

From *The Elements of Style*

Tone

Do not inject opinion. We all have opinions about everything, and the temptation to toss them in is great. To air one's views gratuitously, however, is to imply that the demand for them is brisk, which may not be the case, and which, in any event, may not be relevant to the discussion. Place yourself in the background.

Do not affect a breezy manner. The breezy style is often the work of an egocentric, the person who imagines that everything that pops into his head is of general interest and that uninhibited prose creates high spirits and carries the day.

Do not overwrite. Rich, ornate prose is hard to digest, generally unwholesome, and sometimes nauseating.

Write in a way that comes naturally. Write in a way that comes easily and naturally to you, using words and phrases that come readily to hand.

Avoid fancy words. Avoid the elaborate, the pretentious, the coy, and the cute. Do not be tempted by a twenty-dollar word when there is a ten-center handy, ready, and able.

Put statements in positive form. Make definite assertions. Avoid tame, colorless, hesitating, noncommittal language. Statements qualified with unnecessary auxiliaries or conditionals sound irresolute.

Use the active voice. The active voice is usually more direct and vigorous than the passive.

Do not overstate. When you overstate, the reader will be instantly on guard, and everything that has preceded your overstatement as well as everything that follows it will be suspect in his mind because he has lost confidence in your judgment or your poise.

Avoid the use of qualifiers. *Rather, very, little, pretty*—these are the leeches that infest the pond of prose, sucking the blood of words.

Do not explain too much. It is seldom advisable to tell all.

Omit needless words. Vigorous writing is concise.

Use definite, specific, concrete language. Prefer the specific to the general, the definite to the vague, the concrete to the abstract. The greatest writers—Homer, Dante, Shakespeare—are effective largely because they deal in particulars and report the details that matter. Their words call up pictures.

Structure

Choose a suitable design and hold to it. A basic structural design underlies every kind of writing. Writing, to be effective, must follow closely the thoughts of the writer, but not necessarily in the order in which those thoughts occur.

Make the paragraph the unit of composition. The object of treating each topic in a paragraph by itself is, of course, to aid the reader. The beginning of each paragraph is a signal to him that new step in the development of the subject has been reached. As a rule, begin each paragraph either with a sentence that suggests the topic or with a sentence that helps the transition.

Revise and rewrite. Do not be afraid to seize whatever you have written and cut it to ribbons; it can always be restored to its original condition in the morning, if that course seems best. This is a common occurrence in all writing, and among the best writers.

Sentences

Express coordinate ideas in similar form. This principle, that of parallel construction, requires that expressions similar in content and function be outwardly similar. The likeness of form enables the reader to recognize more readily the likeness of content and function.

Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

the French, the Italians, the Spanish, and the Portuguese.

Keep related words together. Confusion and ambiguity result when words are badly placed.

Be clear. When you become hopelessly mired in a sentence, it is best to start fresh; do not try to fight your way through against the terrible odds of syntax.

Place the emphatic words of a sentence at the end.