The ideal is crispness: lucid, concise exposition of what it is the writer has to say. And that is all. No padding, no beating around the bush, no unnecessary circumlocutions. Straight to the point, the point made, then end.

What is it that we usually get? "It is interesting to note that the situation desiderated, as outlined above, as often as not fails for reasons that can only be explained after serious and thorough studies have been undertaken by experts in the field, about whom more will be said hereinafter." Abominations like these must be rooted out, but how? How can we help students and ourselves achieve the ideal, or a closer approximation to it?

For several years I have found considerable success in using an adaptation of the old "Harvard Daily Theme." Taking the basic format of the single page essay and its strict limitations, I assign a series of such papers in all of my undergraduate classes. Regardless of the topic, or whether students type or write out their papers, they are allowed only one page (double-spaced if typed) for these essays. After their initial groaning and complaining, students find that the one-page paper is not as difficult as they first thought, although it clearly requires them to sharpen both their thinking and their prose. This is all to the good. It also permits their instructor to assign more than one or two papers during the term in addition to regular examinations.

The more writing, the better, as we all realize. But the writing does not all have to come at the same time; indeed, it is better when it
comes in smaller amounts and more frequently. Every word counts in the one-page essay, and besides the distinct virtue of economy of style, students learn the related virtues of precision, point, and relevance. To help students in this effort, instructors may use the blue pencil unsparingly. In the process, they too will find ways to economize on verbiage, find the point that needs to be made, and make it.

Recommended text: Strunk and White, The Elements of Style.

An Awareness of Style: The Study of Language in E110

Cathleen S. Donnelly

Two and a half weeks into my first semester as a Freshman English instructor, I discovered that there is not often a causal relation between what the teacher teaches and what the student learns. The discrepancy often results from the inadequacy of one party or the other, but the basic problem is more complex than that. The difficulty teachers face is inherent. Teaching is an act; learning is a process. For teachers of composition, the problem is particularly acute. There is no foolproof formula for teaching writing, no guarantee that the student who knows grammar will be able to write a lucid paragraph. Good writing, to paraphrase Monroe Beardsley, is more than correctness.

Like most other first-semester instructors at the University of Delaware, I did not design E110, the course required of all freshman. I was provided with a syllabus and three texts. The course focused on particular rhetorical strategies as presented in James M. McCrimmon's Writing With a Purpose. Supplementary reading was taken from McQuade and Atwan's Popular Writing in America, and exercises were extracted from Scholes and Klaus' Elements of Writing. There was no unit dealing specifically with style included on the course syllabus and although I was wary of trying to deal with it and unsure how to approach it, I felt that some treatment of style was essential. I had graded two sets of essays and waged a week-long campaign against the dangling modifier when I realized that my students' problems were not generally mechanical or grammatical: not one paper had contained a dangling modifier. Rather, the problems were stylistic: the manner of expression was awkward, the sense of audience limited, the word choice imprecise, the generalizations extreme, the lack of detail abundant. Parroting the rules of style I had heard and ignored throughout high school and college seemed ineffective at best. I had visions of myself lecturing on the Five Steps to Fluid Prose and Graceful Transition and, at the first challenge, having to smile feebly and stammer, "Well . . . you know . . . rules are made to be broken." They do not need rules, I thought, they need practice. Let I was wary of requiring a great deal of written work and of straying too far from the course outline. The particular writing strategies presented--comparison/contrast, cause/effect, classification, and persuasion--provided an excellent framework within which I wanted to stay. I wanted to integrate and emphasize the stylistic concerns which presented themselves in the texts and in the reader rather than digressing.