word coming just before the main clause:

Because he liked pickles, he bought two jars.

But the president changed her mind.

When signals appear later in the sentence, as they sometimes do, they are designed to enhance the reader's predictions:

Napoleon loved only himself, but unlike Hitler he hated nobody. (J. C. Herald)

FIVE: Make your subject and verb (S→V) of every clause absolutely clear.

The S→V of a clause is several things wrapped in one: a piece of logic, a grammatical structure (the most important one in the language), and the main part of a statement in the sentence. As the arrow suggests, the S→V is unitary, a single driving force. And this force is the catalyst for the production of ideas and grammatical forms in the sentence.

Typically, unreadable sentences begin to be unreadable on the left, in the crucial subject of the S→V in the main clause. Start wrong, and you will end wrong:

"Functional microspace implies the . . . ."

"Symptomatology relative to . . . . manifests . . . ."

"A conceptual relationship as a means to an end is . . . ."

If you combine a poor choice of subject with a poor choice of verb, the sentence will just lie there comatose, perhaps dead:

"Behavior problems act out their relationships." (A problem can't act out.)

"Isolation stigmatizes the individual . . . ." (Isolation can't stigmatize.)

It is in the S→V that we often see most clearly the value of certain premises about readability. The subject and verb cannot do their proper job of catalyzing the sentence (a) if they aren't familiar words; (b) if they don't make sense as an S→V statement as you read from left to right; (c) if, separately, and together, they fail to predict ideas; and (d) if they don't bring (when necessary) the writer and reader into the sentence. An example of bringing them in:

Not this: Union viability is a necessity for continued economic development. (As an S→V, viability is is wretchedly weak.)
But this: Do you want more money? Then join the union.

Or this: Workers who want more money should join the union.

Editors are forever tinkering with the S→V of sentences in order to make them more readable:

**Bad S→V:** The government’s *investigation* into the shipment of wheat by the exporter *was met* by his refusal in regard to an examination of his method of payments for its domestic transportation.

**Better S→V:** The government *investigated* the shipment of wheat by the exporter . . . . But he *blocked* the investigation by refusing to . . . .

**Bad S→V:** The *causes* of the mutation of the genes *received* analysis from the scientists.

**Better S→V:** The scientists *analyzed* the causes of the mutation of the genes.3

SIX: *Use parallel structure as a positive tool for readability.*

In her computer study of parallel structure, Professor Mary Hiatt demonstrated that “balancing” of sentence elements is far more important than we thought. More than 50 percent of standard English sentences contain *doublets, triplets* and *series.* If the computer can be programmed to catch more parallelism than it presently can, we might find the percentage rising significantly.4

Unreadable prose tends to hide or mask its own “parallel ideas”:

**Weak:** Also clear in the activity between the students in the Senate are their wish for clarifying pass-fail, the need for better discipline procedures, and for watering the plant of faculty-student relationships.

**Edited:** Students in the Senate want to *clarify the pass-fail option,* create *better procedures for discipline,* and *improve faculty-student relationships generally.*

**Weak:** None of the principal uses of the Freudian method in personality analysis are the determination of personality defects and utilization of their cures.

**Edited:** When they *analyze* personality, Freudians ordinarily do not wish to *determine defects* or *suggest cures.*

SEVEN: *Treat nouns, particularly abstract ones, as creatures of the devil.*

Unless the construction is familiar and idiomatic, don’t modify nouns with nouns. These are bad: *ramification potentials,*
resource use, attitude myopia. Another example of noun disease (the phrase is an example of its own condition) is a trail of prepositions:

English teachers agree that personal ownership and use of a good dictionary is a prime necessity for every student in obtaining the maximum results from the study of English.

We can edit this by cutting some nouns and altering others. In the new sentence we have reduced the prepositions from five to none, the nouns from ten to three:

English teachers agree that students should own and use a good desk dictionary.


If a sentence goes bad on you, ask it: Who is doing what here? (Just as useful, sometimes: What is what here?) And keep asking until the sentence gives you an answer.

Bad: Accordingly, there is a tremendous emphasis on PE and recreation beginning in the junior high which accounts for the significant increase in the accident rate for grades 7-12.

Better (after three rewrites): Beginning in junior high, schools emphasize PE and recreation for the first time. For example, about 40 percent more students play touch football, softball, and soccer. So, starting in grade 7, the accident rate in school increases.

NINE: Surprise your reader once in a while.

Do something unexpected in grammar, syntax, word choice, rhetoric, logic. Don’t always be serious or predictable. This anti-principle seems to apply to life generally; we all want variety. No woman is interesting unless she surprises occasionally. Nor any man either, as Sam Johnson would have said.

Immediate readability is not always a virtue. Clarity can be tiresome and plebian. In an odd way, it can even militate against understanding an idea. If you want to know more about leadership, for instance, it may be a mistake to read one of the hundred straightforward textbook discussions of the subject. Perhaps it would be better to read the works of unpredictable genius—_Hamlet_, the speeches of Churchill, the messages of Abraham Lincoln to his generals. Lincoln telegraphed to General McClellan: “I have just read your despatch about sore-tongued and fatigued horses. Will you pardon me for asking what the
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horses of your army have done since the battle of Antietam that fatigues anything?"

The more genuinely and permanently readable a writer, the more likely he is to surprise you. Here are a few lines from a recent essay by John Kenneth Galbraith:

All professions have their own ways of justifying laziness. Harvard professors are deeply impressed by the jeweled fragility of their minds. More than the thinnest metal, these are subject terribly to fatigue. More than six hours teaching a week is fatal—and an impairment of academic freedom . . . .

Richly evocative and deeply percipient theory I avoid. It leaves me cold unless I am the author of it . . . .

In the case of economics there are no important propositions that cannot be stated in plain language . . . .

[Concluding paragraph] You might say that all this constitutes a meager yield for a lifetime of writing. Or that writing on economics, as someone once said of Kerouac's prose, is not writing but typing. True.6

Galbraith keeps his reader slightly, delightfully, off-balance. From sentence to sentence, he changes the grammatical pattern of the main clause, using all of the available patterns in English from the SVO to the expletive. He also shifts the rhetoric of his sentences, jumping from normal order, to inversion, to a one-word fragment at the end.

And the reader is tantalized with the unexpected. Professions justify laziness? Harvard professors have minds of jeweled fragility? The metaphor darts and stings. He extends its theme into a metaphorical modulation and then drops into burlesque created by a doublet: "More than six hours teaching a week is fatal—and an impairment of academic freedom."

Galbraith is readable for all the reasons suggested by the authorities on rhetoric from Aristotle on. But as important as any of these reasons is his gift of surprise mixed with blandishment. Partly we want to read him because we are never sure what he is going to do next.

TEN: "Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous."

Thus George Orwell in his famous essay, "Politics and the English Language." You can not only break the rules but add to them. If, for example, readability formulas help you, use them. They are dramatic tests of certain kinds of bad writing, and they satisfy our love of counting things. But they have
three drawbacks: They are notoriously inapplicable to some linguistic problems; they do not get at the roots of unreadable writing; and (worst of all) the professional writer does not use them. But they are here to stay and have their place.

III

These ten rules boil down to: Have respect for yourself, your reader, and your language. Don't write like a professor—my commonest yell of outrage at students. Write like a human being employing one of the most delicate and precise instruments known: this ancient, beautiful, mysterious mechanism we call English.

### NOTES AND REFERENCES

2. Ibid., p. 50.
3. These two bad sentences I borrowed from Joseph Williams, “Defining Complexity,” *College English*, 40 (February, 1979), 597, 601. The rewrites are mine.

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