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INTRODUCTION



When I spoke with the editors at *Writer's Digest* about this book, they were clear on what they wanted: "Concentrate on style, on uniqueness of the author's presentation," they suggested. "Writers shouldn't assume a literal approach, they should treat . . . well, grammar, for instance, more broadly, more flexibly."

"This isn't a book about grammar," I reminded them.

"But it's about style and attitude, and grammar can't be ignored."

Style and attitude have been the beacons of my attention, but grammar approach and usage are part of the circle of light. This book is about style and flair and the writing of good prose; it shows grammar technique and attitude as "tools," not as ends in themselves. I'd like to think I've urged a way of thinking, not a rote application of iron-fast rules about punctuation and syntax. Be flexible, I've wanted to say. Think imaginatively.

And avoid those big writing blunders that can squeeze the life out of what you write. For instance, if all of us followed the same grammar rules and thought in the same grammar terms, there would be little distinction in our styles, in the *way* we write. One piece of writing would read and sound like every other piece of writing, and instead of individuality, there would be only a collective *we*!

Fortunately, the demands of style and individuality allow you to avoid the straightjacket of rules and formulas. It comes back to attitude, of course, where you become what you think you are,

and if you strive to develop an *individual* voice because you're willing to be more flexible and imaginative, then that's what will eventually appear. Adhering to all the rules—grammar and otherwise—will prevent you from exerting your individuality because you'll certainly sound like everyone else. But attitude is more than seeking to break rules simply because they are there; you must have a reason beyond the urge to be different. There must be *purpose* in what you do. Your style must benefit, and so must the reader's sense of enjoyment.

A running presence through this book will be my conviction that readers not only read words on a page but “hear” them as well. That is, as the reader's eyes fall on the words her ears will pick up the sound of the words, too. Some call it the “music” of words, and it can't be overlooked when you're working on style. One way of understanding the influence of rules—grammar or otherwise—on the way you write is to see how they affect the word sounds. Will italics, generally used for emphasis, also change the point of view, for example, and if so, how effectively? Does capitalizing an entire phrase and running the words together cause the words to scream out at the reader? Questions like these are what the thinking writer must pose to herself, and the answers will determine whether the word sounds are sour or sweet.

Attitude is what you're after, remember. Style is what you hope to produce.

Flexibility and imagination are the keys, and the door to better writing can be opened ...

If you're ready to turn the handle.



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DON'T ADD ADVERBS AND ADJECTIVES TO PRETTIFY YOUR PROSE



Some years ago the fine short story writer Raymond Carver offered recollections about learning to write from teacher and novelist John Gardner. "I remember him as being very patient," Carver wrote in *Fires*, "wanting me to understand what he was trying to show me, telling me over and over how important it was to have the right words saying what I wanted them to say. Nothing vague or blurred, no smoky-glass prose... He made me see that absolutely everything was important in a short story. It was of consequence where the commas and periods went."

This attention to detail is precisely why Raymond Carver acquired a reputation as a short story master; rarely, if ever, was a word or a series of words purposeless and uncertain. His prose was tight and emphatic, and his phrases never dangled or were superfluous. His craftsmanship honed his work to its essence.

There aren't many Raymond Carvers in this world, but each of us can learn some important things from the way he approached his writing. Sentence structure and punctuation were crucial, the proper word was essential, and what was omitted as important as what was inserted.

Which brings us to adverbs and adjectives. Clearly, Carver would cast a suspicious eye on these forms of speech because many times they add little to what is already on the page. Frequently, they are not important, and in a short story, that means they have no business there.

Many inexperienced writers throw in “pretty” words to make their prose more dramatic and meaningful. But such cosmetic touch-up often turns out to be redundant or simply uninspiring. Take adverbs such as “lovingly” or “speedily” or “haltingly.” They each point to some circumstance or emotion or movement, yet do they offer solid impact?

He whispered to her *lovingly* ...

She zoomed around the oval *speedily* ...

He stuttered *haltingly* ...

In the last two instances, the verbs themselves provide the acting and the emotion in the sentences; the adverbs merely underscore what the verb has already described. Is it possible to “zoom” without doing so speedily ... or to “stutter” without doing it in halting fashion? These are redundancies, and they do little for the prose except to give it an awkward cast.

The stone sank *quickly* ...

The fire truck bell clanged *loudly*...

How else would a stone sink but quickly? How else would a fire truck bell clang but loudly? The key is to gauge the relationship of the adverb and the verb it modifies: Are they saying essentially the same thing? If so, there is a redundancy, and the adverb should come out—fast!

It isn't only redundancies that adverbs can generate. They also encourage lazy writing. Take the earlier example, “he whispered to her lovingly ...” I suppose he could whisper many things, including words, which are loving, but somehow the adverbial tail seems a lazy way out. By using “lovingly” the writer is really—and we've heard this before—*telling* instead of showing. Far more dramatic would be to write:

He whispered words of love ... *my sweet, dear lover, my angel* ... he purred his contentment, his joy ...

No adverb here, and the drama is enhanced. I've shown those things that he whispered lovingly, and the reader has to be more involved in the story.

It has become a cliché to use the adverbial tail time and time again. In addition to minimizing the dramatic effect of the action, it grinds on the reader's ear (remember, readers "hear" as well as read). All those words ending in "-ly," not doing much for the sentence, not creating much of a word picture ... Who could blame readers for wondering why the words were there in the first place?

And who could blame these same readers for laying the book aside? "Most adverbs," says William Zinsser, "are unnecessary." He's right. And when it's important to prettify your prose, there are better ways to do it.

Not with adjectives, though. These suffer the same general malady as adverbs—usually they are too numerous, they clutter up our writing, and they can turn a deft phrase into a ponderous mass. Consider:

The house had an empty feeling to it, the air stale with undefined kitchen odors ...

This is a tight, dramatic description. But what happens when I add more adjectives to "prettify" it?

The dark, dreary house had an empty, suspicious feel to it, the thick air stale and sour with undefined, scary kitchen odors ...

Do all these adjectives add much at all? An empty house implies something strange and sinister, so do I need "suspicious"? Do I also need "dark, dreary"? An empty house might be these things as well, but I'm not unmindful that a sinister house may also be bright and sunlit (though it does stretch my credibility

a bit). At least, though, I should dispense with one of the two adjectives, either “dark” or “dreary” because taken together, they are a well-recognized cliché ... and they almost mean the same thing.

But note the other bits of overwriting: if the air were stale, wouldn't it also be thick? And wouldn't it be sour, as well?

Mark Twain had it right: “As to the Adjective: when in doubt, strike it out.” The tendency is to try and beef up the noun being modified. It's human, I suppose; most of us can never be *that* sure we're getting our point across. Decorate that noun some more, your fragile self-confidence hears. Don't run the risk the prose will fall flat because it isn't distinctive enough.

Ah ...you think, a little word or two, here and there ... it'll catch the reader's attention, it'll keep her reading ...

Well, yes and no. Yes, it might certainly catch the reader's attention, but never underestimate the kind of attention that could be. Try *negative* attention, the kind that might push the reader away from the prose. Consider:

He was cheered by the *friendly* smiles ...

He spied a group of *dirty* street-urchins ...

Do the adjectives “friendly” and “dirty” add anything to the sentences? Read the words without adjectives ... Now read them with the adjectives inserted. Is anything more provided by including the adjectives? They contain the thought that's already in the noun they modify, so they aren't doing anything for the sentences except taking up space. Aren't smiles usually “friendly”? Aren't street-urchins usually “dirty”? Why the adjectives, then?

The short answer is that you're trying to prettify your prose, to give it a lushness that will settle on the reader. Adjectives are a way of lengthening your sentences and providing a more complicated word picture, and this, in turn, will intrigue the reader

because there will seem to be substance in the prose. The reader will experience more, and hence, the reader will enjoy it more.

But misplaced adjectives can do as much damage as botched-up syntax. If the adjectives are there only to prettify the prose, they should be eliminated. The key is, adjectives should be used only when they highlight something the noun can't highlight. For example:

He slipped into the *darkened* alley ...

Not all alleys are dark, so now you know this one will be. But suppose this had read:

He slipped into the *narrow* alley ...

Alleys are usually narrow (if they aren't narrow, they're called streets or roads), so the adjective isn't telling any more than is offered by the noun. This is "prettifying" the prose, and it isn't pretty at all. Reach for adjectives that give more information than can already be found in the noun—when, in fact, an adjective should be used at all. Frankly, most adjectives are not needed. What benefits they offer are usually much less than the havoc they create.

Some years ago, a wise man (with perhaps a sexist bent) said, "pick adjectives the way you would diamonds or a mistress ..."

Carefully, he meant, so carefully.