

Let Me Make This Perfectly Clear:
Precise Writing in Freshman Composition

Scott G. Stevens

Due to the fact that an inordinate percentage of my academic apprentices had hitherto exhibited an onerous propensity toward propagating evasive, convoluted and diswarbulating prose in order to transmit the nebulous nuances of their cerebral faculties, I endeavored to inculcate them with the techniques to render their script more efficacious. Not only that, I wanted to teach my students to write with clarity and precision.

By the second quarter of the semester, all but a few of my Freshman Composition students could write grammatically acceptable, though not error-free essays. Most of my red ink was applied to misspelled words or unneeded commas. The dangling modifiers, sentence fragments, and subject-verb disagreements, which had characterized the earlier papers of my students, were now seldom to be found. It was time for me to demand more from my writers. I began to stress the importance of precise diction, logical development, vivid imagery, clear illustration, and adequate detail. I was asking the class to communicate with more precise, and thus more effective, prose.

I began with no intention of developing a formal, experimental lesson plan. I devoted several weeks to emphasizing, whenever possible, the importance of detail and illustration in formal writing. Although the students were preparing for an illustration essay that I was soon to assign them, they quickly realized that I expected them to reinforce their arguments with specific and relevant examples in all their essays.

I urged the class to select their words carefully and to elaborate their thoughts in detail. During a mini-lesson on semantics, the students classified various words into categories: abstract or concrete,

general or specific, figurative or literal. I recommended their choosing concrete, specific, and literal words whenever possible, but I also showed the appropriateness of abstract or figurative language for some rhetorical situations. I explained to the class that by using more specific nouns they could eliminate many "fattening" adjectives from their writing. I assigned a number of writing exercises to sharpen their abilities to explain with both detail and illustration.

During one class period, I spontaneously asked the class to remove and then describe one of their shoes in minute detail, treating it either as a concrete or an abstract object. (The students were given complete freedom to select which shoe, right or left, they wished to remove for study.) The exercise was very successful, producing a number of vividly descriptive paragraphs. Some students personified their shoes; others expressed what their particular shoes revealed about themselves. Throughout the following class meetings, I took every opportunity to remind the class of the importance of illustration and detail. And, if only to silence their nagging instructor, the students began using their newly acquired skills to elaborate their statements and thereby clarify their ideas.

With five weeks remaining in the semester, I began to implement a formal lesson plan on precise writing. I thought it best to start my lesson by proscribing, by telling my students what I did not want from them. Throughout the semester, I had mimeographed sample sentences and paragraphs from recent class essays for the students to edit. They had responded favorably to these opportunities to find and correct the mechanical errors in each other's sentences. After the class had written their classification essays, I decided to select a number of sample sentences to be analyzed by the class in terms of precision. For each sentence I asked the class the following questions: What is the author saying in this sentence? What makes his meaning unclear? How would you improve the sentence? The students quickly noticed how wordiness, clichés, and inappropriate or inaccurate diction tend to bog down or distort a writer's intended meaning. I silently rejoiced to discover an opportunity to justify more concretely the need for correct grammar as well by showing the class how faulty parallelism, awkward word order, and confusing subject-object reference also blurred a writer's message.

Since I was intending to use George Orwell's "Politics and the English Language" as a basic framework for a few of my lectures on precise writing, I decided to mimeograph a number of Orwell's fine examples of imprecise prose. My students were amazed to discover that professional writers could express themselves with such bombastic baloney, to paraphrase one student's sentiments. We entertained ourselves for a while trying to decipher the inflated jargon and then began analyzing the inadequacies of each passage. The students were able to identify many of the same weaknesses of style that had characterized their own sample sentences. They were, however, able to recognize a new strain of the insidious disease of imprecision, and they labelled it "empty imagery." I listed a number of what Orwell calls "dying metaphors," e.g., "tow the line" or "fishing in troubled waters," and the class added some more examples to the list. We agreed that only creativity could eradicate empty imagery. When I said, "Gerald Ford has two left feet," the students shrugged their shoulders with indifference, but when I expressed the same thought with new imagery, e.g., "Gerald Ford is as graceful as a ballet dancer in snowshoes," the response was more encouraging.

I next addressed the problem of "filler" or "padding" phrases--hackeyed expressions that supplant meaning with length. Orwell wrote that modern "prose consists less and less of words chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more and more of phrases tacked together like the sections of a pre-fabricated henhouse."¹ Americans do seem to think more in phrases than in individual words. Certainly we are learning to read in phrases, for Evelyn Wood's clustering technique is now being used by millions of people. Dennis Rygiel indicates a need for writers to re-learn the ability to see words as individual units with individual meanings.² Rygiel quotes George Turner as saying, "'it is the educated writer who learns to think in words, weighing the contribution of each element in sequences which are tailored to the occasion, enormously multiplying possible combinations of items by working with smaller parts.'"³ I felt that the writers in my class could also profit from a little re-learning.

I did not bother to explain all of the above to my students. I merely told them-how much more clearly and succinctly they could express themselves by abandoning meaningless filler phrases. I wrote a number of such phrases on the blackboard, asking the class to give me a one word translation for each. The students were initially dumbfounded. They knew of no other way to write "due to the fact that." They had used the phrase so often that they had grown indifferent to its meaning. I finally told them "because" would be an adequate substitute. I tried again with "in order to." This time a few students answered, and "to" was acknowledged as being the more economical way of expressing the same thought.

Suddenly the class revolted. They liked their filler phrases. "Why," shouted one student, "is your shorter method any better? What virtue is there in brevity?" Before I could answer another student cried, "Filler phrases permit us to be creative and to pad out our pa--." The student stopped short and smiled, as did the others. They had caught themselves. The writing of filler phrases was not an act of creation, but one of imitation that saved them the trouble of thinking of the precise words with which to express their ideas. And, yes, filler phrases served to "pad" their papers, providing ammunition for their shovels. The students had remembered something from our previous discussions after all. I recommenced our translations, receiving the cooperation of the entire class. "Brought to a satisfactory conclusion" became "resolved"; "give grounds for" became "justify"; "render inoperative" became "break." I was doing less of the talking, and the class was doing more of the learning. I followed the exercise with an assignment, asking my students to bring to class newspaper or magazine articles containing any of the following errors of imprecision: wordiness, pretentious diction, inaccurate diction, filler phrases, and empty imagery.

My initial progress was short-lived, for I soon reached an impasse with my lesson plan and did not know how to proceed. My students' writing had improved slightly, but I continued to be disappointed by what I read. I knew it was not enough for me to tell the students to write with greater clarity or to show them examples of precise prose. But what else could I do? Finally, I played back a tape recording I had made of a fifty-minute "rap" session with the class. We had been sharing our thoughts on the various problems we had encountered in our own processes of writing when one girl said, "I usually gather a lot of thoughts--often very good thoughts--in my head, and after some outlining I begin to write my paper. But I

always discover--usually after it's been graded--that somehow very few of my great thoughts had gotten on my paper, that somehow the clarity and even the logic of my ideas had become all screwed up by the time I had finished writing. And I wasn't even aware of it happening. Do you know what I mean?" Her classmates apparently understood, for many of them expressed the same sentiments. And as I turned off the tape machine, I understood too.

My students needed a few conscious-raising exercises. It appeared to me that they were not thinking enough about how they wanted to express themselves while they were writing. Yes, many of them had been doing some form of prewriting in the way of outlines or rough drafts. But nothing was to stop them once they began their final copies. They simply opened the flood gates of their minds and covered the pages with words. Only after the thing was done did they bother to see what they had created. They had to learn to check themselves at every stop along the way.

I drew up a list of fourteen "questions for the precise writer"--some of which were suggested by Orwell--and gave each student a copy along with the following instructions:

Since we are beginning our unit on persuasion, I want you to write me a persuasive essay. Consider your audience to be Jimmy Carter, and persuade him to take a particular action to resolve the Iranian crisis. You may choose an epistolary, i.e., letter, format for your paper. But your assignment is not that simple. For every one or two sentences of your own, I want you to select one of the fourteen questions and write it where your last sentence left off. Then write a response to the question and proceed as though you had not been interrupted. Use as many of the questions on the handout as possible.

Despite my elaborate directions, my very astute students grasped my meaning and began to write. Following are a few excerpts from their paragraphs:

1) The Iranian situation has completely overwhelmed me. The United States has lost its clout. (How can I be more convincing, more persuasive?) Just the fact that college students in a Middle Eastern country can overtake a United States embassy illustrates my point. The embassy is international property and should not be touched even during times of war. (Do I need an example to illustrate my point?) During World War II the Japanese ambassador to the United States was told to leave, but he and his staff were not seized by the government. . . .

2) Mr. President, at this point in time, the Iranian crisis has reached a pinnacle of absurdity as far as the Americans are concerned. (Have I used any filler phrases? oops, yes: "at this point in time" and "as far as the Americans are concerned." Will edit later.) The Shah has just. . .

3) . . . I support you in not returning the Shah to Iran. (Is there another word or group of words that would express my meaning more clearly? Yes.) I support your decision not to return the Shah to Iran because I believe that if we agree to. . .

4) The Iranians' threat of killing the hostages is keeping the mighty United States on its knees. (Do my metaphors create clear, striking images? Yes, I think my metaphors can be visualized.) If the Iranians don't give up the American embassy in Iran, then the U.S. should use any military action necessary to get back the captives. (Am I making any sense? Yes.) I think a show of strength would help. . .

I heard a number of deep groans as the students first began writing; they did not like the idea of interrupting themselves to answer questions. One student looked up and said, "How would you feel if you were Mark Spitz swimming a thousand-yard free-style race while Howard Cosell pursued you in a motorboat trying to get you to answer interview questions?" "Good imagery!" I replied, "Now back to work." After a few minutes, however, the silence of the class indicated to me that the writers were no longer disconcerted by these intruding interrogatives. The quality of the resulting papers surpassed my expectations. The questions had apparently controlled and guided the writers' thoughts, for I found myself reading a number of well-written paragraphs.

Almost all of my students treated the questions seriously, and they either answered them directly (examples 2 & 4) or responded to them by editing their papers accordingly (examples 1 & 3). The questions acted as a warning system, directing and focusing and shaping the students' papers as they were being written. As the students were required, at each step of the way, to re-examine their prose, they began, perhaps for the first time, to recognize and react to their particular writing weaknesses. For example, after Andy had been directed by question three to check his diction, he must have re-thought a number of his points, for from that point in his essay his hitherto confusing argument and sloppy prose improved markedly. Dave eliminated a sentence alluding to the upcoming Presidential election after question eight made him notice the irrelevancy of the idea to his argument. A few students used the exercise to focus on specific writing problems. Since Jean had often failed to elaborate her points in previous papers, she repeated the question, "Have I explained myself thoroughly, or do I need to elaborate?" a number of times to push herself to complete her thoughts.

A brief analysis of one of the papers may be helpful. One of my poorest writers composed the following:

Dear President Carter,

- 1 If you haven't noticed, there is a problem in
- Iran. (Do I need an example to illustrate my point?)
- 3 There are forty-nine people being held as hostages
- by Iranian students. Iran and Khoumeini are backing
- 5 these students, so it is not just a question of
- getting the hostages away safely; it is a question
- 7 of nation versus nation. (How can I be more convincing,
- more persuasive?) Is it fair to put these people's
- 9 lives in jeopardy for one person's life? (Am I making
- any sense?) The Iranians want the Shah back to
- 11 punish or to do with him as they feel they should.
- If this is the only way to assure the freeing of the

11 punish or to do with him as they feel they should.
13 If this is the only way to assure the freeing of the
15 hostages, then it should be done. (Is my punctuation
17 or word order confusing my meaning?) *Ἴ ὑπόθεσις ἡ
19 ἐνθάδε ἀσπασίμων ἐστὶν ἢ ἐνθὺς ἐπὶ τὸ ἐπιβλεῖν ἢ ὅτι ἄλλοι
21 ἐπὶ ἀλλοῦ ἀνὴρ ἀσπασίμων ἐπὶ ἑαίῃ ὁρᾷται ἢ.* (Is what I'm
23 saying relevant to my argument?) A solution to the
crisis is not easy to come by, but sitting, waiting,
and trying to talk it out is the most reasonable
approach. (Am I saying anything?) So do what must
be done, but if this is going to last for months,
is it not more reasonable to let the Shah out of the
country and have the hostages returned?

By drawing a line through each of the questions one may read this coherent and well-organized paragraph without interruption. The author has made a few grammatical errors, and his writing is by no means eloquent or sophisticated. Nevertheless, he has clearly expressed his central idea, i.e., the Shah's life should be sacrificed so that the lives of the hostages might be spared.

The student has not directly answered the questions; rather, he has responded to them, permitting them to direct the course of his paper. The question on line two prompts the writer to state the problem he is addressing. On line nine he asks himself if he is making any sense and realizes that he has not identified the "one person" who is placing the lives of forty-nine others in jeopardy. He corrects the oversight by naming the Shah in the following sentence. The question beginning on line thirteen prompts the writer to avoid a run-on by changing the comma at the end of line eleven to a period and capitalizing the "I" in "If." The student eliminates the sentence beginning on line fourteen after determining that it is irrelevant to his argument (see question beginning on line sixteen). His final question, "Am I saying anything?" reminds him to restate his position and to wind up the paragraph. He has, in a sense, led himself by the hand. Perhaps he has learned to take his time and to write more carefully.

I was so pleased by the results of my little experiment that I momentarily considered turning it into some sort of behavioral experiment. I thought of repeating the experiment ten or fifteen times, ringing a bell and then placing the list of questions before the students. Each time a student wrote down a question on his paper I would nod or smile. I recovered my sanity in time to realize that as much as the plan might improve my students' writing, their papers would be rendered illegible from their having drivelled at the sound of the bell.

But there was no reason for me to repeat the exercise. The class quickly discerned the method behind my madness. They realized that I merely wanted them to be critical of what they wrote as they wrote it. They learned that precise writing required unrelenting thoroughness.

I cannot quantify the success of my lesson plans. My students handed in one last persuasion essay after they concluded their study of precise writing. Of the many papers tucked away in my files, George Orwell would probably have been most satisfied with this last set. The papers were relatively free of excess verbal baggage, expressing their authors' ideas with clarity and detail. It must be admitted that my students had been gradually maturing as writers throughout the semester. They had improved with each successive essay--a strong indication that, once again, it is practice, and no lesson plans, that makes one perfect. Nevertheless, my

efforts do deserve an honorable mention." Andy has finally acquiesced to my plea that he forsake his beloved "due to the fact that." Kathy is beginning to master her impatience, for she appears willing to elaborate and clarify one point before moving on to another. My students have not yet forgotten my fourteen questions; I am satisfied. They have learned to describe the act of writing with new imagery. They no longer see themselves as the guardians of flood gates, determining whether the stream of consciousness will trickle or gush forth. Rather, they are builders--creative yet practical. At each stage of construction they must ask themselves; is it strong enough to support more? Have I used the proper materials? Will it be beautiful or at least functional? I hope I have taught my students to proceed more carefully, but I pray I have not dampened their courage.

Notes

¹George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," in Eight Modern Essayists, ed. William Smart, 2nd edition. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973), p. 229.

²Dennis Rygiel, "Word Study and Composition," CCC, 29, No. 3 (1978), 287.

³Rygiel, p. 288.

Questions for the Precise Writer

- 1) Am I making any sense?
- 2) Is there another word or group of words that would express my meaning more concisely?
- 3) Is there another word or group of words that would express my meaning more clearly?
- 4) Do my metaphors create clear, striking images?
- 5) Do I need an example to illustrate my points?
- 6) Have I used any filler phrases that I can do without?
- 7) Have I explained my point thoroughly, or do I need to elaborate?
- 8) Is what I am saying relevant to my argument?
- 9) Is my punctuation or word order confusing my meaning?
- 10) What are some possible objections that the reader might make to my argument?
- 11) Is my argument logical or plausible?
- 12) How can I be more convincing, more persuasive?
- 13) Do I need to rethink this point?
- 14) Am I saying anything?