How to be Clear, Correct and Persuasive on the Page

WRITE TO THE POINT
SAM LEITH

CONTENTS

1
SURVIVING THE LANGUAGE WARS

MOST PUBLIC DISCUSSION of how language is used – and certainly the most vociferous public discussion – is concerned with mistakes. Should that be a capital letter? Is it 'different from' or 'different to'? Where should that comma go – inside the quotation marks or outside them? On questions such as these, we're encouraged to think, rests the difference between civilisation and barbarism.

These arguments have been characterised as 'language wars' – and they can look like that. The sound! The fury! To one side, the Armies of Correctness mass behind fortifications made not of sandbags but second-hand copies of Fowler's *Modern English Usage*, *Gwynne's Grammar* and Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*. Here's Lynne 'Deadeye' Truss, her sniper-rifle loaded with apostrophes, taking pot-shots at mispunctuated grocery advertisements; and there's Simon 'Mad Dog' Heffer, preparing a shock-n-awe offensive involving the word 'decimate', which he hopes will reduce the enemy forces by a tenth.

On the other side, equally well dug in, are the Descriptivist Irregulars: a curious fighting force in which hippy-dippy schoolteachers battle shoulder-to-shoulder with austere academic linguists. There are a lot of cardigans. Someone has just pulled the pin and lobbed a split infinitive over the barricades. Now they're sticking their tongues out and flicking V-signs and laughing. And, yes, I can just make out

Geoffrey Pullum, looking peevish and tinkering with the controls of a devastating secret weapon they call only 'The Corpus'.

At issue is whether there is a correct way to write. Are there, or should there be, rules about the meanings and spelling of words, the use of punctuation marks, and the formation of sentences? And if there are, or should be, who pronounces on them? Like the conflict in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, this war has been going on for as long as anybody can remember. In the Introduction to his *The Sense of Style*, the linguist Steven Pinker writes that 'complaints about the decline of language go at least as far back as the invention of the printing press'. He quotes Caxton in 1478 beefing that 'certaynly our langage now vsed veryeth ferre from that whiche was vsed and spoken when I was borne'.

Both sides – because all armies have their propaganda wings – will tend to caricature the positions of the other. Descriptivists see the Armies of Correctness as snobbish amateurs, obsessed with a set of prohibitions half-remembered from their own schooldays and essentially mistaken about how language works. Prescriptivists, meanwhile, see their opponents as smart-arsed ivory-tower types who, in trendily insisting that anything goes, actively collude in the coarsening and eventual destruction of the language they purport to study.

Intellectually, the Descriptivists are right. Nobody made the English language up. It isn't an invention, like tennis or a washing machine, where there's an instruction manual to which we can refer. It is not a fixed thing. It is a whole set of practices and behaviours, and it evolves according to the way it is used. One hundred years ago, 'wicked' meant 'evil'; now, in many contexts, it means 'excellent'. Nobody decided that: it just – to use a technical linguistic term – sort of caught on.

And if it just sort of catches on that 'gay' is understood to mean 'homosexual', or 'decimate' is understood to mean 'annihilate', no number of indignant letters to the *Daily Telegraph* will prevent that happening.

Does a language have rules? Yes, in one sense it does. It would not work if it didn't. But it doesn't have an umpire. It has rules in the same way that the acceleration of a body through space under gravity or the formation of a foetus in the womb have rules. The rules of language are a property of the system itself. And that system is a property of its day-to-day users.

You may think you don't know any grammar – because, perhaps, you weren't taught at school what a gerund is, or the difference between a conjugation and a declension. But every sentence you utter is grammatical: if it were not, nobody would be able to understand you. You conjugate – I conjugate, he conjugates ... hell, we all conjugate – like a champ, and use gerunds without even thinking about it. The grammar that is taught and written down in books is not a manual for language users: it's a description of what they do.

That is where this book starts from. I take the part not of the Armies of Correctness nor of the Descriptivist Irregulars, but of the huddled civilian caught in the middle: cowering in the shelled-out no-man's land somewhere between them. And I want to try to present a practical way through.

I hope to acknowledge that there is real value in knowing where to put a question mark or how to spell 'accommodate' – and that the armies of proofreaders, sub-editors and schoolteachers who think about these questions are not labouring in vain. I'll have plenty to say in later sections about correct (or, more precisely, standard) usage – and about the pointless myths that have grown up about it, too.

But I also want to get the language wars in proportion.

Language is a social activity – which is why these things matter. And yet it's precisely because language is a social activity that these things change over time. Knowing your audience is always more important than knowing a set of rules and prohibitions. Correctness is part of the picture, but it's not the whole or even the most important part of the picture.

Good writing is about much more than knowing how to frame a restrictive relative clause. It has to do with how you get a voice down on paper, how you make a sentence easy for your reader to take in, how you attend to the prose music that makes it pleasurable to read, how you make it fresh in idiom and vivid in image, and even how you present it on the page.

Almost all of us, in the first world, need to put pen to paper or stubby finger to keyboard daily. We write memos, emails, reports, presentations, CVs, blogs, tweets and letters of complaint, congratulation or supplication. Our working lives and our working relationships are shaped by how and what we write. To write clearly is an essential courtesy, and to write well is to give pleasure to your audience. You are not only making a case or imparting information; you are cultivating a relationship.

That's an important point. It's worth pausing for a moment to think about why prescriptivists and proud pedants – the sort driven to apoplexy by signs that say 'Five Items or Less' rather than fewer – feel as they do, and why they mind so much. Oddly, this has more to tell us about language than any of the rules they cherish.

The arguments people tend to make in support of 'correctness' are of four kinds:

1. Appeals to tradition. They will cite the authority of

previous style or grammar manuals, or the evidence of distinguished writers who seem to fall into line with their rules.

2. Appeals to logic. They will argue that the correct sequence of tenses, or the proper agreement of a modifier with its subject, are essential to the clarity of a sentence.

3. Appeals to efficiency. They will argue that non-standard usage blunts the precision of the language. If 'enormity' is allowed to mean 'bigness', or 'wicked' is allowed to mean 'excellent', confusion and, possibly, rioting will follow.

4. Appeals to aesthetics. They will denigrate certain constructions as ugly or clumsy or even 'barbaric'.

There is some merit, on the face of it, in all these arguments.

'Authorities' on language are often not only careful users, but careful observers of the way language is used. The usage of distinguished writers tells you something about the norms of the language at the time they were writing. And yet: what either tells us is not always straightforward. Writers serve their own ends; authorities have their own axes to grind, and themselves often refer to previous authorities. Which writers? Which authorities? And what are we to do when they contradict one another?

It is indeed possible to use logic or analogy to make some of your writing consistent – and you will usually benefit in terms of clarity if you do. But not always. English was not designed as a logical system. It was not designed at all. It evolved – jerry-built by millions of users over hundreds of years – to do its job. In the old children's TV series *The A-Team*, there was typically a scene in which our heroes were locked into a shed by the villains. Rummaging through the shed, they would discover a collection of old rubbish and

would use their ingenuity to knock up some improvised device to mount an escape. Before long, out through the doors of the shed would crash a three-wheeled tank made of plywood and dented paint cans, powered by an outboard motor and flinging tennis balls and old potatoes at the enemy from a rear-mounted trebuchet. The English language is that three-wheeled tank: no amount of wishful thinking will make it a Maserati.

In infancy, our language-hungry little brains hoover vocabulary out of the air; and not only that, they very quickly figure out the grammar that makes sense of it and start bolting the two together with a facility so efficient that theorists believed for a long time we must have an innate 'language organ' in the brain. By four months, children can recognise clauses; by ten months, they're getting the hang of prepositions; by a year old, they have the noun/adjective distinction down, and by the time they're three they've mastered the whole of English grammar. It's staggering – like deducing the rules of chess by watching a handful of games; or like figuring out the Highway Code and the workings of the internal combustion engine by standing next to the junction of the A1000 and the North Circular for half an hour.

Languages evolve in communities and they therefore bind communities. Americans don't aspirate the 'h' in 'herb', for instance, because in standard spoken English at the time their ancestors boarded the *Mayflower* it was pronounced 'erb' (it came in from the French, which didn't aspirate the *h* either). At some point between now and then, British English underwent a trend for pronouncing words as they were spelt and so, as Eddie Izzard put it, 'we say *herbs* – because there's a fucking H in it'. But is that rule applied consistently? No: because it's not a fucking rule. We both call the thing with which we chop our *herbs* or *erbs* a *nife*.

The difference between herb and erb is what's sometimes called a shibboleth: a word or pronunciation that distinguishes one language community from another. 'Shibboleth' was a shibboleth. If you needed to tell an Ephraimite from a Gileadite, a millennium or so BC, you'd ask him to say 'shibboleth', a Hebrew word that has something to do with corn. The Ephraimites didn't have the 'sh' sound in their language, so if he said 'sibboleth' you had your man, and could get straight to the business of slaying him with the jawbone of an ass, or similar.

When we talk about 'language' everyone knows we're not talking about just one thing: there are about 7,000 languages spoken worldwide. Less attention is paid to the fact that when we talk about 'English' we are not talking about a single thing either: we're talking about a huge, messily overlapping mass of dialects and accents and professional jargons and slangs – some spoken, some written – which have their own vocabularies and grammatical peculiarities and resources of tone and register. The sort of 'legalese' you'll see in the small print of your car insurance is English; as is the Russian-inflected 'nadsat' used in Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*; as is the abbreviated text-speak burbling through your SMS or Twitter feed. They share a common ancestor, they share almost all of their vocabularies and grammars and they are, more often than not, mutually intelligible. It takes a while for a standard English user to 'tune in' to *A Clockwork Orange* – but not all that long.

On the other hand, a language is not only a set of practices. It is also, in its broader sense, a set of ideas about those practices. And the fact is that a very large number of people do believe that there is a right and a wrong way to speak or write. Those ideas are bound up with identity. Sometimes they are explicit – as in books written by proud pedants

deploring the corruption of the Queen's English. Sometimes they are implicit – as in the suspicion with which one community of dialect users might regard an outsider. The former of these two things is, at root, no more than a posh variant of the latter.

By adopting a pragmatic, rhetorical approach we can come at this from a third direction. We can try to arrange a Christmas kickabout for the troops in no-man's land. How? Suffer fools gladly. God knows there are a lot of them about, so you're going to be suffering them anyway. If you can't do so gladly, it's your gladness that will suffer, not the fools.

Yes: if someone believes that it's not English to split an infinitive they are, technically, quite wrong. But you're not interested in proving them wrong: you're interested in getting them on your side. Indulge them. If that's the sort of person you're writing to, *or even if there's a decent chance such a person will be in your audience*, leave that infinitive unsplit with a good grace and an inward smile.

We should also recognise that we have, and are entitled to indulge, a whole set of stylistic preferences. Every time you speak or write you are trying to form a connection with your audience, and that connection depends on speaking that audience's language. This book is primarily interested in standard English. One of the sociological features of standard English is that many of its users place a high value on getting it right. So, as I'll be repeating, you go to where the audience is.

That means that, as we make our way across that battlefield, it's worth knowing where the shell-holes are: better to step into one knowingly and carefully than to stumble over it in the dark and break your silly neck.

Furthermore, knowing the rules of standard English can help give you something that is vitally important to any

writer: confidence. Many people, sitting down to write, feel apprehension or even fear. How am I going to fill this white space? How am I going to say what I mean? What if I get the punctuation in the wrong place? What if I end up sounding stupid? Even the most fluent speakers can freeze up so that the voice that falters onto the page is not, somehow, their own.

That fear is responsible for more bad writing than anything else. Fear, more often than self-regard, is what makes people sound stiff and pompous in print, and fear is what makes people cling to half-remembered rules from their schooldays.

Writing, then, is in some respects a confidence trick. I don't mean that writers are in the business of hoodwinking their readers. Rather, that in the best and most fluent writing, the writer not only feels but instils confidence. The writer is in command and projects that – meaning the reader feels in safe hands. You are confident that the writer knows what he or she means and is expressing it exactly.

I don't say that there is one, and only one, form of good writing. This book is not a list of rules or instructions, though it contains many suggestions and opinions. It does not pretend to contain a magic formula. What it hopes to do, rather, is to walk you companionably around the question of what it is we're doing when we read and write, and how we can do it better and more confidently.

I'll talk about the basic bits and pieces that make up a sentence, and how you fit those sentences into paragraphs and larger units of thought and argument. I'll talk about why sentences go wrong and how you can fix them. I'll talk about specific types of writing, the conventions of grammar, and common mistakes and irregularities. I'll talk about the difference between writing for the page and writing for the

internet. And I'll discuss some of the tricks that can be used to make prose livelier and more immediate.

But I'll also look at the bigger picture. Most of the writing we do is intended, one way or another, to persuade, so I want to consider how persuasion itself works. What will make someone read your words and adopt your point of view? How do you capture their attention and keep it focused? How do you step back and see your words from the point of view of your reader? There's a body of knowledge on this subject that leads us from the ancient world, where Aristotle first set out the principles of rhetoric, to the laboratory of the modern neuroscientist.

Right. Out of the shell-hole. Let's see what it's like up there. One, two, three, HUP!

2
THE BIG PICTURE

You Talkin' to Me?: Speaking, Reading and Writing

Many years ago, I interviewed the writer Julian Barnes for my school magazine. Imagine an 18-year-old me, settling my tape recorder nervously on the North London coffee table of the great man. I was armed with a list of overwrought and pretentious questions. I was eager to please. But just as I set my tape recorder running, he said something that wrong-footed me completely. He said, with a Sphinxlike Barnesian smile, that he insisted on only one precondition for the interview. I was not to quote him verbatim.

I was confused: wasn't being misquoted the complaint that every interviewee made of every journalist? Yet here was someone – who could see my tape recorder on the table as an earnest of my good intentions – positively insisting on inaccuracy. 'You can make anybody look like an idiot by quoting them verbatim,' he said.* And, of course, he was right. None of us speaks in complete and well-formed sentences.

What I have come to think of as the Barnes Principle is a good way to consider something that we don't pay enough attention to. Speech and writing are different things; more different than we often notice. And reading is different, too, from either. In fact, the ways in which people read – on a

computer screen, in a book, on a smartphone – are themselves different enough to need thinking about.

In this chapter I'd like to offer some hints as to how this might affect your practice.

One of the commonest pieces of advice you hear is: 'Try to write as you speak.' But it's a piece of advice that needs to be treated with real caution. In one way, it's sensible. All of us, in conversation, improvise fluently and grammatically. We speak with unthinking confidence – at least until we're asked to do so in front of a room full of people, or to a stranger by whom we're intimidated – and that confidence is the heart of effective communication. You can learn as a writer from the way you speak, and you can seek to capture your speaking voice on the page.

But to write as you speak is much more easily said than done. Speaking is natural; writing is artificial. You cannot write exactly as you speak, and nor should you. I just tried, for instance, to dictate the next paragraph without preparation into my iPhone.

The spoken language tends to be redundant. It tends to contain a whole lot of things that, um, that aren't features of the written language. It's much more freely and openly structured ... you find that sentences run on into each other, a whole lot of little things like, voice, intruding, you'll say a lot of things, fillers, filler phrases that will, um, interrupt and give the listener time to react and time to digest what you've already said. You'll tend to find that you stop halfway through sentences and break off and, um, basically the spoken language is much more slippery than the written one and readers can go back in the written language which they can't in the spoken language, so if you transcribe exactly how someone speaks, even if they speak, well, more eloquently than I'm doing now, um, you'll still end up with something that in no way looks fit for the page.

Ending up with something in no way fit for the page is

certainly what I've done (what was all that guff about 'like, voice, intruding'?) by quoting myself verbatim.

What I was trying to get at in that ramble was that the written and spoken languages have different formal properties and slightly different grammars. There's nothing in my spoken voice that tells me how to punctuate the above, for instance – already, I've started to tidy it up by inserting spaces and full stops and commas and dashes, according to the grammar of standard written English. But as phoneticians will tell you, the spoken voice doesn't usually leave gaps between words – there's no exact spoken equivalent to the semantic difference between a full stop, a colon, a comma or a dash. Already, I'm falsifying it for the page.

Accordingly, literary writers will often use non-standard style to capture a speaking voice. Here's a bit from Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead*, for instance:

> *I wrote almost all of it in the deepest hope and conviction. Sifting my thoughts and choosing my words. Trying to say what was true. And I'll tell you frankly, that was wonderful.*

Grammar sticklers would probably allow the first sentence. They'd object to the lack of a main verb in the second and third, regarding them essentially as modifying clauses. They might tut-tut over the fourth, too: on the grounds either (if they were particular asses) that it begins a sentence with the word 'and', or that the comma after 'frankly' wants an opposite number to isolate the adverb as a parenthesis ('I'll tell you, frankly, that was wonderful') or perhaps that the comma would be better as a colon ('I'll tell you frankly: that was wonderful').

The sticklers would miss the point. Here the punctuation is being used not as a grammatical signpost, but solely as a score for the cadence. Read it aloud. It's expressed perfectly.

The full stops and the comma tell you exactly where the pauses in the spoken language come; and – though this isn't a precise science, as I'll discuss in more detail in the section on punctuation – those pauses are the length of a full stop where Robinson puts a full stop and the length of a comma where Robinson puts a comma.

Why the difference? Speech does not have to be learned in the same way as writing. A normal child, in its first six years of life, will acquire a full competence in the grammar of the language and a passive vocabulary (that is, a list of the words it understands) of something like 20,000 words. It does that with such miraculous speed and accuracy that for a long time it was thought there might be a 'language organ' in the brain. All you have to do is surround a baby with other language users and leave it to do its thing.

But forming letters, stringing those letters into words, and applying the rules of punctuation … these have to be painstakingly taught and practised. Writing is an arbitrary and artificial code for representing a natural behaviour. It assumes a theoretical or imaginary reader: when you write, you are creating a sort of message in a bottle. That's odd. It's not an intuitive thing to do. It's a learned behaviour.

As I fumblingly put it in my straight-to-dictaphone paragraph above, the spoken language tends to be much more loosely packed and less structured than the written version. Sentences run together, break and change direction, or circle back. Speakers say 'um' and 'er', and insert empty phrases. This not only helps them catch up with themselves: it helps the listener digest what's being said without suffering cognitive overload. For the same reason you'll see much more repetition, too. To state the obvious, readers can go back and reread a sentence, or refer to an earlier paragraph. The listener can't press rewind.

So writing and speech are profoundly different animals. There are several ramifications of this. One is that writing obeys more precise, conscious, man-made rules. There are conventions that apply to particular forms of writing, and those conventions are much of what those in the language wars fight about. So when you sit down to write, however well-trained you may be, you're conscious of doing something artificial, something formal, something unnatural. And more often than not you stiffen up.

Take an extreme example: the stereotypical English blue-helmeted policeman. No real copper alive would, returning to the squad-room and being asked about his afternoon over a cup of tea and a fondant fancy, tell a colleague: 'As I was proceeding in a westerly direction along Dock Green Road, I became aware of an altercation between two males. Upon their disregarding a verbal warning to desist, I proceeded to engage them. I apprehended one suspect. The other suspect escaped on foot and remains at large.'

He would be more likely to say something like: 'I was walking down Dock Green Road and there were these two blokes having a scrap, so I told them to stop. They didn't pay me a blind bit of notice, so I piled in, but by the time I got the cuffs on one little toe-rag the other guy had legged it.'

You can be sure, though, that it's the first version that will be read out in court. The tone of formal notes for testimony in court *should*, of course, be different from the one that you'd use when telling the story to your colleague in the squad-room. But my imaginary plod is doing an extreme version of something that very many of us tend to do: he's overcorrecting. He's not just representing speech in a formal way: he's representing a form of speech that never existed. Nobody, in any circumstances, needs to use the phrase 'proceeding in a westerly direction'. And you'll find cousins to

this sort of thing in any amount of official and formal writing.

The question of what you might call tone of voice, of the right level of formality, is what's known as decorum or, sometimes, register. Getting it right – finding a style appropriate to the communication – is at the very heart of effective writing. To get it wrong is to make the prose equivalent of messing up the dress code for a party. In the squad-room, you're in jeans-and-trainer mode; in court, you're aiming more for suit and tie. Our policeman has presented himself in an ill-fitting tuxedo with a badly knotted dickie-bow. This is one of the things behind that idea of writing as you speak: you're trying to capture the spontaneity and directness of spoken communication on the page without sounding stiff or pompous.

But as I say, writing is a representation of speech, not a transcription of it. You're translating something that lives in sound into something that lives on the page. That is a more radical transformation than we're used to noticing. It's not less of an illusion than the representation of a physical object in oil paint. You can tell the difference between a painting that looks like a pipe and one that doesn't. We're so used to assuming the equivalence between painting and subject that if someone shows you a painting of a briar pipe and asks you what it is, you'll like as not say: 'A pipe.' But as Rene Magritte reminded us: 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe' ('This is not a pipe').

When you're writing you're trying to produce the *illusion* of your best speaking voice, in the most apt register, in written form. As I've started to suggest, the way the spoken language works is shaped by the way in which it's received: it adapts to its audience. The same is true of the written form. Reading and hearing are related, just as writing and speaking are related, but they are not the same thing.

One of the ways this manifests itself is pace: a fast writer

will be able to knock out something between 500 and 1,000 words in an hour. A fast reader can take those words in in approximately a minute. We read tens of times as fast as we write, in other words. So we experience the text differently: hours of agonised concentration at the keyboard translates, at the other end of the process, into a few minutes of interested attention on the page. That means that the writer won't have a natural sense of the pace of the finished product.

Imagine shooting a feature film in stop-motion: moving a plasticine model or redrawing a cel minutely differently, for each frame. In order to see how it's going to flow for the viewer, you'll need to run the rushes back at normal speed. So you'll only really get a sense of the pace of your work on revising: you need to try to experience it as a reader, not as a writer. And in practice, this means rereading. Indeed, you'd be astonished by how different a text you've written feels when you experience it as a reader.

If you have time, leave it for a couple of days. When you reread something you've just written, you're still bruised by the experience of composing it: you'll be too aware of the joins, the awkward transitions, the hidden architecture. This paragraph or that paragraph will distract you because you're conscious of the specific labour you spent composing it. Something that felt arduous to compose will feel heavier on the page; and, if you've been busy with cut-and-paste, you'll have a sense that no reader would of how it used to connect to a separate part of the text altogether. Leave it a bit, and those scars heal. When you return to it as a reader you'll have a much better sense of how it reads to someone coming to it cold. It may well read better than you imagined.

It's worth thinking, too, about a third thing: what happens when we read? We learn a language, it is now generally

accepted, in much the same way we learn anything else: our clever, super-adaptable neurons develop the tools to do the job as our brains develop in childhood. The idea of a special or innate 'language organ' in the brain, as originally proposed by Noam Chomsky, is generally discredited. If no such organ exists for the spoken language, you can be sure there won't be one for the written language – which appeared only in the fourth millennium BC, not long ago at all in evolutionary terms.

Instead, the brain repurposes various other areas – those dedicated to the spoken language, to object recognition, motor coordination, sound and vision – to cobble together a set of reading circuits. As the cognitive neuroscientist Maryanne Wolf puts it in *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain* (2007), the brain is able to learn to read because of 'its [...] capacity to make new connections among structures and circuits originally devoted to other more basic brain processes [...] such as vision and spoken language'.

Quite how this happens, it should be said, is not known in very great detail. We all love neurosciency stuff – publishers most of all – but we're still at a pretty rudimentary stage. You can use various devices to measure blood flow or electromagnetic impulses in the brain. Afterwards you can point to a bit of the brain and say: 'Something's definitely going on in there when X does Y, but we don't have much of a clue what it is.'*

But this stuff at the very least offers hints and suggestions for the practical writer: you're working with the reader's brain, so a quick glance under the cranial bonnet has the potential to put you at an advantage.

By the time you're a fully competent speaker of the language, two areas of the brain in particular will have

Professional mnemonists from the ancient world to the modern one have used the 'method of loci' – *loci* means places in Latin – to store memories: they create an imaginary architecture in their minds' eyes and populate it with the things they want to remember. This seems to be based on sound science.

So the codex book makes mental map-making easier. Something similar applies for a set of sheets of paper – a presentation or a company report or a hand-out. You might not have those left-side, right-side markers to steer by, but you might (if it's printed on both sides) have a sense of which side of the paper your quote is on. You'll probably have oriented yourself with regard to one of the four corners of each page, too. And you'll know roughly how far through the document your quote is.

Reading on an e-reader, things are a little different. You won't have the physical sense of how far through you are. Some digital devices mimic the codex – presenting a set of double-page spreads. Others give you a continuous downward scroll of text. In both cases navigation is, you might say, lower-tech than with print: the reader has less control. You can flip backwards and forwards with more ease in a physical book than you can in a virtual one. The sense of how far through a digital text you are can be given by a percentage, or a progress bar – but it's less readily, less physically, apprehended.

Does this matter? It seems to. A large number of studies over three decades have found that people reading on screens find the process more mentally taxing, and (perhaps consequently) that they less easily and less thoroughly remember what they have read. Some also suggest that the *way* in which we read on screen is different: that, essentially, we approach on-screen reading with less concentration than

we do the dead-tree kind. We expect to be distracted; we expect to read less deeply – and so we do.

I don't raise these findings to denigrate online or on-screen reading. In the first place, these young technologies are changing: some of the cognitive load involved in on-screen reading can be attributed to issues that aren't necessarily intrinsic to the screen/page distinction. For instance e-ink, which reflects light like a paper-and-ink book, is known to be less taxing than a tablet or a phone, which shines light directly into the reader's eyes.

The default mode of reading online has been given the name 'continuous partial attention'. I'm fond of quoting the science fiction writer and blogger Cory Doctorow's matchless description of the internet as 'an ecosystem of interruption technologies'. We are used to seeing visual movement, pictures, embedded links, wobbly gifs and what have you – and the characteristic activity on the internet has been described as 'wilfing', from the acronym WWILF: 'What was I looking for?'

There's no reason to suppose that that can't or won't change. But we are where we are. And the smart writer will bear all this in mind when thinking about how a long text will go over. As I will discuss in later chapters, there are useful tricks you can use to direct that 'continuous partial attention', when writing for electronic media, to the important bits of your text.

Audience-Awareness, or, Baiting the Hook

'When you go fishing you bait the hook, not with what you like, but with what the fish likes.' This quote, variously attributed in various forms, captures the nub of what I want

to get across in this book. There is no more important principle in practical writing. It governs everything from style and register, through vocabulary choice and decisions about 'correctness' to line-spacing and typography.

Day-to-day practical writing is not about making words look pretty on the page or showing stylistic sophistication or an impressive vocabulary. It's about connecting with the reader. As the American political pollster Frank Luntz likes to put it: 'It's not what you say. It's what people hear.'

The idea of putting yourself in the reader's shoes is not a new one. You find it in almost every style guide ever put on paper. But what does it mean, why is it important, and how can it be achieved?

Aristotle, the first person to think systematically about rhetoric, identified three different ways that people are persuaded. He called them *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos*. Pathos is the way in which we are swayed by emotion. Logos is the intellectual shape of an argument. But ethos is more important than both of these two. It comes first. It describes the bond a speaker or writer forges with his or her audience.

That bond has to do with whether an audience warms to you, trusts your authority, and believes that whatever you're selling will be in their interests. If an audience dislikes or mistrusts you, or is bored by you, you get nowhere. You won't sway their emotions with pathos, and even if they can't see the flaws in your argument they will resist it nevertheless.

Ethos, overwhelmingly often, boils down to the question: do they think of you as 'one of us'? It has to do with how they see your identity in relation to their own. It's not quite true to call human beings herd creatures. But we incessantly construct meaning in terms of communal identity; we think in sets and groups.

My identity is constructed out of a whole collection of

commonalities I share with others of my species: 'white', 'male', 'middle-aged', 'British'; 'father', 'husband', 'member of Leith family'; 'keen baker of bread', 'wearer of size nine Doc Marten boots', 'X-Men fan'. These commonalities will affect not only how other people see me, but how I see myself – and the two things are, of course, intimately linked.

That idea of bunching and grouping – what's sometimes derisively called 'pigeonholing' – underpins the language itself. Nouns (with the exception of so-called proper nouns, such as 'Fred' or 'Blenheim Palace') don't describe single things, they describe categories of things. Verbs don't describe single actions, they describe categories of action. Even conjunctions or prepositions – words that signal the relationships between phrases, clauses and sentences – describe *types* of relationship: under, over, after, while and so on.

'The man kicked the ball over the house.' To understand that sentence you are marshalling not a particular image of a particular man kicking a particular ball over a particular house. You are marshalling a set of agreed ideas about what properties define 'man', 'ball' and 'house'; what spatial relationship the word 'over' denotes; what physical gesture qualifies as a 'kick'.

Your image and mine – if asked, say, to draw a picture – will not be identical. Is the man in your more or less hazy mental image black or white; short or tall; clothed or naked? Is the ball a football or a tennis ball or a beach ball? Is your house a North London semi or a bungalow in the Pasadena suburbs? Is the ball sailing high or skimming the roof? Is the man kicking the ball from his hands or from the ground or intercepting his six-year-old son's throw-in? The answers to those questions will be rooted in your experience and therefore, to an extent, in your identity.

But the chances are that to start with you aren't seeing the image with that sort of specificity – precisely because you know without really thinking about it consciously that those differences will exist. For the sentence to be meaningful, it relies on a common understanding of these definitions, and the awareness that until you hear different, it's safest to keep your interpretive options open. You're trying to tune in to the broad meaning of what the speaker is saying and not go beyond it. If you form a super-specific image right off the bat – and the next sentence makes clear that your image is wrong, you have to go back and unpick your assumptions and start from scratch. That involves cognitive work: it's a waste of energy.

Your communication will of course be more meaningful – more instantly precise – if the shared references are stronger. You have to work harder to communicate exactly if the connotations of the words are likely to be different for your audience or absent altogether – but, fortunately, the language supplies the tools where context does not. In mental energy terms, the closer you are to the audience in the first place the easier your task will be; particle physicist speaks unto particle physicist more easily than particle physicist speaks unto six-year-old.

The point is that the successful communicator takes as much of the work of interpretation on him or herself as possible. If your frame of reference is different from your audience's, you reach them faster by adopting theirs. You see people doing that all the time. When that particle physicist is speaking to that six-year-old, she's more likely to prosper if she uses an analogy from the six-year-old's world – explaining, say, the way that the universe is made up of little bits with reference to Lego bricks rather than plunging straight into the mathematics of subatomic particles.

Some forms of writing ask for continuous prose. Some are more in the direction of a collection of numbered paragraphs. Get your genre features right and you're on your way. Get them wrong, and you're headed to an ABBA-themed fancydress party got up as Marilyn Manson.

Plain and Simple

Lots of style guides suggest using 'Plain English'. There is even a 'Plain English Campaign' in the UK that pressures official bodies to adopt a simpler style of communication, and has done so over the years with some success.

But what do we mean by Plain English?

As an analogy, think of the iPhone. If you read Walter Isaacson's biography of Steve Jobs you'll be flabbergasted by the technical difficulties that had to be overcome – the toughness of the glass, the design of the interface, the cramming of all those doohickeys and gizmos into that pocketsized device. The technical specifications for building an iPhone would run to thousands of pages.

But – which is what makes it the success story it is – here is a pocket computer that does everything, and yet which ships to the customer without a manual. It is designed to be so self-explanatory – so intuitive – that you can learn to use it simply by fiddling around with it.

Now compare the video recorder you had in the early 1990s (those of you who remember the early 1990s). The iPhone does much more than that video recorder ever did. But the video recorder came with a large, incomprehensible manual, and even then only your children could work out how to program it. Writing Plain English is being the iPhone rather than the video recorder.

So the test of Plain English is whether it works. There isn't a scientific test for the plain style – though, as I'll discuss later, there are some rules of thumb. In that sense it's a negative quality: you can say of Plain English not that you know it when you see it, so much as that you notice like hell when it isn't there. It's the simplest language that the widest possible segment of your intended audience will understand.

Plain English, simply, makes the reader's life easy. It minimises the cognitive work he or she has to put in. So as a writer, aspiring to produce Plain English, you need to put yourself constantly in the position of the reader.

And be aware that – as with building an iPhone – the contract isn't symmetrical. Something that's easy for the reader to consume isn't necessarily easy for the writer to produce. You may sweat. You may labour. And if you get it right, all the hard work you've done will barely be noticed by the person on whose behalf you've done it.

In that sense, it might seem self-explanatory that you'd want to write Plain English. But it's not quite that simple. There are all sorts of circumstances in which Plain English isn't appropriate. If all we had was the plain style we'd have no rousing oratory, no poetry (or very little) – not much, in fact, to cause the heart to sing.

Take an example:

> I caught this morning morning's minion, kingdom of daylight's
>   dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding
> Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding High
> there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing In his ecstasy!
> then off, off forth on swing,

In Plain English, the opening lines of Gerard Manley Hopkins's 'The Wind-Hover' could be rendered:

I got up early, went for a walk and saw a bird.

In other areas, sometimes a particular subject matter demands a particular language – not complexity for its own sake but because, say, scientists might need a specialist technical vocabulary to be exact. And that specialist language can, in effect, do for scientists what Plain English does for the general reader: minimise the cognitive work. If you already know what Planck's Constant is, those two words will get the idea across instantly.

Plain English aims to be understood, then, by the maximum number of readers in any given audience with the maximum ease. It will usually draw from common vocabulary – and common vocabulary, even when unambiguous, can be imprecise. So it's not as simple as choosing only short words, or only common words. It's about considering the simplest words that will do the job.

This has immense practical advantages.

One: where writing is intended to be communication rather than performance, it needs to get through. And that means it needs to get through to the least linguistically able of its readers. According to the UK's National Literacy Trust, the average reading age among adults in Britain is about 13. US figures show an approximate equivalence. That's the *average* – and it's three years below school leaving. From that it seems pretty clear to me that, even if most of your communications are in the white-collar world, you may need to pitch things a bit lower even than you'd expect.

Two: unclear writing wastes time and money. If you're in the public sector, people's access to public services depends on them understanding how to navigate the system – which means that the instructions need to be clear. In the private sector, leave alone the misunderstandings, the confusions,

the follow-up phone calls to clarify what the blithering hell that email was all about, if you aren't able to make what you are offering or accepting clear to a business partner at the least you will lose goodwill, and at the worst you will trigger lawsuits.

Not long ago, when my three-year-old was suffering from a pink and gunky eye, I bought him a bottle of Optrex eyedrops from the chemist. The side of the pack, under dosage, said: 'Adults and children over two years of age – 1 drop every 2 hours for the first 48 hours and 4 hourly thereafter.' Does that mean four drops every hour thereafter? Or one drop every four hours? The grammar of the sentence leads me to the first conclusion. Common sense leads me to the second. But if I'm squirting this stuff into my toddler's eye, I'd really like to be sure.

Finally, clear, grammatical English helps your ethos appeal. People judge you on your language. When an employer gets a CV, a journalist a press release or a colleague a memo that's obtuse, repetitive, misspelt or grammatically muddled, he or she will always think less of the sender. Your reader is always, always looking for an excuse to move on. You don't stand to gain readers in the course of a given piece of writing, only to lose them – and making some of them struggle to understand you is a sure-fire way of doing it.

In this respect a piece of continuous prose follows the publishing model of those partwork magazines you used to see advertised on TV. Part One of *Locomotives of the Golden Age of Steam*, say, would be offered at the bargain price of £1.50, and bundled with a free binder and a cover-mounted toy locomotive. Maybe it would sell 10,000 copies. Two weeks later, Part Two would appear in the newsagent for £2.50. Inspired by the free binder – collect them all! – those who liked Part One would pick it up. Maybe you'd get 7,000

readers. A fortnight later, Part Three would come, and a fortnight later, Part Four, and so on. The best the publishers can hope for is a low attrition rate – but with each successive issue you lose readers to apathy, disorganisation or a sense that they are not getting value for money. By the time you get to Part Twelve, the hope is that a decent number of readers will still be with you – impressed by the quality of the product, the collector's desire for completeness, or the sense of by this stage being already invested in the series. The business model is one of retaining readers, not gaining them. You never sell more of the last issue than you do of the first. You will never get more people reading the second half of your article than read the first.

This has implications for structure. Crudely, it says that the first few sentences really matter: that's where you offer the free binder and the cover-mounted model engine. But it also makes the more basic point that for the writer, just as for the publisher of *Locomotives of the Golden Age of Steam*, you only retain as many readers as you keep engaged and offer – metaphorically – value for money. The writer who aims for the stupidest and least attentive person in his or her audience is not a stupid or inattentive writer.

There are a couple of rough tests, as I mentioned above, for the plain style. For many years, a number of mechanical 'readability tests' have been in circulation. The best known is probably the Flesch-Kincaid score – which now comes bundled with many word-processing programs.* Readability tests make an estimate of a text's complexity based on the number of syllables per word and the number of words per sentence. Unhelpfully for English users, the Flesch-Kincaid score is given as a US school grade level. The lower the score, the easier the text is to read: a grade score of 8 or 9 indicates that an average teenager should be able to make sense of