a smoke of dignity and some calm heroism, not unlike the sense of freedom which also comes when a marriage is burst—Mailer knew for the first time why men in the front line of battle are almost always ready to die: there is a promise of some swift transit . . . [it goes on]

—Norman Mailer, *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, the Novel as History*

We almost feel we are eavesdropping on Mailer's stream of thought. But of course, such a sentence is the product not of an overflow of feeling but of premeditated art.

- Mailer opens with short, staccato phrases to suggest confusion, but he controls them by coordination.
- He continues the sentence by coordinating free modifiers: *arms linked . . . line twisting . . . speeding up. . . .*
- After several more free modifiers, he continues with a resumptive modifier: *a love so lacerated. . . .*
- After another grammatical sentence, he adds another resumptive modifier: *a smoke of dignity and some calm heroism. . . .*

Here's the point: Think about the length of your sentences only if most are longer than thirty words or shorter than fifteen. Your sentences will vary naturally if you edit them in the ways you've seen here. But if the occasion allows, feel free to experiment.

Lesson

11

The Ethics of Style

Style is the ultimate morality of mind.

—Alfred North Whitehead

Beyond Polish

It is easy to think that style is just the polish that makes a sentence go down smoothly, but much more is at stake in choosing subjects and verbs in these two sentences:

1a. **Shiites and Sunnis** DISTRUST one another because **they** HAVE ENGAGED in generations of cultural conflict.

1b. **Generations of cultural conflict** HAVE CREATED distrust between Shiites and Sunnis.

Which sentence more accurately reflects what causes the distrust between the two—their deliberate actions, as in (1a), or, as in (1b), the circumstances of their history? Such a choice of subjects and verbs even implies a philosophy of human action: do we freely choose to act, or do circumstances cause us to? Later, we'll look at the way this issue plays itself out in our own Declaration of Independence.

Our choice of what kind of character to tell a story about—people or their circumstances—involves more than ease of reading, even more than a philosophy of action, because every such choice also has an ethical dimension.

The Ethical Responsibilities of Writers and Readers

In the last ten lessons, I have emphasized the responsibility writers owe readers to write clearly. But readers also have a responsibility to read closely enough to understand ideas too difficult for Dick-and-Jane sentences. It would be impossible, for example, for an engineer to revise this into language clear to everyone:

> The drag force on a particle of diameter *d* moving with speed *u* relative to a fluid of density *p* and viscosity μ is usually modeled by $F = 0.5C_D u^2 A$, where A is the cross-sectional area of the particle at right angles to the motion.

Most of us do work hard to understand—at least until we decide that a writer failed to work equally hard to help us understand or, worse, deliberately made our reading more difficult than it has to be. Once we decide that a writer is careless, lazy, or self-indulgent—well, our days are too few to spend them on those indifferent to our needs.

But that response to gratuitous complexity only reemphasizes our responsibilities to our own readers, for it seems axiomatic that if we don't want others to impose carelessly complex writing on us, then we ought not impose it on others. If we are socially responsible writers, we should make our ideas no simpler than they deserve, but no more difficult than they have to be.

Responsible writers follow a rule whose more general theme you probably recognize:

> Write to others as you would have others write to you.

Few of us violate this First Rule of Ethical Writing deliberately. It's just that we are all inclined to think that our own writing is clear: if our readers struggle to understand it, the problem must be not our flawed writing but their shallow reading.

But that's a mistake, because if we underestimate our readers' real needs, we risk losing more than their attention. We risk losing what writers since Aristotle have called a reliable *ethos*—the character that readers infer from our writing: Does our writing make them think we are difficult or accessible? Trustworthy or deceitful? Amiably candid or impersonally aloof?

Over time, the ethos we project in individual pieces of writing hardens into our reputation. So it's not just altruistically generous to go an extra step to help readers understand. It's pragmatically smart, because we tend to trust most a writer with a reputation for being thoughtful, reliable, and considerate of her readers' needs.

But what is at stake here is more than just reputation: it's the ethical foundations of a literate society. We write ethically when, as a matter of principle, we would trade places with our intended readers and experience the consequences they do after they read our writing. Unfortunately, it's not quite that simple. How, for example, do we judge those who write opaquely without knowing they do, or those who knowingly write that way and defend it?

Unintended Obscurity

Those who write in ways that seem dense and convoluted rarely intend to do so. For example, I do not believe that the writers of this next passage *knowingly* wrote it as unclearly as they did:

> A major condition affecting adult reliance on early communicative patterns is the extent to which the communication has been *planned* prior to its delivery. We find that adult speech behaviour takes on many of the characteristics of child language, where the communication is spontaneous and relatively unpredictable.
>
> —E. Ochs and B. Schieffelin, "Planned and Unplanned Discourse," *Acquiring Conversational Competence*

That means (I think),

> When we speak spontaneously, we rely on patterns of child language.

The authors might object that I have oversimplified their idea, but those eleven words express what I remember from their forty-four, and what really counts, after all, is not what we understand as we read, but what we remember the next day.

The ethical issue here is not those writers' willful indifference but their innocent ignorance. In that case, when writers don't know better, readers have the duty to meet another term of the reader–writer contract: we must not just read carefully, but when given the opportunity, respond candidly and helpfully. I know many of you think that right now you do not have the standing to do that. But one day, you will.

Intended Misdirection

The ethics of writing are clearer when writers knowingly use language not to further their readers' interests but to disguise their own.

Example #1: Who Erred? Sears was once accused of overcharging for automobile repairs. It responded with an ad saying:

> With over two million automotive customers serviced last year in California alone, mistakes may have occurred. However, Sears wants you to know that we would never intentionally violate the trust customers have shown in our company for 105 years.

In the first sentence, the writer avoided mentioning Sears as the party responsible for mistakes. He could have used a passive verb:

> . . . mistakes **may have been made**.

But that would have encouraged us to wonder *By whom?* Instead, the writer found a verb that moved Sears offstage by saying mistakes just "occurred," seemingly on their own.

In the second sentence, though, the writer focused on *Sears*, the responsible agent, because he wanted to emphasize its good intentions:

> **Sears** . . . would never intentionally violate . . .

If we revise the first sentence to focus on Sears and the second to hide it, we get a different effect:

> When we serviced over two million automotive customers last year in California, we made mistakes. However, you should know that no intentional violation of 105 years of trust occurred.

That's a small point of stylistic manipulation, self-interested but innocent of any malign motives. This next one is more significant.

Example #2: Who Pays? Consider this letter from a natural gas utility telling me and hundreds of thousands of other customers that it was raising our rates. (The subject/topic in every clause, main or subordinate, is boldfaced.)

> **The Illinois Commerce Commission** has authorized a restructuring of our rates together with an increase in Service Charge revenues effective with service rendered on and after November 12, 1990. **This** is the first increase in rates for Peoples Gas in over six years. **The restructuring of rates** is consistent with the policy of the Public Utilities Act that **rates for service to various classes of utility customers** be based upon the cost of providing that service. **The new rates** move revenues from every class of customer closer to the cost actually incurred to provide gas service.

That notice is a model of misdirection: after the first sentence, the writer never again begins a sentence with a human character, least of all the character whose interests are most at stake—me, the reader. I'm mentioned only twice, in the third person, never as a subject/topic/agent:

> . . . for service to various classes of utility **customers**
>
> . . . move revenues from every class of **customer**

The writer mentions the company only once, in the third person, and not as a responsible subject/topic/agent:

> . . . increase in rates for **Peoples Gas**

Had the company wanted to make clear who the real "doer" was and who was being done to, the notice would have read more like this:

> According to the Illinois Commerce Commission, **we** can now charge **you** more for your gas service after November 12, 1990. **We** have not made **you** pay more in over six years, but under the Public Utilities Act, now **we** can.

If the writer *intended* to deflect responsibility, then we can reasonably charge him with breaching the First Rule of Ethical Writing, for surely he would not want that same kind of writing directed to him, systematically hiding who is doing what in a matter close to his interests.

Example #3: Who Dies? Finally, here is a passage that raises an even greater ethical issue, one involving life and death. Some time ago, the Government Accounting Office investigated why more than half the car owners who got recall letters did not get their cars fixed. It found that car owners could not understand the letters or were not sufficiently alarmed by them to take their cars to the dealer for service.

I received the following. (When asked my make of car, I dodge the question.) It shows how writers can meet a legal obligation while evading an ethical one (I number the sentences):

> [1]A defect which involves the possible failure of a frame support plate may exist on your vehicle. [2]This plate (front suspension pivot bar support plate) connects a portion of the front suspension to the vehicle frame, and [3]its failure could affect vehicle directional control, particularly during heavy brake application. [4]In addition, your vehicle may require adjustment service to the hood secondary catch system. [5]The secondary catch may be misaligned so that the hood may not be adequately restrained to prevent hood fly-up in the event the primary latch is inadvertently left unengaged. [6]Sudden hood fly-up beyond the secondary catch while driving could impair driver visibility. [7]In certain circumstances, occurrence of either of the above conditions could result in vehicle crash without prior warning.

First, look at the subjects/topics of the sentences:

[1]a defect	[2]this plate	[3]its failure
[4]your vehicle	[5]the secondary catch	
[6]sudden hood fly-up	[7]occurrence of either condition	

The main character/topic of that story is not me, the driver, but my car and its parts. In fact, the writers—probably a team of lawyers—ignored me almost entirely (I am in *your vehicle* twice and *driver* once), and completely removed themselves. In sum, it says,

> There is a car that might have defective parts. Its plate could fail and its hood fly up. If they do, it could crash without warning.

The writers also nominalized verbs and made others passive when they referred to actions that might alarm me (n = nominalization, p = passive):

failure $_n$	vehicle directional control $_n$	heavy brake application $_n$
be misaligned $_p$	not be restrained $_p$	hood fly-up $_n$
is left unengaged $_p$	driver visibility $_n$	warning $_n$

If the writers intended to deflect my fear and maybe my anger, then they violated their ethical duty to write to me as they would have me write to them, for surely they would not swap places with a reader deliberately lulled into ignoring a condition that threatened his life.

Of course, being candid has its costs. I would be naive to claim that everyone is free to write as he or she pleases, especially when a writer's job depends on protecting an employer's self-interest. Maybe the writers of that letter felt coerced into writing it as they did. But that doesn't mitigate the consequences. When we knowingly write in ways that we would not want others to write to us, we abrade the trust that sustains a civil society.

We should not, of course, confuse unethical indirectness with the human impulse to soften bad news. When a supervisor says, *I'm afraid our new funding didn't come through*, we know it

means, *You have no job*. But that indirectness is motivated not by dishonesty but by kindness.

In short, our choice of subjects is crucial not only when we want to be clear, but also when we want to be honest or deceptive.

Rationalizing Opacity

Necessary Complexity

A trickier ethical issue is how we should respond to those who know they write in a complex style but claim they must because they are breaking new intellectual ground. Are they right, or is that a self-serving rationalization? This is a vexing question, not just because we can settle it only case by case, but because we may not be able to settle some cases at all, at least not to everyone's satisfaction.

Here, for example, is a sentence from a leading figure in contemporary literary theory:

> If, for a while, the ruse of desire is calculable for the uses of discipline soon the repetition of guilt, justification, pseudo-scientific theories, superstition, spurious authorities, and classifications can be seen as the desperate effort to "normalize" *formally* the disturbance of a discourse of splitting that violates the rational, enlightened claims of its enunciatory modality.
>
> —Homi Bhabha

Does that sentence express a thought so subtle and complex that its substance can be expressed only as written? Or is it academic babble? How do we decide whether in fact his nuances are, at least for ordinarily competent readers, just not accessible, given the time most of us have to figure them out?

We owe readers precise and nuanced prose, but we ought not assume that they owe us an indefinite amount of their time to unpack it. If we choose to write in ways that we know will make readers struggle—well, it's a free country. In the marketplace of ideas, truth is the prime value, but not the only one. Another is what it costs us to find it.

In the final analysis, I can suggest only that when writers claim their prose style must be difficult because their ideas are new, they are, as a matter of simple fact, more often wrong than right. The philosopher of language Ludwig Wittgenstein said,

> Whatever can be thought can be thought clearly; whatever can be written can be written clearly.

I'd add a nuance:

> . . . and with just a bit more effort, more clearly still.

Salutary Complexity/Subversive Clarity

There are two more defenses of complexity: one claims that complexity is good for us, the other that clarity is bad.

As to the first claim, some argue that the harder we have to work to understand what we read, the more deeply we think and the better we understand. Everyone should be happy to know that no evidence supports so foolish a claim, and substantial evidence contradicts it.

As to the second claim, some argue that "clarity" is a device wielded by those in power to mislead us about who really controls our lives. By speaking and writing in deceptively simple ways, they say, those who control the facts dumb them down, rendering us unable to understand the complex truths about our political and social circumstances:

> The call to write curriculum in a language that is touted as clear and accessible is evidence of a moral and political vision that increasingly collapses under the weight of its own anti-intellectualism. . . . It seems to us that those who make a call for clear writing synonymous with an attack on critical educators have missed the role that the "language of clarity" plays in a dominant culture that cleverly and powerfully uses "clear" and "simplistic" language to systematically undermine and prevent the conditions from arising for a public culture to engage in rudimentary forms of complex and critical thinking.
>
> —Stanley Aronowitz, *Postmodern Education: Politics, Culture, and Social Criticism*

This writer makes one good point: language is deeply implicated in politics, ideology, and control. In our earliest history, the educated elite used writing itself to exclude the illiterate, then Latin and French to exclude those who knew only English. More recently, those in authority have relied on a vocabulary thick with Latinate nominalizations and on a Standard English that requires those Outs aspiring to join the Ins to submit to a decades-long education, during which time they are expected to acquire not only the language of the Ins but their values as well.

Moreover, clarity is not a natural virtue, corrupted by fallen academics, bureaucrats, and others jealous to preserve their illegitimate authority. Clarity is a value that is created by society and that society must work hard to maintain, for writing clearly is not just hard: it is almost an unnatural act. It has to be learned, sometimes painfully (as this book demonstrates).

So is clarity an ideological value? Of course it is. How could it not be?

But those who attack clarity as a conspiracy to oversimplify complicated social issues are as wrong as those who attack science because some use it for malign ends: neither science nor clarity is a threat; we are threatened by those who use clarity (or science) to deceive us. It is not clarity that subverts, but the unethical use of it. We must simply insist that, in principle, those who manage our affairs have a duty to tell us the truth as clearly as they can. They probably won't, but that just shifts the burden to us to call them out on it.

With every sentence we write we have to choose, and the ethical quality of our choices depends on the motives behind them. Only by knowing motives can we know whether a writer of clear or complex prose would willingly be the object of such writing, to be influenced (or manipulated) in the same way, with the same result.

That seems simple enough. But it's not.

An Extended Analysis

It is easy to abuse writers who seem to manipulate us through their language for their own, self-interested ends. It is more difficult to think about these matters when we are manipulated by the

language of those whom we would never charge with deceit. But it is just such cases that force us to think hardest about matters of style and ethics.

The most celebrated texts in our history are the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and Second Inaugural Address. In previous editions of this book, I discussed how Lincoln artfully manipulated the language in both of his addresses. Here I examine how Thomas Jefferson managed his prose style in the Declaration of Independence to influence how we respond to the logic of his argument.

The Declaration is celebrated for its logic. After a discussion of human rights and their origin, Jefferson laid out a simple syllogism:

Major premise: When a long train of abuses by a government evinces a design to reduce a people under despotism, they must throw off such government.

Minor Premise: These colonies have been abused by a tyrant who evinces such a design.

Conclusion: We therefore throw off that government and declare that these colonies are free and independent states.

Jefferson's argument is as straightforward as the language expressing it is artful.

Jefferson begins with a preamble that explains why the colonists decided to justify their claim of independence, based on the surprising idea that revolutionaries must have, and declare, good reasons:

> When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bonds which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

He then organizes the Declaration into three parts. In the first, he offers his major premise, a philosophical justification for a people to throw off a tyranny and replace it with a government of their own:

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any form of government becomes destructive to these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shown that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security.

In Part 2, Jefferson applies these principles to the colonists' situation:

> Such has been the patient sufferance of these colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former systems of government. The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over these states. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world.

Those facts constitute a litany of King George's offenses against the colonies, evidence supporting Jefferson's minor premise that the king intended to establish "an absolute Tyranny over these States":

> He has refused his assent to laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good.

> He has forbidden his governors to pass laws of immediate and pressing importance . . .

> He has refused to pass other laws for the accommodation of large districts of people . . .

> He has called together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant . . .

Part 3 opens by reviewing the colonists' attempts to avoid separation:

> In every stage of these oppressions we have petitioned for redress in the most humble terms: Our repeated petitions have been answered only by repeated injury. A prince, whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.
>
> Nor have we been wanting in attention to our British brethren. We have warned them from time to time of attempts by their legislature to extend an unwarrantable jurisdiction over us. We have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration and settlement here. We have appealed to their native justice and magnanimity, and we have conjured them by the ties of our common kindred to disavow these usurpations, which would inevitably interrupt our connections and correspondence. We must, therefore, acquiesce in the necessity, which denounces our separation, and hold them, as we hold the rest of mankind, enemies in war, in peace friends.

Part 3 ends with the actual declaration of independence:

> We, therefore, the representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress, assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the name, and by the authority of the good people of these colonies, solemnly publish and declare, that these united colonies are, and of right ought to be free and independent states; that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the state of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved; and that as free and independent states, they have full power to levy war, conclude peace, contract alliances, establish commerce, and to do all other acts and things which independent states may of right do. And for the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor.

Jefferson's argument is a model of cool logic, but he artfully managed his language to tacitly incline readers to accept that logic.

Parts 2 and 3 reflect the principles of clarity explained in Lessons 2–5. In Part 2, Jefferson made *He* (King George) the short, concrete subject/topic/agent of all the actions named.

> **He** *has refused* . . .
>
> **He** *has forbidden* . . .
>
> **He** *has refused* . . .
>
> **He** *has called together* . . .

He could have written this:

> **His assent to laws**, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good, *has not been forthcoming* . . .
>
> **Laws of immediate and pressing importance** *have been forbidden* . . .
>
> **Places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of public records** *have been required* as meeting places of legislative bodies . . .

Or he could have consistently focused on the colonists:

> **We** *have been deprived* of laws, the most wholesome and necessary . . .
>
> **We** *lack* laws of immediate and pressing importance . . .
>
> **We** *have had to meet* at places unusual, uncomfortable . . .

In other words, Jefferson was not forced by the nature of things to make King George the active agent of every oppressive action. But that choice supported his argument that the king was a willfully abusive tyrant. Such a choice seems so natural, however, that we don't notice that it was a *choice*.

In Part 3, Jefferson also wrote in a style that reflects our principles of clarity: he again matched the characters in his story to the subjects/topics of his sentences. But here he switched characters to the colonists, named *we*:

> Nor *have* **we** *been wanting* in attentions to our British brethren.
>
> **We** *have warned* them from time to time . . .

> **We** *have reminded* them of the circumstances of our emigration . . .
>
> **We** *have appealed* to their native justice and magnanimity . . .
>
> . . . **we** *have conjured* them by the ties of our common kindred . . .
>
> **They** too *have been deaf* to the voice of justice and of consanguinity.
>
> **We** *must*, therefore, *acquiesce* in the necessity . . .
>
> **We** . . . *do* . . . solemnly *publish and declare* . . .
>
> . . . **we** mutually *pledge* to each other our Lives . . .

With the one exception of *They too have been deaf*, all the subjects/topics are *we*.

And again, Jefferson was not forced by the nature of things to do that. He could have made his British brethren subjects/topics:

> **Our British brethren** *have heard* our requests . . .
>
> **They** *have received* our warnings . . .
>
> They *know* the circumstances of our emigration . . .
>
> They *have ignored* our pleas . . .

But he chose to assign agency to the colonists to focus readers on their attempts to negotiate, then on their action of declaring independence.

Again, his choices seem natural, even unremarkable—*King George committed all those tyrannical acts, so we must declare our independence*—but they were not inevitable. What more is there to say about the style of Parts 2 and 3, other than that Jefferson made the obviously right choices?

Far more interesting are Jefferson's choices in Part 1, the words we have committed to our national memory. In that part, he chose a style quite different. In fact, in Part 1, he wrote only two sentences that make real people the subject of an active verb:

> . . . **they** [the colonists] *should declare* the causes . . .
>
> **We** *hold* these truths to be self-evident . . .

There are four other subject–verb sequences that have short, concrete subjects, but they are all in the passive voice:

> . . . **all men** *are created* equal . . .
>
> . . . **they** *are endowed* by their Creator with certain unalienable rights . . .
>
> . . . **governments** *are instituted* among men . . .
>
> . . . **governments long established** *should* not *be changed* for light and transient causes . . .

The agency in the first two sentences is obviously God's, but the last two passives explicitly obscure the agency of people in general and the colonists in particular.

In the rest of Part 1, Jefferson chose a style that is *even more* impersonal, making abstractions the subjects/topics/agents of almost every important verb. In fact, most of his sentences would yield to the kind of revisions we described in Lessons 2–5:

> When in the course of human events, **it** *becomes necessary* for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another . . .

✓ When in the course of human events, **we** *decide* **we** *must dissolve* the political bands which have . . .

> . . . **a decent respect to the opinions of mankind** *requires* that they should declare **the causes** which *impel* them to the separation.

✓ If **we** decently *respect* the opinions of mankind, **we** *must declare* why **we** *have decided to separate.*

> . . . **it** *is the right* of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government . . .

✓ **We** *may exercise* our right to *alter or abolish* it, and *institute* new government . . .

> **Prudence,** indeed, *will dictate* that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes . . .

✓ If **we** *are prudent*, **we** *will not change* governments long established for light and transient causes.

> . . . **all experience** *hath shewn*, that **mankind** *are more disposed* to suffer, while evils are sufferable . . .

✓ **We** *know* from experience that **we** can *choose* to *suffer* those evils that are sufferable . . .

> . . . **a long train of abuses and usurpations** . . . *evinces* a design to reduce them under absolute despotism.

✓ **We** *can see* a design in a long train of abuses and usurpations pursuing invariably the same object—to reduce us under absolute despotism.

> **Necessity** . . . *constrains* them to alter their former systems of government.

✓ **We now** *must alter* **our former systems of government**.

Instead of writing as clearly and directly as he did in Parts 2 and 3, why in Part 1 did Jefferson *choose* to write in a style so indirect and impersonal? One ready answer is that he wanted to lay down a philosophical basis not for revolution in particular but for just revolution in general, a profoundly destabilizing idea in Western political thought and one that needed more justification than the colonists' mere desire to throw off a government they disliked.

What is most striking about the style of Part 1 is not just its impersonal generality, but how relentlessly Jefferson uses that style to strip the colonists of any free will of their own and to invest agency in higher forces that coerce the colonists to act:

- **respect** for opinion *requires* that [the colonists] explain their action
- **causes** *impel* [the colonists] to separate
- **prudence** *dictates* that [the colonists] not change government lightly
- **experience** has *shown* [the colonists]
- **necessity** *constrains* [the colonists]

Jefferson echoes that coercive power over the colonists again in Part 3:

- **We** *must . . . acquiesce [to] the necessity*, which denounces our separation.

Even when abstractions do not explicitly coerce the colonists, Jefferson implies that the colonists are not free agents:

- It [is] *necessary* to sever bonds.
- Mankind *are disposed* to suffer.
- It is their *duty* to throw off a tyrant.

In this light, even *We hold these truths to be self-evident* is a claim implying that the colonists did not discover those truths but that those truths imposed themselves on the colonists.

In short, Jefferson manipulated his language three times, twice in ways that seem transparent, unremarkable, so predictable that we don't even notice the choice: in Part 2, he made King George a freely acting agent of his actions by making him the subject/topic of every sentence; in Part 3, Jefferson made the colonists the agents of their own actions.

But to make the first part of his argument work, Jefferson had to make the colonists seem to be the coerced objects of higher powers. Since the only higher power named in the Declaration is a Creator, nature's God, that Creator is implicitly the coercive power that "constrains them to alter their former systems of government." Jefferson did not explicitly *say* that, much less defend it. Instead, he let the grammar of his sentences make that part of his argument for him.

The Declaration of Independence is a majestic document for reasons beyond its grammar and style. The same words that brought our nation into existence laid down the fundamental values that justify the self-governance of all people everywhere.

But we ought not ignore Jefferson's rhetorical powers, and in particular, the genius of his style. He created a relentlessly logical argument justifying our independence, but he also manipulated, managed, massaged, spun—call it what you will—his language to support his logic in ways not apparent on a casual reading.

If his end did not justify his means, we might argue that Jefferson was being deceptive here, using language instead of logic to establish the crucial premise to his argument: the colonists were not free to do other than what they did; they had no choice but to revolt.

It is, finally, an ethical issue. Do we trust writers who seek to manage our responses not just explicitly with logical arguments but implicitly through their prose style? We would say *No* about the writer of that automobile recall letter, because it was almost certainly *intended* to deceive us. We are, however, likely to say *Yes* about Jefferson, but only if we agree that his intended end justified his means, a principle that we ordinarily reject on ethical grounds.

"Good" Writing

How, finally, do we decide what counts as "good" writing? Is it writing that is clear, graceful, and candid, even if it fails to achieve its end? Or is it writing that does a job, regardless of its integrity and means? We have a problem so long as *good* can mean either ethically sound or pragmatically successful.

We resolve that dilemma by our First Principle of Ethical Writing:

> We are ethical writers when we would willingly put ourselves in the place of our readers and experience what they do as they read what we've written.

That puts the burden on us to imagine our readers and their feelings.

If you are even moderately advanced in your academic or professional career, you've experienced the consequences of unclear writing. If you are in your early years of college, though, you may wonder whether all this talk about clarity, ethics, and ethos is just so much finger-wagging. At the moment, you may be happy to find enough words to fill three pages, much less worry about their style. And you may be reading textbooks that have been heavily edited to make them clear to students. So you may not yet have

experienced much carelessly dense writing. But it's only a matter of time before you will.

Others wonder why they should struggle to learn to write clearly when bad writing seems so common and to cost its writers so little. What experienced readers know, and you eventually will, is that clear and graceful writers are so few that when we find them, we are desperately grateful. They do not go unrewarded.

I also know that crafting a good sentence or paragraph gives many writers pleasure enough. It is an ethical satisfaction some of us find not just in writing, but in everything we do: we find joy in doing good work, no matter the job, no matter who notices. It is a view expressed with clarity and grace by the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, who identifies a "sense for style" in any art or endeavor as an aesthetic and, finally, moral appreciation for planned ends economically achieved:

> The administrator with a sense for style hates waste; the engineer with a sense for style economises his material; the artisan with a sense for style prefers good work. Style is the ultimate morality of mind.
>
> —Alfred North Whitehead, "The Aims of Education"

CREDITS

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