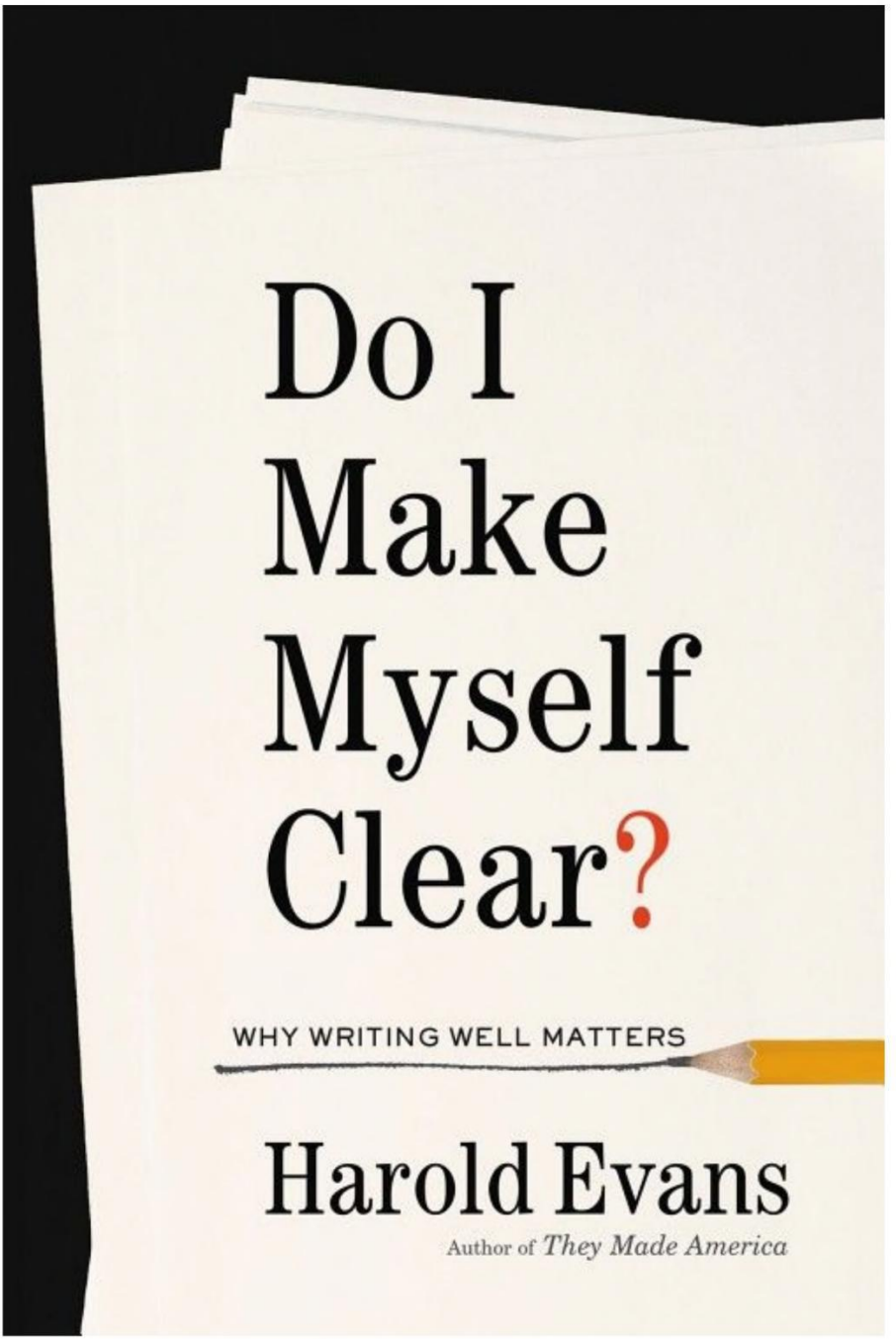

CONTENTS

To the memory of the brilliant Robert Silver, our family's lost friend

Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city. Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish heights. Fog creeping into the cabooses of collier-brigs; fog lying out on the yards, and hovering in the rigging of great ships; fog drooping on the gunwales of barges and small boats. Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners, wheezing by the firesides of their wards; fog in the stem and bowl of the afternoon pipe of the wrathful skipper, down in his close cabin; fog cruelly pinching the toes and fingers of his shivering little 'prentice boy on deck. Chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog, with fog all round them, as if they were up in a balloon, and hanging in the misty clouds.

—Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*

INTRODUCTION

The year 2016 was the seventieth anniversary of George Orwell's classic polemic *Politics and the English Language* (1946) indicting bad English for corrupting thought and slovenly thought for corrupting language.

The creator of Newspeak, as he called the fictional language of his nightmarish dystopia, Oceania, did as much as any man to rescue us, but eternal vigilance is the price of intelligent literacy. For all its benefits, the digital era Orwell never glimpsed has had unfortunate effects.

As I write today, messages on Facebook and WhatsApp mourned the death of "martyr Rahul Upadhyay"[1] in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. It was news to Rahul; he was very much alive, but one man died in riots incited by the bogus report of his death. It's old news that words can kill, but today we're vulnerable to a fusillade of digital bullets, reckless words unmonitored, unchecked, unverified, but with their credibility enhanced by traveling at the speed of light to the screen of your cell phone. The *New York Times* tracked months of "riots and lynchings... linked to misinformation and hate speech" following "Facebook's rapid expansion in the developing world whose markets represent the company's financial future."[2]

This book on clear writing is as concerned with how words confuse and mislead, with or without malice

aforethought, as it is in literary expression: in the millions of raw and deceptive social media postings, in misunderstood mortgages, in the labyrinthine language of Social Security, in commands too vague for life-and-death military situations, in insurance policies that don't cover what the buyers were led to believe they covered, in instructions that don't instruct, in warranties that prove worthless. The 2008 implosion of the housing bubble revealed that millions had signed agreements they hadn't understood or had given up reading for fear of being impaled on a lien. But as the book and movie *The Big Short* make clear, the malefactors of the Great Recession hadn't understood what they were doing either.

Fog everywhere. Fog in the English Channel (and La Manche) obscuring the irreversible connection of the British Isles with Europe. Fog online, on seductive screens, and in print. Fog in the Wall Street executive suites. Fog in the regulating agencies that couldn't see the signals flashing danger in shadow banking. Fog in the evasions in Flint, Michigan, while its citizens drank poisoned water. Fog in the ivory towers where the arbiters of academia all over the world are conned into publishing volumes of computer-generated garbage. Fog machines in Madison Avenue offices where marketers invent dictionaries of fluff so that a swimming cap is sold as a "hair management system."[3] Fog in pressure groups that camouflage their real purpose with euphemism, fog in how "clean air" and "clear water" became dirty words, fog from vested interests aping the language of science to muddy the truth about climate change. Fog in the U.S. Supreme Court, where five judges in *Citizens United v. Federal Elections Commission* (2010) sanctified secret bribery as freedom of speech. But never come there fog too thick, never come there mud and mire too deep, never come there bureaucratic and marketing waffle so gross as to withstand the clean invigorating wind of a sound English sentence.

"I like it—it's wonderfully editable."

I

Tools of the Trade

1

A Noble Thing

Winston Churchill had problems talking to a table. His teachers at Harrow told him that the Latin word for *table* was *mensa* but if he wanted to invoke the thought of a table—address a table in the vocative case—he could not just blurt out the word. He must do as the Romans did and write or say, "O *mensa*." To Churchill's straightforward English way of thinking about such matters, it seemed "absolute rigmarole" to muck about with a good solid noun. He was further dismayed to learn it was not even permissible to talk *about* a table without changing its identity to *mensae*. Give these Romans an inch, and they'd take a passus.

In his captivating memoir *My Early Life,* Churchill admits a delinquency in the declensions of Latin grammar which had given "so much solace and profit" to the cleverest Englishmen. He decided he would stake his destiny, instead, on the force of simple, natural prose rooted in the lexicon of Anglo-Saxon. "Thus," he writes, "I got into my bones the essential structure of the ordinary British sentence—which is a noble thing."

The world well knows how he marshaled the sentences. On February 9, 1941, he addressed a radio appeal for war

matériel to President Roosevelt and the American people. He asked America to believe in Britain's ability to stand alone against Hitler's war machine, even then poised to invade. He cited British victories against the Italian armies in the North African desert war. He closed with three sentences. The first was an emotional pledge: "We shall not fail or falter; we shall not weaken or tire. Neither sudden shock of battle, nor the long-drawn trials of vigilance and exertion will wear us down." But then he ended his broadcast with ten taut words: "Give us the tools and we will finish the job!"

The sentence, a verb in the active voice, had the decisive urgency of a battlefield command, a shocking transition from literary elegance. No tears. No plaintive whining. No soft soap. Not a wasted syllable. Just, for God's sake, man, give us the tools and we will finish the job!

So many of Churchill's words are imperishable. He might have written "words are the only things that last forever; they are more durable than the eternal hills." For a time, like many, I thought he had, but they were written by the English essayist William Hazlitt (1778–1830). We know the observation to be true of those combinations of words we can none of us forget: Lincoln's resolve for "government of the people, by the people, for the people"; Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I have a dream," invoking the cadences of the Bible, "... from every mountainside, let freedom ring!"; John Kennedy's call to "my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country"; and for many, the enduring inspiration of Shakespeare's *Henry V* battle speech at Agincourt, that from this day "to the ending of the world... we in it shall be remembered—we few, we happy few, we band of brothers." The words of Pope Francis in 2013 will surely pass into history—that an obsession with narrow political issues risks even the moral edifice of the church falling "like a house of cards, losing the freshness and fragrance of the Gospel."

Such pulsations of language memorably marry thought and expression. We cannot remember all the good writing we come across, but we know it when we see it. One of the cool sentences in E. B. White's essay on the "trembling city" of New York comes with me every day I walk to my office in Times Square. "No one should come to New York to live unless he is willing to be lucky."

We know the right words are oxygen, that dead English pollutes our minds every day. Those combinations of words don't last forever, but ugly words and phrases linger in the vocabulary. They are picked up and passed on like a virus by the unwary and by the pretentious who like to give the "appearance of solidity to pure wind." Orwell, of course:

> Political language—and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservative to anarchist—is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.

The critic Clive James defines the subtlety of composition that has given enduring life to that one sentence toward the end of Orwell's essay *Politics and the English Language:*

> The subject stated up front, the sudden acceleration from the scope-widening parenthesis into the piercing argument that follows, the way the obvious opposition between "lies" and "truthful" leads into the shockingly abrupt coupling of "murder" and "respectable," the elegant, reverse-written coda clinched with a dirt-common epithet, the whole easy-seeming poise and compact drive of it, a world view compressed to the size of a motto from a fortune cookie, demanding to be read out and sayable in a single breath—it's the Orwell style.

There is no compulsion to be concise on either the

Internet or the profusion of television and radio channels; and in writing of every kind, Twitter apart, we see more words, more speed, less clarity, and less honesty, too, since with "demand media" you never know whether a review of *Swan Lake* will conceal a hard sell about toenail fungus. A new enterprise in print, on TV, or on the web is now a "platform" for "content" where if you can develop "core competency," there will be "measurable deliverables." My own observable "behavior-driven process" used to be to throw a shoe at the television whenever I heard *weather* expunged in favor of *existing weather conditions.* As for marketing-speak, I don't have enough shoes or energy for all the branding baloney; it induces the comatose condition Ben Bradlee defined as "MEGO."[1]

In 2012, Chris Hughes, a co-founder of Facebook, bought control of the *New Republic* magazine, renowned as a citadel of literacy. Two years later his new management decided it would no longer print the magazine; it would henceforth publish only online. Straightforward enough, you'd think. The magazine was losing money. It was better to be read than dead. It had lost none of its authority in the hard times for all print publications. It need lose none when the words were backlit on a screen.

What it did lose, on the announcement of a series of changes, was most of the gifted editors and writers. This is not the place to explore all the reasons for the resignations, much regretted by their readers, but one can empathize with the reluctance of writers to associate with the fakery of marketing-speak which regarded the magazine's history as a "competitive advantage" to be "leveraged." The new managers expected the digitized staff to "create magical experiences" through "cross-functional collaboration," and "align themselves from a metabolism perspective" to the needs of "a vertically integrated digital media company." It didn't, as they say, travel well. "Vertical integration?" asked

Slate's Seth Stevenson in a spirit of inquiry. "Are they going to, like, mine their own pixels?" Cynthia Ozick, the novelist and critic, fretted that the magazine might be turned into a clickbait factory. She knocked out a rough lament inspired by Byron's "The Destruction of Sennacherib":

> The Siliconian came down like the wolf on the fold,
> And his cohorts were gleaming in wireless gold,
> Crying Media Company Vertically Integrated!
> As all before them they willfully extirpated:
> The Back of the Book and the Front and the Middle,
> Until all that was left was digital piddle,
> And Thought and Word lay dead and cold.

Lo and behold, in a nanosecond, Mr. Hughes, who initiated the debacle, announced in January 2016 he would "pursue conversations" with those interested in "taking on the mantle," i.e., buying the magazine. He was as good as his word. What the trade prefers to call a "liquidation event," i.e., a sale, took place a month later. Everybody was happy when, as Mr. Hughes put it, the philanthropist Winthrop McCormack donned the mantle. He assigned the literary figures Hamilton Fish and John Gould to sentry duty to keep out non sequiturs and marketing burble.

In his thoughtful book on rhetoric, *Enough Said,* Mark Thompson, the CEO of the *New York Times,* suggests that anger with conventional political leadership in the United States and Britain can be traced to a change in public language that has produced a mutual breakdown of trust, "leaving ordinary citizens suspicious, bitter and increasingly unwilling to believe anybody."

My contention in *Do I Make Myself Clear?* is that the oppressive opaqueness of the way much of English is written these days is one cause for disaffection. Waffle dressed up as a

high-level digital concept gets regurgitated by business leaders who promise to dedicate themselves to "improving the efficacy of measurable learning outcomes" (a *Financial Times* management statement). Another company urged staff to "deploy social listening tools to come up with consumer engagement strategy to inspire consumer conversations and advocacy."

Had Donald Trump talked like that he would not have won the election. His simple, repetitive assertions were brilliantly effective with his audiences, hypnotized by his insistent certainty:

> We have to stop illegal immigration. We have to do it. [Cheers and applause] We have to do it. Have to do it. [Audience: USA! USA! USA!] And when I hear some of the people that I am running against, including the Democrats. We have to build a wall, folks. We have to build a wall. And a wall works. All you have to do is go to Israel and say is your wall working? Walls work.

It's straightforward work to lay brick on brick to make a wall. It is harder to explain to people caught in the ice and snow of winter storms that the planet is in danger from global warming and that this has something to do with the cars they drive and the coal and oil they burn. Candidate Trump did not attempt to explain the difference between weather and longer escalations in temperatures. His reluctance to attempt that got him into enough of a language swivvet, but what he did say served him well because it connected with his audience. It may have offended the cognitive elite, but it did not deter his rally crowds. It was more or less what they felt; indeed, they may have resented the intrusion of physics into polite conversation. So these were his words:

> And actually, we've had times where the weather wasn't

> working out, so they changed it to extreme weather, and they have all different names, you know, so that it fits the bill. But the problem we have, and if you look at our energy costs, and all of the things that we're doing to solve a problem that I don't think in any major fashion exists. I mean, Obama thinks it's the number one problem of the world today. And I think it's very low on the list. So I am not a believer, and I will, unless somebody can prove something to me, I believe there's weather. I believe there's change, and I believe it goes up and it goes down, and it goes up again. And it changes depending on years and centuries, but I am not a believer, and we have much bigger problems.[2]

He identified with Republican sentiment—their anxieties, their bewilderment. In national polls, Democrats are as consistent worrying about the effects of climate change from human causes as Republicans are dismissive. More than half of Democratic voters trust the scientific consensus; 15 percent of Republicans say the scientists are motivated by political bias and advancing their careers.

Mischief has flowed from Marshall McLuhan's overused, enigmatic paradox "The medium is the message." He did not mean the message was irrelevant, but that we should be more aware of how changes in the medium affect our social interactions. Wasn't he just right? The digital era might have offered a vision of a universe of honest exchanges in search of mutual understanding.

It didn't happen. Legislators blundered. Dazzled like rabbits caught in the headlights of "new tech," they gave social media companies immunity from liability—with few exceptions—for whatever their visitors post or tweet, true or false, virtuous or vile.

The template for this amazing license denied to regular news services, including newspapers, was enacted in section

230 of the US 1996 Criminal Justice code. The friendly exchanges among the millions of families using Facebook and Twitter are much enjoyed, but the same free-for-all immunity shield has protected evils. No silver tongue can escape the odium of shielding a notorious website retailing children for sex. Nicholas Kristof exposed the villainy of Backpage.com. "Do no evil" is supposed to be the soul of the genius of Google, and much enlightenment has it shed by its prodigious search engine, but how could Google have secretly used its lobbying muscle and advertising power to forestall a narrowly focused bipartisan bill designed to protect children? Stop Enabling Sex Trafficking Act was not passed until 2018.

Twitter breaks news, offers instant relief for the opinionated, makes sure Harry gets to the same meeting place as Sally. It became a megaphone for Donald Trump as a candidate, and then as twitterer in chief. He made an art form of creating stereotypes and pinning scurrilous adjectives to characters in his psychodrama—Lyin' Ted, Crooked Hillary, Psycho Joe, Goofy Elizabeth, Little Rocket Man, etc. You can despise or relish such tweets, but they had millions of loyal followers, even though Twitter Audit and other monitors have identified umpteen fake tweets generated automatically by code, not people.

Only in the wake of the 2016 U.S. presidential election did we become aware of the more sinister malefactions created by the digerati. Facebook's founder, Mark Zuckerberg, laughed off as "crazy" the fears that his site had been infiltrated by fake accounts. The joke was on the millions of Americans who were hoodwinked into believing they were reading the opinions of their fellow Americans when they weren't. They were suckers for a stealthy agitprop campaign by Russian secret services so massive that fully half the voting population was exposed to divisive messages—mainly, it seems, hostile to the Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton and to the benefit of Donald Trump. In 2018 we learned that

Facebook had been sneaky about another covert political operation, this one funded in 2016 by the American billionaire Robert Mercer, in a scheme devised by Steve Bannon. In an attempt to underpin the Trump campaign, they engaged a company luxuriating in the faux academic name Cambridge Analytica to "harvest" private information from more than 50 million Facebook accounts. The aim was to identify themes for psychographic messaging that might influence voting attitudes and not incidentally further enrich Zuckerberg and his top staff.[3] Twitter, too, was corrupted. The agitators bought 36 million robot accounts ("bots") that tweeted 14 million times and reached half the 200 million eligible voters.

I would argue that the maelstrom of mendacity makes it all the more imperative that truth be clearly expressed. The great nineteenth-century editor C. P. Scott might have written his famous command just for today—that the unclouded truth must not suffer wrong. But if we care for truth, C.P.'s demand is more onerous since the digerati have secured legal immunity for transmitting falsehoods, as the gun-making industry has secured immunity for marketing assault weapons.

Liars and their lies can be exposed, but can good writing be learned? I give the "best answer" cigar to Mark Forsyth, author of *The Elements of Eloquence,* whose title I will adorn with the alliterative adjective *entertaining*. He proves how Shakespeare learned to write. Yessir; Shakespeare had a lousy start then refined and mastered every trick in the rhetorical trade. If this attitude seems without reverence for God-given genius, beware: Mr. Forsyth advocates a hit, a palpable hit, on the noses of dissenters until they promise not to talk nonsense anymore.

Still, it may be impossible for any of us to avoid slovenly English. There is so much of it about. Words filtered through algorithms are not washed clean of impurities. Rust eats

once-fresh metaphors. I've been reading about *crumbling* infrastructure for twenty years. Hasn't it crumbled away yet? Could it not make out with another adjective for a decade or two, deepen our depression by linking with the catalog of deadly *d* words, *disintegrating, dilapidated, decaying,* or just rot and collapse? Better, is it beyond the wit of the writers to get out from under the Latin *infra* and remind us that the abstraction covers a multitude of sins—corroded water pipes, leaking dams, archaic airports, decrepit overhead power cables?

Passages of obscurity, ugliness, and verbosity pop up as in the game Whac-A-Mole in news reports, business letters, academic journals, contracts, websites, school essays, job descriptions and the applications they attract; in magazines, publicity releases, Facebook posts, broadcasting, and even supposedly well-edited books. Bureaucrats have no monopoly on the opaque. Writers generally set out with good intentions, but something happens along the way. We don't really know what we want to say until we try to write it, and in the gap between the thought and its expression we realize the bold idea has to be qualified or elaborated. We write more sentences. Then more. We are soon in the territory defined by the French mathematician Blaise Pascal (1623–1662) but associated with others, too: I would have written something shorter, but I didn't have time. Soon enough we find ourselves trapped in a bad neighborhood. We whistle up reinforcements, more words. Thoughts collide midsentence. Abstractions suffocate narrative. Nouns dressed up as verbs sap vigor. Clichés avoid detection. Stale images creep in. Modifiers get detached from the words they are supposed to modify: "Walking into Trafalgar Square, Admiral Nelson's column is surrounded by pigeons reaching 169 feet into a pure blue sky."[4]

It's good to feel bad about something you've just written. It tells you there's a fat chance nobody else will feel good

about it, so you'd better work out what's wrong and fix it. Kurt Vonnegut's seventh rule of writing[5] applies: "Pity the readers. Readers have to identify thousands of little marks on paper, and make sense of them immediately. They have to read, an art so difficult that most people don't really master it even after having studied it all through grade school and high school—twelve long years." Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus spelled out the obligation for the imperfect artist to meet the imperfect readers more than halfway. It means "rewriting, and rewriting, all of it or in bits and pieces, getting rid of redundant words, making complex sentences simpler, clarifying what you really wanted to say."[6]

A fair question—I am glad you asked—is what do I bring to the picnic? The short answer is that I have spent my life editing thousands of writers, from the urgent files of reporters on the front lines to the complex thought processes of Henry Kissinger in his memoirs and history of China. Forty years ago I wrote a manual for journalists that was adopted by the industry's Society of Editors[7] and another adopted by the Asian press.[8] I discovered early on how skilled are some people in politics and business in using words not for communicating ideas but concealing them. At the *Sunday Times* when we were investigating the cover-up of the great espionage scandal of the Soviet agent Kim Philby, who became head of British intelligence, we were educated in nuance by a former Foreign Office adviser who was a specialist in Anglican liturgy. "Oh, dear," he said, "why does no one read our statements with the care with which we drafted them?" Prime Minister Edward Heath had said in 1973 that the British government was "now aware" that Philby had "worked for the Soviet authorities *before* 1946." In other words, they had known for some unspecified time that he was a Russian agent after 1946 and had then just discovered that Philby had been working for the Soviet Union before that—that is, all along. This made all the more pressing the

question of what he was doing in British intelligence from 1940 onward. The finished articles read like John le Carré (who was incidentally of some assistance), but this book is all about nonfiction. I want to pass on what I've learned from trying to get a headlock on the world's most sinuous or deceptive writing; learned, too, from travels with a dictionary in the cascade of good books about writing well (see the bibliography).

If you are more into explaining your inner self to the waiting world than in conveying information, stop here and brood on to greatness. My approach is to start from the muddy field where the casualties lie, see what editing can do to make them whole, and generalize from there. I may note why nonfiction passages lose narrative tension, but I don't aspire to teach great writers; they can look after themselves. Nor do I wish to take the chalk from the grammarians' itchy fingers. When we get lost in unraveling how menaced we are by a software licensing agreement setting out what is forbidden by our "concurrent use," it's the Silicon Valley syntax, stupid. We should respect grammatical rules that make for clarity, but never be scared to reject rules that seem not to. In self-defense, I can call spirits from the vasty deep. A little more than a century ago, William Brewster insisted that the mere avoidance of grammatical barbarisms will not result in clear writing:

> One might escape illiteracy but not necessarily confusion. To know what a sentence is saying is important, more important than anything else about it. That is rarely interfered with, directly, by the presence of barbarisms, and not grievously, for the most part, by improprieties and solecisms, as they actually occur in writing; these things cause sorrow chiefly to the erudite or the parvenu of style, whom they offend rather than confuse; the populace cares very little about them.

Fifty years later, Robert Graves and Alan Hodge took up the right end of the stick that the only relevant standard by which to judge any straightforward piece of prose is the ease with which it conveys its full intended sense, rather than its correctness by the laws of formal English grammar inherited from Alexandrian Greek. And around the same time, Orwell was rebuking the rebukers. Defending the English language, he wrote, "has nothing to do with correct grammar and syntax, which are of no importance so long as one makes one's meaning clear, or with the avoidance of Americanisms, or with having what is called 'a good prose style.'"

You can lose your mind trying to obey prescriptivists—the "linguistically brainwashed," in David Crystal's exuberant demolition. He advises: "Don't be conned, don't feel threatened or inferior when confronted by a menacing grammarian" [*that* but not *which* can introduce a noun clause (or argument clause or content clause), and *which* but not *that* can be used as a determiner with a plural noun (so *which books*, but not *that books*]. Go to a quiet room with Crystal's *The Fight for English* or read Thurber's adventures with a which clause which rescued Ernest Hemingway from a which clause about which nobody had alerted him, which was a damn shame.[9]

Do I Make Myself Clear? is for everyman. I've read and respected the admonitions in scores of books on usage and debated their utility. What I got into *my* bones, early on, was the conviction that a concise sentence was more likely to be clear. At sixteen, as a junior reporter on a weekly newspaper, I longed to speed up the translation of the proceedings of councils, inquests, and courts I'd taken down verbatim in Pitman's phonetic shorthand.

At Durham University, writing essays on politics, economics, and ethics, I became infected with literary pretensions, squeezed out of me when I was hired by an electric evening newspaper, the *Manchester Evening News*. We

edited words written on a typewriter, sent the marked folios to the Linotype operators to convert into column-width slugs, lines of hot lead, antimony, and tin. We prayed that the number of metal lines would fit into the space the page planner had allotted for their assembly in an iron frame (a chase). Every report we edited had to fit a prescribed space. ("We don't have rubber type.") No meandering in cyberspace. Omit a salient fact in editing to length, send the printer an excess of type, and you were looking for a job. The turnover of staff was scary.

I graduated from those disciplines to marshaling arguments, as best I could, for the newspaper's formal editorials, as testing an exercise in making oneself understood in a short space as my spare-time efforts to pass on my understanding of Keynes to coal miners for workers' education classes. Both demanded as much clarity as I could manage.

Every day on the editorial page I had sixty minutes to write the *Evening News* pronouncement on whatever the editor, Big Tom Henry, decided was the issue of the moment. Housing! Suez Canal! The Test Ban Treaty! The National Health Service! I'd spend half the hour writing an arresting first paragraph. Too often for my self-respect, it didn't appear. It had been lopped off by Big Tom. I got the message: Get to the point. No throat clearing.

His next big thought was that I might now be qualified to clear up debris left by British imperialism. Governments of various countries in Southeast Asia had asked the International Press Institute for help in improving newspapers and broadcasting. Big Tom nominated me, so in a jiffy I was translated from Manchester's dark Satanic mills to the lovely Delhi garden of India's prime minister, Pandit Nehru (Cambridge and the Inner Temple 1907–1910). He gently explained how the florid Victorian mode of writing bequeathed by the Raj was standing between him as prime

minister and his people's understanding of what he was trying to do.

I spent months on the temporary teaching assignment with editors in the subcontinent and the Philippines and Japan and South Korea. Paul Miller, the head of the Associated Press and Gannett Newspapers, heard about the work, said he'd always admired the conciseness imposed on the wartime British press by the shortage of newsprint, and that Evans fellow should come to the United States for a few months to indoctrinate editors who'd hadn't realized they could tell more in less.

All these experiences were apprenticeships for accepting responsibility for the opinion and news columns of regional and then national newspapers. For fourteen years as editor of the *Sunday Times* (circulation 1.5 million), I pounded the typewriter to make sure the brilliant but complex work of the investigative team known as Insight—on thalidomide, the DC-10 disaster, the exposé of the espionage of Kim Philby[10]—could be understood by the man on the Clapham bus as clearly as it was by the lawyers who would be at our throats before the ink was dry.

I knew risks were embedded in every word from another learning experience at the *Sunday Times*. On vacation in Austria, I tried to ski. I couldn't do it. I blamed the complicated instructions about what to do with my knees and when, and having a care also for what I was doing with shoulders, arms, elbows, and hips while paralyzed by fear. The reputable book I bought left me giddier:

> The skier comes out of a traverse or a preceding turn, places increasing weight on the downhill ski, and tries to prepare for a stepping-off movement from the downhill ski by pressing his downhill knee forwards and uphill. Taking off with the help of a vigorous pole plant, he then steps his weight on the other ski and starts the next change of direction. As he turns, the ski which is now

> weighted is edged on the other side and he steps up the ski from which he has taken off. The turn is controlled by the twisting movement of the legs, and a strong edging maneuver as well as the forwards and sideways movement of the upper part of the body.

Say again? From which ski am I to detach the upper body and hope the rest will follow? Brooding on the humiliation of being able neither to ski nor to understand the choreography led me to think what editing could do to make the instruction clearer. The following year I went back to the Alps with two similarly frustrated *Sunday Times* colleagues and tried again. We engaged a champion ski teacher, a Scottish disciplinarian, and talked enough of wild fondue parties to persuade a photographer and graphic artist to risk their necks. At night, we wrote up everything that had helped us get through the moguls in one piece, and everything that catapulted us into space. We all became good skiers, able to cope with any well-behaved mountain and stop with a decent flourish in front of the restaurant crowd. We were so exhilarated we wrote a book called *We Learned to Ski.*[11] That, too, was hard. We rewrote and rewrote, and rewrote. The three of us were haunted by the knowledge that the penalty for a clumsy sentence or badly labeled graphic prepared in comfort might be a skier with a sprained ankle, or worse, isolated on an icy mountain; risks multiplied when nearly a million learners took us at our word. It seems a good time was had by all. We had made ourselves clear.

In 1981, I became the editor of the *Times,* only the twelfth in two hundred years. It was the pinnacle of the profession. Abraham Lincoln had shaken the hand of its famous war correspondent John Russell in 1861 at the start of the Civil War: "I am very glad to see you in this country. The *London Times* is one of the greatest powers in the world—in fact, I don't know anything which has more power—except perhaps the Mississippi." I wrote policy editorials with Lincoln's

words in my ear and the great thunderers Thomas Barnes, John Delane, and William Haley frowning over my shoulder. I was never allowed to forget that the Black Friars, the guardians of its literary traditions among staff and readers, were coiled to chastise any transgression of the Queen's English.

I had no trouble with the Black Friars, but I had hardly been installed when our cultured but combative columnist Bernard Levin shook everyone by insisting that one of his labyrinthine sentences should be published unchanged or he would write no more. It was 160 unbroken words. I loved reading Levin. He coruscated, but this passage stopped you dead. It was not clear. We were close to press time. I was told the *Times* had never before published such a long sentence. The Victorian tops were forty-five. I reckoned a cultural reference might persuade Levin to cooperate with his editor. I compared some of his sentences to the endless corridors of a Venetian palace: "You know there is something good at the end but your feet ache getting there." He was unmoved by metaphor. I appealed for compassion. A fair proportion of *Times* readers were elderly. No one had ever so tested their stamina. A full stop (U.S. period) in midpassage would give them a chance to catch a breath. He relented. The paragraph lit up, but it had been a close-run thing.

Subsequently, for seven years as president and publisher of Random House, U.S., in the nineties, I had to decide the level of financial and intellectual investment we would make in authors—we got it right with *Dreams from My Father* by a community organizer—but I still most relished line editing. I found working with celebrated authors and editors at Random House to be enjoyably instructive in the language and the varied approaches required of an editor in the foothills of Parnassus. I am proud of the bruises in linguistic encounters with Norman Mailer. Our prized novelist E. L. Doctorow had an answer when I asked where we were going

with the narrative in *The Waterworks* (1994). "Writing a novel," he rejoined, "is a lot like driving a car at night. You never see further than your headlights but you can make the whole trip that way." Doctorow never needed roadside assistance, but as an editor I liked to know the route so I could always be at hand with a jack and spare tire.

Working comma by comma with the writers and the editors, I was entrusted with approving their work on the lethal complexities of nuclear treaties and the looming shadow of Chinese power, the brooding introspections of Marlon Brando, the hilarious concoctions of Christopher Buckley, the sardonic essays of Gore Vidal, the excitements of the life of Colin Powell, the outrages documented in Jonathan Harr's prizewinning legal thriller *A Civil Action,* and the forensic energies of Jeffrey Toobin and Lawrence Schiller writing independently on O.J.'s murder trial.

All very different in substance and writing style, all meriting editing that respected their idioms and their nuances. Having grumbled about Twitter tantrums, I readily concede the value of Twitter as an alarm clock for news—opinion flashes, the swift formation of coalitions, and the instant exposure of absurdity. The *New York Times* Sunday magazine chose to feature a hairless egg-domed Hillary Clinton as a planet in the universe. Within seconds a whole universe of tweeters and parodists were flooding the zone, one of them describing the image of Hillary Clinton as a "sentient space testicle." Days into the row about the apparently vindictive closing of access lanes on the New Jersey side of the George Washington Bridge, Stephen Colbert said a lot in ninety-nine characters: "When Christie is President, he'll address our nation's crumbling infrastructure by making sure we stay off bridges."

This is Twitter at its best, but it's an elephant trap for loose writers. One moment of unwitting candor, one ambiguity, one misplaced pronoun, one misdirection, one

errant syllable, and the trivia cops are on the case. Or worse. Jack Bauer had good reason for the insistent "Copy that" in the TV thriller *24 Hours.* In the Crimean War (1853–56), the British cavalry was sent to attack the wrong guns, a catastrophe memorialized by Lord Tennyson:

> "Forward, the Light Brigade!
> Charge for the guns!" he said:
> Into the valley of Death
> Rode the six hundred.
> ...
> Someone had blunder'd:
> Theirs not to make reply,
> Theirs not to reason why,
> Theirs but to do and die

Readers, like cavalrymen, deserve clarity. Writers may aspire to glory, but I hope this book can at least help you to say—whether in social media or published form—what you want to say concisely, without ambiguity, and without being put off by the mandarins in the corner fussing about "proper" English. May you be as braced for execrations about deviant tendencies in the deployment of *who* and *whom,* and *which* and *that,* as Churchill was for the impertinences of the vocative case. What really matters is making your meaning clear beyond a doubt. My aim is simple: to give you the tools so you can finish the job, first by describing the tools and then by applying them to lengths of knotty prose.

Do I make myself clear?

2

Use and Abuse of Writing Formulas

"Sorry, but I'm going to have to issue you a summons for reckless grammar and driving without an apostrophe."

David Blundy, a reporter for the *Sunday Times* and the *Correspondent,* was at the front line of truth—not because he sometimes exposed himself to danger, but because he never ceased to expose himself to doubt. He used to hang his long frame over his battered portable typewriter and ask of himself and anyone within earshot in the newsroom, "Do you find a problem in getting the words in the right order? What's it all about?" He worried how faithfully he could portray what he'd just seen and heard on his varied assignments. What is the source of the fear on the streets of Belfast? How did an epidemic start in Haiti? And who is lying to him about the machine-gunning of El Salvador's peasants along the Sumpul River border with Honduras? He began his report:

> Lolita Guardado was awakened at about 4 am by a strange noise. There was the usual sound of persistent drizzle pouring from the roof of closely packed palm leaves and through the walls of mud and sticks. But outside across the Sumpul River she could hear men shouting. Groups of peasants gathered anxiously in the grey dawn to watch as Honduran soldiers formed a line on the far bank and ran to and fro carrying stones from the river bed. They built a low wall. Only later that day, after her family, friends and neighbours had been slaughtered, did she fully understand why the soldiers were there.

The Honduran soldiers were there to stop Lolita's family, and hundreds of Salvadoran peasants like them, escaping from a "border-cleansing operation" by El Salvador's army. Blundy's investigation exposed how the three hundred people killed at the river were innocent peasants, not the guerrillas El Salvador's army was hunting.

As his biographer noted,[1] Blundy's angst at the keyboard epitomized "every writer's eternal problem about getting the right words in the right order." The massacre was one of many perpetrated by a panicky right-wing government. The story could have been told any number of ways. ("El Salvador's army fired into hundreds of peasants," etc.) Blundy worried his way to telling it from the viewpoint of the peasants taken by surprise that morning. He adopted a narrative style. His first sentence raises curiosity about the strange noise, then carries us along to the shocking verb *slaughtered*. The end of this sentence leads us to the next paragraph. We are impelled to read on to find out what happened. (In the craft of journalism, the technique of holding the reader in suspense is called a *delayed drop,* apparently a term borrowed from parachuting.)

Ten years later, at the age of forty-four, Blundy had filed another dispatch on street fighting in El Salvador's continuing civil war, but wanted to make sure he had it right.

He went into the barrio again for a last paragraph. He didn't write it. A random bullet took his life.

David Blundy at the Sumpul River had no literary pretensions. He had a story to tell. He wanted to get the words in the right order in the six sentences in this extract, and in the ones that followed it, so that nothing stood between the reader and a sense of the crime. He made himself clear. How did he do that? He used words within every literate person's vocabulary. They are mostly short, and they are concrete, not abstract, so we can imagine the people in the scene. But the right words in the right order have to be corralled into some kind of sentence, the essential unit of English. This is where clouds form to obscure the view.

Ink for a hundred dictionaries has been shed defining a sentence. The angels dancing on a pinhead need not detain us. A sentence expresses a complete thought; we mostly write and read sentences defined as a meaningful collection of words ending at a full stop. (I prefer the unambiguous English *full stop* over the American *period,* a noun better busying itself as an expression of time.) There is no doubting the meaning of the single dot at the end of a sentence: you have said enough, now move to the next thought. The colon, a dot mounted on another dot (:), allows the thought to be continued or illustrated with an example. We know that one word between two full stops can express a thought. Nobody any longer fears arrest by the language police for sending a naked sentence into the world. Subject, verb, and predicate may be stripped off without loss of meaning even with an imperative—Women and children first!—and the surprise of a one-word staccato conclusion may wrap up an argument in the way President Lyndon Johnson did in grabbing the lapels of an objector. Bull! Microsoft Word's grammar and spell check is on sentry duty for verbless writing ("Fragment, consider revising"), but keep your temper if you feel like rejoining, "Up yours." It's worth being reminded that the

verbless sentence, used too often, is like a mosquito buzzing in your ear.

Enough.

Blundy's apparently straightforward paragraph, as it happens, comprises four structurally different sentences of graduating complexity. I illustrate with a rough sequence based on Blundy's narrative (but not his words).

1. The soldiers came to the river.

Simple one-clause sentence (one subject, one single-verb predicate)

2. The soldiers came to the river, and they built a low stone wall.

Compound—simple one-clause sentence linked to another by a conjunction.

3. Soldiers came to the river, where they built a low stone wall, watched by anxious peasants.

The complex sentence with one principal statement and one or more subordinate statements or clauses that modify or supplement the main statement.

4. Soldiers came to the river, where they formed a line on the far bank, and peasants watched them run to and fro carrying stones from the river bed to build a low stone wall. (34 words)

A compound-complex sentence where all the statements have one or more modifying statements.

Writers and editors are frequently enjoined to embrace "simple" sentences. That's fine when it is understood to mean shedding adverbs, adjectives, and runaway subordinate

clauses, less so if an editor of your work is incited to impose the grammatical definition of a simple sentence:

> Soldiers came to the river. They formed a line on the far bank. The peasants watched. The soldiers ran to and fro. They carried stones from the river bed. They used them to build a low stone wall. (38 words)

Even with the infinitive phrase (to build a low stone wall), the last sentence is still a simple sentence, one clause, one thought. A series of simple cat-sat-on-the-mat sentences provides monotonous clarity, which misses the point of being clear: we won't communicate anything if the sentences are so boring readers switch off. It's also wasteful to introduce a complete subject and predicate for each new idea. The compound-complex sentence flows better and it saves four words on the six simple sentences. The attraction of the simple sentence is that its one idea is more likely to stand clear, but complex sentences are not doomed to be unreadable. Later, we'll look at the architecture of some that don't collapse of their own weight. The longest Blundy sentence is thirty-two words. How long is too long? Could the average twelve-year-old read all the Blundy sentences with ease? The answer is yes. I can justify that assertion by inviting you to take a journey to the West of the United States—and then through time.

We land in Lincoln, Nebraska, in 1882, where the state university has just appointed to its chair in English a thirty-five-year-old Yale PhD who's been teaching Latin, Greek, and English at Hopkins Grammar School in Connecticut. Lucius Adelno Sherman (1847–1933), sadly widowed after a year of marriage, is the son of a Rhode Island carpenter and builder. He is to spend much of his forty-seven academic years investigating how the sentence developed clarity over a century. He is a daring young man. He has the nerve to apply metrics to art. His literary insights are acute; he has

discerned how Shakespeare used the phrase as a special instrument of power, and then the clause. Sherman's heretical idea is that the elements of the prose of masters might be as susceptible to scientific study as the elements of chemistry. He plunges into counting the elements in works by Thomas Babington Macaulay, Henry James, Edmund Spenser, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Cardinal Newman, Thomas De Quincey, Thomas Carlyle—counting the number of words, prepositions, clauses, predications, abstract nouns, and so on. He will distill these laborious researches into a book of argument, tables, and graphs that is more readable than it sounds: *Analytics of Literature: A Manual for the Study of English Prose and Poetry*. Published in 1893, it documents how sentences sped up from pre-Elizabethan to Sherman's times. "Anyone acquainted with the Elizabethan or ante-Elizabethan prose-writers," he writes, "is well aware that their sentences are prevailingly crabbed or heavy and that it is often necessary to re-read, sometimes to ponder, before a probable meaning reveals itself." He found solace in discovering that from an early-sixteenth-century average of fifty words a sentence, the average fell to forty-five in the Elizabethan era, twenty-nine in the Victorian era, and twenty-three in the early twentieth century.

And with that compression, Sherman demonstrated, went greater clarity without loss of the inherent literary values.

Where did the easier reading come from? The clearer sentences weren't the result of some publisher's fiat that henceforth sentences should not exceed *x* number of words. Scrutinizing the great books, Sherman discovered that they got more concise because writers gradually dispensed with a feeling that every new thought had to be introduced as a package, a subject and a predicate made up of a verb and an object. He documented a "decrease in predication" over a century or so. His selected work by Chaucer had 5.24 predications in 480 words, Spenser 4.68, Bacon 3.12, Emerson

2.26, Macaulay 2.15. Two predications to a sentence became the new norm, and with that a 33 percent increase in the proportion of simple sentences. Think of it as reducing the baggage a sentence was expected to carry. The invention of subordinate clauses relieved the burden, and then phrases supplanted the clauses. It was all a natural organic consequence, an effect, not a cause.

Sherman attributed the faster concrete sentences as an adaptation of prose to the directness of speech. There must be something to this. Any number of authors testify that reading aloud strips the veneer from sentences that look polished in print. I cherish the image of Flaubert declaiming, before his ink had dried, parts of *Madame Bovary* to his friends or, if there were none around, to himself. "Night after night," writes Eric Ormsby, "he would shout his sentences to the stunned flowerbeds and dumbstruck nightingales in his Croisset garden."

Sherman reported that his numerate literature course roused enthusiasm for reading among his students and claimed that those accustomed to write in "a lumbering awkward fashion began to express themselves in strong, clear phrases and with a large preponderance of simple sentences." Students—with no computers then—must have found it tedious to count the words in 100,000 sentences by seven authors; one of the class rebelled. The teenage Willa Cather (1873–1947) was to become an admired novelist of the western plains but a satirist of her teacher's method. She wanted literature to make her "feel the hot blood riot in the pulses" rather than have to ponder "the least common multiple of *Hamlet* and the greatest common divisor of *Macbeth*." Her deflation of magic-from-metrics has not deterred scholars at Nebraska. In 2006, Andrew Jewell, the editor of the Willa Cather archive, suggested "digital Americanists" might infiltrate the Cather archive to detect language patterns in her fiction. "Perhaps one could even

find the least common multiple of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*."

The arguments may seem esoteric, but Sherman achieved something significant a century before the digerati took over the world. For his initiative in bringing forth reasoned facts, Mark Liberman, professor of linguistics at Penn, suggests the accolade "the first digital humanist *avant la lettre*." The Nebraskans scanning the Cather sentences in the archive today acknowledge that any quantitative analysis risks an assault to literature-loving sensibilities. One of Sherman's notions was to assess the power of passages by means of a "force-ratio," which meant assessing the number of emphasized words in relation to the total. "In the prose passage from Carlyle, there is more than seventy percent of emphasis but the force-ratio of the present paragraph and the next is 25:45, or only fifty-five percent." That rates a giggle, but the importance of Sherman's work is real and well summarized by William DuBay:[2] "Sherman's work set the agenda for a century of research in reading." DuBay is an authority in "readability." That's not a subjective judgment on whether the latest Stephen King is a good read. Readability isn't a literary or legibility issue. It's a dispassionate, objective measure of whether a selection of words and sentences will be understood by the intended audience. Comprehension comes before enjoyment; you can't be gripped if you can't follow the narrative. (Nor can you if the typography is anything as illegible as *Wikipedia*'s 250 characters to a line.)[3]

Mark Twain, J.R.R. Tolkien, Jane Austen, Louisa May Alcott, Harper Lee, Arthur Conan Doyle, J. D. Salinger, Norman Mailer... which of their books can be assigned to twelve-year-olds and which only to high-schoolers? You can guess, but getting it wrong for thousands of schools is expensive and seeds, in the uncomprehending, a hatred of highfalutin literature. Educators had questions that could be answered only by embracing Sherman's empiricism, testing

selections of representative text on large numbers of targeted readers, and correlating the results. The impetus for objective readability research gained force through the 1920s, initially to find reader-friendly texts for immigrants and then servicemen. In 1931, William Gray and Bernice Leary in Chicago identified 228 elements that affect readability, a total guaranteed to multiply the number of Depression-era authors suffering writer's block. Gray and Leary boiled down their variables to five because for all the extra counting, there was little payoff in accuracy.

Out of all this work came readability formulas to count the prevalence or absence of variables associated with reading difficulty, basically syntactic (sentence structure) and semantic (vocabulary).

Rudolf Flesch galvanized the effort. He had thought he would have a successful career as a lawyer in Vienna until the Nazis marched in. He came to the United States in 1938 as a refugee, found his law degree not recognized, worked in a book-shipping department, got a scholarship to Columbia, and in 1943 publicized the first way to measure what the average American adult could read and, therefore, how authors should write if they were to have any hope of bestseller success. He wrote *The Art of Readable Writing* and nineteen other popular primers, inspired Dr. Seuss to write *The Cat in the Hat,* campaigned for the phonic teaching of reading, and bequeathed us the Flesch Reading Ease index. It's a simple calculation of complexity judged by the average length of sentences and the number of syllables per hundred words. He urged writers to *average* eighteen words a sentence. In his 1949 book, still available, the endpaper is a nomograph, three columns scored like thermometers, one on the left for words per sentence, one on the right for syllables per hundred words, and one in the middle. The writer places a ruler to run from the word total on the left to the syllable total on the right. The intersection with the center Reading

Ease column yields the score: 100 for a child's primer, 0 for an academic paper. Like the typewriter, the nomograph is a curiosity.

Your laptop can do the analysis before you can check *nomograph* in the dictionary—and the Flesch test is free online. So are a number of later formulas I list in the bibliography. In 1975, a U.S. Navy educationist, J. Peter Kincaid, related the Flesch Reading Ease index to grade levels. Ten years after Flesch, Robert Gunning created the fog index. Working with newspapers and business corporations, he identified seven measurable factors that affect reading: average sentence length in words; percentage of simple sentences; percentage of strong verb forms; proportion of familiar words; proportion of abstract words; percentage of personal references; percentage of long words. He simplified his prescription for writers: If you want to be clear, count the average number of words in your sentences, count the number of words of three syllables (the percentage of hard words), total the two, and multiply by 0.4. The lower the ranking on the fog index, the easier the reading, so a 6 index is material for grades six and seven. "If your copy tests 13 or more... you are writing on the college level of complexity and your reader is likely to find it heavy going, even though he is paying close attention. Copy with a fog index of 13 or more runs the danger of being ignored or misunderstood." Edgar Dale, professor of education at Yale, and Jeanne Chall, later at Harvard (consulted by *Sesame Street* producers), concentrated on vocabulary. Their formula bases readability on the number of hard words—that is, words that are not in a basic vocabulary of three thousand easy words. William DuBay judges the Dale-Chall index "the most reliable of all the readability formulas." A score of 8 to 8.9 on Dale-Chall is readable by eleventh-graders; 9 is a college reading level; 10 or over is a college-graduate level.

The assertion I made early in this chapter that the

average twelve-year-old could understand the opening paragraph by David Blundy was based on testing it against a number of readability indexes.

I called up Count Wordsworth, alias Joseph Rocca of Auteuil, who maintains "an (unnecessarily) elaborate enquiry into the statistics of prose." The Count spares me the arithmetic of reckoning the average number of words in the Blundy sentences. It is 15.29. None of the sentences is longer than thirty-two words. None of the words is longer than ten characters; the average number of syllables per word is two. The paragraph about Honduran soldiers I wrote following Blundy's (here) has similar characteristics. But most helpful is the comparison with readability formulas, provided you understand that a high score on Flesch means easy reading, whereas a high score on Dale-Chall means hard. Here is Count Wordsworth's analysis of four indexes. All four give roughly the same signal of relatively easy reading for a twelve-to thirteen-year-old.

Readability Scores

Flesch Reading Ease index: 69.56

Flesch-Kincaid grade level: 7.35

Dale-Chall Formula: 8.23

Gunning fog index: 6.49

A low score for readability that surprises you may be due to a few knotty tangles of sentences or a bunch of clichés you overlooked in a hurry and can fix. The digital analysis enables you to see how you construct your work. It puts you, the word mechanic, in the position of the auto mechanic who makes sense of the connections under the hood. The indexes may vary in their scores but not by enough to make a difference.

Readabilityformulas.com and Readability-score.com will give you individual results or a consensus of seven or more analyses.

Arithmetic can't write. I am not advocating an abacus at every desk. Clear writing meets the judge's definition of *porn:* I know it when I see it. But the formulas will give you a clue whether your assumptions are right about the comprehension of your likely readership. Bureaucrat, meet the baffled person who would receive a benefit if he could understand how to claim it. Company chairman, meet your shareholders. Tycoons and their henchmen need as much help as they can get. The *Financial Times* columnist Lucy Kellaway has been the dragon slayer of jargon. Her Golden Flannel Awards go to masters of the universe who use guff for exaggeration, euphemism, and obfuscation and encourage marketing people to "turn something that we need into something entirely baffling." To test the acumen of Readabilityformulas.com I fed it four separate Golden Flannel sentences[4] from Ms. Kellaway's absolutely indispensable branded corrective product. Sorry, no money back if you gag in the course of ingestion:

> (1) As we iterate on the logged out experience and curate topics, events, moments that unfold on the platform, you should absolutely expect us to deliver those experiences across the total audience and that includes logged in users and users in syndication.
>
> (2) As brands build out a world footprint, they look for a no-holds-barred global POV that's always been part of our wheelhouse.
>
> (3) In the wholesale channel, we exited doors not aligned with brand status and invested in presentation through both enhanced assortments and dedicated customized real estate in key doors.

> (4) Going forward, we are focused on aggressively managing short-term challenges and opportunities and we remain committed to delivering our mid-decade plan and serving a growing group of customers.

All the readability formulas spat out the same verdict: difficult to read, only for college graduate and above. But the algorithm's vindication of Ms. Kellaway's judgment misses the comic pretension of the flannellers. Were they fed on cotton wool as babies?

None of the measurements should be regarded with reverence. The readability experts George Klare and Byron Buck crystallize the point: "Formulas are *rating* tools, not *writing* tools."[5] Reflect on the red flag for the long sentence or unusual word, but don't be browbeaten. Formulas don't worry about the right words in the right order as David Blundy did. They are blind to meaning, to the progression of an argument. You can write illogical nonsense and get a good score of readability; the classic proof is that if you enter your sample from the last word to the first, you get the same score. Metaphor, analogy, and satire are unrecognized, wit unappreciated. The formulas have tin ears for the rhythm of sentence variety, for word choice, for the energy in the writing.

These are qualities in the best reporting, commonly written against the clock and sometimes at risk. In the Mexican Revolution of 1913–1914, a would-be war reporter from New York in search of the rebel patriot Pancho Villa had to ask permission to cross the Rio Grande. The federal general Pascual Orozco made himself clear: "Esteemed and Honored Sir: If you set foot inside of Ojinaga, I will stand you sideways against a wall, and with my own hand take great pleasure in shooting furrows in your back."

The reporter took a chance; he found a spot where he could wade across with a dry notebook and timed it for when the sun was high and the sentries would be taking their siesta

on the shady side of adobe walls. The adventurous gringo John Reed, twenty-seven, rode four months with Villa and his guerrilleros before heading off to another revolution, in Russia; Warren Beatty played him in the movie *Reds*. Reed's Mexican reports, telegraphed from dusty townships to New York's *Metropolitan Magazine,* came to be eclipsed by his better-known reports from the Bolshevik Revolution, published in his book *Ten Days That Shook the World*. His earlier book, *Insurgent Mexico,*[6] was out of print for decades, but the sentences throb with drama as he rides to battle with the guerrillas, "readier to lend their woman than their horse," but also too ready to "please the trigger finger."

The drunk pockmarked officer who bursts into Reed's small-town rented room says, "I am Lieutenant Antonio Montoya, at your orders. I heard there was a gringo in this hotel and I have come to kill you. My only difficulty is to determine which revolver I shall use."

Reed trades his wristwatch for his life. He is a portrait artist and a muralist. His sentences reflect the rhythms of his experiences. The long first sentence in the following paragraph would set off the alarms on the readability formulas[7]—it is 77 words, 153 syllables—but the progression is easy to follow, each of the five phases of deployment marked by a comma, the unwinding finally marked by a semicolon. The words are concrete, as with Blundy:

> At Santa Clara the massed columns of the army halted and began to defile to left and right, thin lines of troops jogging out under the checkered sun and shade of the great trees, until six thousand men were spread in one long single front, to the right over fields and through ditches, beyond the last cultivated field, across the desert to the very base of the mountains; to the left over the roll of flat world. The bugles blared faintly and near, and the army moved forward in a mighty line across the whole

country. Above them lifted a five-mile-wide golden dust-glory. Flags flapped.

We see it all.

3

The Sentence Clinic

"This is going to be a little invasive."

The joyously dim Emperor Joseph II complains to Mozart in the movie *Amadeus,* "Too many notes.... There are only so many notes an ear can hear." To which Mozart asks which ones the emperor would like cut. It's a fair question. Every day I stumble on long sentences I have to read twice. I set them aside in the sentence clinic so I can attempt a diagnosis at leisure—maybe the difficulty is not so much in the number of notes, but the way they are organized. Or maybe I will conclude that the fault is not in the syntax but in myself. And I do, indeed, suffer from a chronic condition of editor's reflex, my attention too easily diverted from the thread of the argument or narrative to find out what stands between me and the sense the writer wants to share. I don't get mad. I

enjoy finding the clues, the footloose modifier, the duplicitous pronoun, the subject in search of conjugation with a friendly verb. It always helps to find where the writer has hidden subject and verb. The family of subject, verb, and object that should stick together frequently becomes separated on a crowded thoroughfare—where's Junior? Or there may be something else I can't quite fathom that has made the sentence a Rubik's Cube of words. A useful habit is to ask dumb questions of writer or text. What follows here is a ragbag of sentences that had passed some kind of editorial scrutiny before I seized them as examples of the unclear. They may be grammatically flawless, so what is it that makes them hard to follow? I offer them as editing exercises because I think it's good for writers to come into the engine room where the pipes hiss and clang; I suggest correctives but with every one you're welcome to take a wrench and do your own repair. I don't name the authors of the errant sentences; they represent us all.

The commonest case in the clinic is the overcrowded sentence. Take a moment's break and watch a fragment of the video I've footnoted[1]—then come back! It's a video of "pushers" in Japan trying to cram people into packed subway cars; they are doing what journalists do, notably in oversourcing an introduction to a good story; what lawyers do in shoving in clauses to catch every imaginable contingency; what office seekers on the stump tend to do. Winston Churchill discerned it in Ramsay MacDonald as "the gift of compressing the largest number of words into the smallest amount of thought." Here as a warm-up is a bureaucratic masterpiece, a sentence from a federal regulation typical of the abuse regardless of an administration's political party:

> Whenever the Commission shall be of opinion that any change, classification, regulation or practice of any carrier or carriers is or will be in violation of any of the

> provisions of the chapter, the Commission is authorized and empowered to determine and prescribe what will be the just and reasonable charge or the maximum and minimum charge or charges to be thereafter observed, and what classification, regulation or practice is or will be just, fair, and reasonable to be thereafter followed, and to make an order that the carrier or carriers shall cease and desist from such violation to the extent that the Commission finds that the same does or will exist, and shall not thereafter publish, demand, or collect any charge other than the charge so prescribed, or in excess of the maximum or less than the minimum so prescribed, as the case may be, and shall adopt the classification and shall conform to and observe the regulation or practice so prescribed.

What a monster, a boa constrictor of a paragraph. How to grapple with it? In editing, I searched for the verb that drives the sentence. There—after 35 prefatory words—we have a cluster, *is authorized and empowered to determine and prescribe.* We can then more or less follow the author, a lawyer with hiccups. The tedious repetitions add up to a blanket authority. The sense of it all can be rendered in 29 words instead of 165:

> The Commission has the authority to act against any violation of the provisions of this chapter. It may prescribe charges and practices it judges to be fair and reasonable.

BEWARE THE PREDATORY CLAUSE

"Write shorter sentences" is the standard imprecation in advice on writing. Count me in, but note that I closed the last chapter with a long quote from John Reed. His description of the massing of the army columns in Mexico was 77 words, but

it could be read and enjoyed. Why? In my experience, writers and editors alike miss or understate another source of mystification in the way a sentence is put together. We see it in the first 35 words of the Commission's sentence. You could say it takes too long to get to the point. True, but the source of the reader's exasperation is the bureaucrat's long opening conditional clause before unveiling the ideas in the main clause. The more we delay linking subject to verb, the more the reader wonders what the hell we are on about. We can grasp the meaning in a long sentence when we read a concise introduction of the subject ("the massed columns of the army") and an early verb ("halted"). The connection between subject and verb is crucial.

I call the overweening prefatory element *predatory* because it steals the reader's attention and clogs cerebral arteries. It's the hydrogenated fat of prose. It's why David Crystal is justified in this, as much else, when he writes, "The longer the subject gets, the more uncomfortable we feel." In umpteen practical editing experiences in journalism and publishing, I struggled to save sentences from suffocation by a predatory clause, and must have written quite a few. As writers, we set out to seize attention with a bold declaratory sentence, but before we get to the main idea that excited us, we think of a detail or qualification and plonk it in. Ambition should be made of sterner stuff. What seems to be a neat and economical way of speeding up the story—two ideas for the price of one—imposes a burden on the reader's short-term memory and concentration. The predatory clause is more a threat to clarity than footling prescriptive consternation about *that* or *which* or *who* and *whom*.

The predatory clause ought to have expired of its own weight long ago. Nearly two centuries ago Thomas De Quincey (1785–1859), author of *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*[2] was clear enough about what he called the "hypothetic" effect of opening with a subordinate clause.

> A sentence, for example, begins with a series of ifs; perhaps a dozen lines are occupied with expanding the conditions under which something is affirmed or denied... all is suspended in air. The conditions are not fully to be understood until you are acquainted with the dependency; you must give a separate attention to each clause of this complex hypothesis, and yet, having done that by a painful effort, you have done nothing at all; for you must exercise a reacting attention through the corresponding latter section.

He has a metaphor for the damage inflicted by the predatory clause (though he does not use my term).

> Each separate monster period is a vast arch, which, not receiving its keystone, not being locked into self-supporting cohesion until you nearly reach its close, imposes of necessity upon the unhappy reader all the onus of its ponderous weight through the main process of its construction.

The young English philosopher Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) buttressed De Quincey's argument. Spencer—creator of the phrase "the survival of the fittest"—was thirty-two when he published *Philosophy of Style,* in which he visited the disdain of Victorian morality on writers whose "labyrinthine complexities" demand a great expenditure of mental energy with a result "that tallies ill with the pains taken." Yet it has proved hard to extinguish the predatory clause, as hard as getting rid of the central character in a Gothic novel invented by another Victorian writer, Bram Stoker (1847–1912), author of *Dracula*.

WHO'S FOR SLAVERY?

Colorado citizens voting in 2016 were invited to accept or

reject a constitutional amendment. As Peter Hessler recounted in *The New Yorker* (November 21, 2016), he stood in a voting booth in the Ouray County Courthouse, at an elevation of 7,792 feet. He could cope with the thin air, but experienced a sensation of vertigo trying to find a way to oxygen through language shrouded in clouds of unthink. It helps to clarify one's own writing to ask questions of a muddled sentence. This was the enigmatic proposition:

> Shall there be an amendment to the Colorado constitution concerning the removal of the exception to the prohibition of slavery and involuntary servitude when used as punishment for persons duly convicted of a crime?

The bad writing begins with the inert, negative construction *Shall there be an amendment concerning the removal?,* which means "Shall we amend the constitution to remove an exception?"

What exception? An exception to the general rule that the state of Colorado prohibits slavery and involuntary servitude. The exception allows slavery and involuntary servitude as punishment *for people convicted of a crime.* So all the verbiage comes down to: Shall we keep slavery and involuntary servitude as punishment for criminals? Eleven words against the 34 in the state's question.

Just over half the 2.2 million voters voted not to remove the exception, meaning it remained legal for the state to refuse pay or restitution for work done by prisoners. Mr. Hessler says, "I honestly cannot remember whether I voted for or against slavery." Who can blame him?

UNDERSTANDING AN ECONOMIST

A leading economist writes on the prospects of a collapse of the eurozone:

> Finally, because neither restructuring of insolvent sovereigns, nor recapitalization of zombie banks, nor ring fencing of those sovereigns that are most likely solvent, but vulnerable to illiquidity ambushes have been addressed decisively and completely, tight financial conditions and intensifying fiscal austerity will contribute to a European recession in 2012 and possibly beyond. (52 words)

Even for the reader familiar with the terms, the structure of the sentence is confusing for two reasons. This is a fifty-two-word sentence with the essential warning message in ten words at the end. What are the preceding forty-two words doing? They give the economist's reasoning. It is akin to someone rushing into a building saying he's sorry to interrupt the meeting, but it's important that, for a number of reasons too complicated to explain at this moment, everyone there should be good enough to pack up their stuff and leave in haste *because the building is on fire.*

The forty-two words are meaningless until we get to the end. We are expected to carry this mental baggage all that way but when we think we see light at the end of the tunnel, we are trapped by the second obstacle, a *neither/nor* construction. We can usually follow one *neither/nor,* but here we have another *nor,* too. The point is that a leading economist is trying to warn the eurozone countries of the dangers of a recession in 2012. No wonder they got one.

How do we disentangle? It's okay to talk to ourselves again.

> Q. What is the core message?
> A. There is a risk of a recession in Europe in 2012 and possibly beyond.

Okay. Well. Let's say that.
Next questions: