

The write stuff

Three keys to better writing: Emphasize action, description, simplicity

By Marvin Olasky

The New York Times two weeks ago headlined a story, "Writing in Schools Is Found Both Dismal and Neglected." Use of the passive voice in a headline was itself dismal, but the *Times* recognition of a problem pushed me to write a column long promised to several WORLD readers who had asked for advice on how to write better.

I had put off that column because my advice is simple: *Read good writers. Write often. Don't use big words and fancy sentences. Use specific detail. Prefer nouns and strong verbs over adjectives and adverbs. Don't try to dress up your writing.* I thought that advice was just common sense, but recently I've found that it's not.

Apparently, some writing teachers give students points for "dressing up" their writing by using sentences beginning with "after," "while," or "because," clauses beginning with "who" or "which," and lots of adjectives and adverbs. One popular textbook gives this example of a sentence improved by dressing up: "The fox casually mentioned how pleased he would be to hear the crow sing." (The prized addition, "casually," makes the sentence worse, because it's redundant; a mention is casual.)

One fifth-grader I know received a low grade because his paragraph about a school trip lacked dress-ups. Here it is: "On Tuesday we visited NASA in Houston. My group built a rocket and went on a scavenger hunt. The next morning we rode the tram, had fun on the playscape, ate lunch, and watched an IMAX about the space station. On Thursday we hurried to the Museum of Health and Sciences and saw amazing and disgusting things, like the insides of a brain and a heart. Then we ate lunch and wandered around the gross museum."

That paragraph could be improved, but it cogently provided specific detail. The teacher, though, told the fifth-grade boy writer to use dress-ups. Here's his rewritten paragraph: "After traveling to NASA in Houston on Tuesday, my group excitedly built a stupendous rocket. While there we spent time scavenging. When the next morning dawned we merrily traveled on the tram and played happily on the playscape. Since it was lunchtime we ate delicious food and viewed a lively IMAX film. The next day we enjoyably galloped through the Museum of Health and Sciences, which displayed the insides of a brain and a heart, and then relished our food."

That paragraph received a high grade—but the writing seems like that of a precious British duchess rather than an American boy. If the student continues getting bad advice

like that, by the time he's in college he'll be ready to write essays that only a mediocre English professor might like, on payday.

Here's better advice from several generations of writers who dressed down those who say, dress up. Mark Twain: "When you catch adjectives, kill most of them—then the rest will be valuable. They weaken when they are close together; they give strength when they are wide apart." British poet F. L. Lucas: "Make clear connections between sentences.... Be simple. Omit needless words. Write less; rewrite more." Novelist John Gardner: "The abstract is seldom as effective as the concrete. 'She was distressed' is not as good as, even, 'She looked away.'"

Here's advice from critics like Sheridan Baker: "Never use a long word when you can find a short one.... Suspect yourself of wordiness whenever you see an *of*, a *which* or a *that*.... Pick up every sentence in turn, asking ourselves if we can possibly make it shorter." And Jacques Barzun: "Look for all fancy wordings and get rid of them."

Mediocre writers become good writers by becoming conscious of their dress-ups and slaying them. Writing guru William Zinsser advises, "Look for the clutter in your writing and prune it ruthlessly. Be grateful for everything you can throw away. Re-examine each sentence that you put on paper. Is every word doing new work? Can any thought be expressed with more economy? Is anything pompous or pretentious or faddish? Are you hanging on to something useless just because you think it's beautiful? Simplify. Simplify."

Please, teachers, do not try to get your students to write like 19th-century Englishmen. Instead, you and they should read a little book that has become a classic, Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*. Co-author William Strunk Jr. once wrote, "Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences."

What makes for good writing? Evocative images, provocative thoughts, action that creates tension without pretension.

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