

Ten Rules for Writing Readably

ARN TIBBETTS

Abstract—A readable style is created by proper handling of ideas, words, phrases, clauses, logic, syntax, and personality. Every word should be written for somebody. These rules tell how to create readable writing: (1) Read some great writing every day; (2) use genuinely familiar words; (3) break sentences into clearly defined units; (4) use signals in sentences (because, so, but); (5) make the subjects and verbs absolutely clear; (6) balance sentences with parallel structures; (7) use nouns sparingly, especially as modifiers; (8) make sentences answer Who does what?; (9) surprise the reader with variety; and (10) do not hesitate to break a rule or create a new one.

THESE rules form a set of suggestions that I use for all my writing courses, graduate and undergraduate. I also use them, or most of them, when acting as a consultant for public and private organizations.

PREMISES

First, some premises. In my teaching, I usually do not state any premises at the beginning. Instead we dive into the rules and examples, getting a feel for editing techniques. We sandwich the premises in with the rules wherever they seem to fit best. This helps to avoid lecturing and artificiality. The main point is not to separate theory from practice but to let them develop from each other as we inspect and discuss examples. Here, I put the premises in a lump at the beginning because they are easier to deal with that way.

Readability is not one thing, but many; not simple, but complex. A readable style is created by a number of things—by proper handling of ideas, words, phrases, clauses, logic, syntax, rhythm, personality. And by voices, by the sound and shape of all these in your ear. Also in your mouth, because if a style is to be readable it should also be utterable. This is another way of saying that unreadable writing is, literally, unspeakable.

If you write speakably, you will have a good chance of writing readably. Never write a sentence that twists your tongue, strains your throat, or gives you no place in it to breathe. Read all your stuff aloud, and listen. If necessary, as one fine writer told me three decades ago, take voice lessons.

Style is found mainly in the English sentence, which is relatively controllable. Reduced to written form, your ideas have a tendency to become ruly. After all, you have imprisoned them in the small, narrow space of a sentence, which in size is ordinarily only a few inches long and less than a quarter-inch high:

Here is an English sentence.

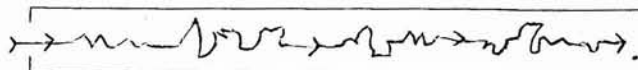
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Formerly an Engineer, the author is an Editor and Professor of English at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 608 S. Wright St., Urbana, IL 61801, (217) 333-0458.

It is greatly to the writer's advantage that sentences are placed in small, narrow jails. The ideas thus imprisoned can be manipulated—combined, separated, shortened, lengthened, switched, taken out, put in. The jail forces the sentence to keep its basic outer form, but you as writer control almost everything else about it.

A part of your control is created by a strange truth, one which is very important but usually unrecognized by writers. This is that the English sentence is read from left to right. "Dog cat the a bit" is meaningless, but "The dog bit a cat" makes sense. What does the left-to-right premise mean?

It means, first, that reader and writer have something in common. They both start at the left of the sentence and fight their way rightwards through its narrow prison:



Reader and writer are in jail together. And the more they cooperate, the more easily they can move together through the complex masses of verbal symbols and levels of grammar that we call writing.

Second, the left-to-right premise means that a writer should supply what the reader predicts. Suppose you write, The _____ said something _____ when he _____ his thumb with a _____. Because the readers of this sentence are familiar with the grammatical "code," they can rather easily predict what kinds of words might appear in the empty spaces. To write readably, you should be predictable on all the overlapping levels in the grammatical code. A few brief examples:

- Subordinate clauses are predicted by subordinating signs: *How* we reward the winner of the race *that* was unscheduled is up to the committee chairman *who* made the error.
- Nouns are predicted by articles and adjectives: *the* dog, *a* rat, *great* poet, "*Silent Running*" (movie title).
- A verb is predicted by the appearance of a subject: A woman _____ us that she _____ that job.

Such examples give us only the beginning of a discussion of predictability as it is built into the language. It would take a book to do justice to the subject.

I will discuss one more method of gaining control over the sentence—*chunking*. Ordinarily, all but the shortest messages shoved (from left to right) through the jail of the sentence should be broken up into units so that the reader can process the information. As a result of chunking, the writer creates a sentence unit which can be a single word, phrase, clause, or recognizable cluster of these. For some reason, most of us tend to write long sentence units that the reader has trouble processing:

There have been no flu deaths from even the most virulent types of the disease for the past ten years in the county.

