Plain English: The Remaining Problems

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Those who must write clear, readable sentences now have access to about 90% of everything they need to know to write those sentences. That knowledge can be encapsulated in three principles: (1) Express crucial actions as verbs; (2) locate the participants of those actions in the subjects of the verbs; (3) arrange information in those sentences so that older, more familiar precedes newer, less familiar. But if some scholarly knowledge is available, other needed information is not. We know relatively little about the nature of form. More importantly, we knw relatively little about how best to teach the knowledge we do have. And most importantly, we know less yet about how to train those responsible for managing the prose of others. There is, though, one crucial piece of certain knowledge that takes precedent over all the rest: before we can train those in an organization how to write plain English, the highest levels of management must make it clear by their active participation in the program that clear communication is their highest priority.

Not too long ago, this item appeared in the *New York Times* News of the Week in Review, at the end of a report on litigation over GM's X-cars and their brake problems:

> In a recent report, the General Accounting Office . . . found that public recall notices are difficult to understand, which may contribute to the poor consumer participation — about 50 percent — in recall programs. (March 6, 1983)

Given our level of national literacy, the GAO's concern is probably not misplaced. I suspect they had in mind recall letters such as this one, which I in fact received:

(1) A defect which involves the possible failure of a frame support plate
(2) may exist on your vehicle. This plate (front suspension pivot bar
(3) support plate) connects a portion of the front suspension to the
(4) vehicle frame, and its failure could affect vehicle directional
(5) control, particularly during heavy brake application. In addition,
(6) your vehicle may require adjustment service to the hood secondary
(7) catch system. The secondary catch may be misaligned so that the hood
(8) may not be adequately restrained to prevent hood fly-up in the event
(9) the primary latch is inadvertently left unengaged. Sudden hood fly-up
(10) beyond the secondary catch while driving could impair driver

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(11) visibility. In certain circumstances, occurrence of either of the
(12) above conditions could result in vehicle crash without prior warning.

While I found alarming the news of my possible "crash without prior warning," the quality of the text was only a little less so, since I could imagine someone less than entirely literate trying to get through it, discarding it, and increasing, however slightly, *my* chances of confronting that person's episode of acute hood flyup.

Now there is no mystery why this letter is so badly written. The remote causes have to do with the corporation's twin fears over its customers' anxiety and its own liability: the manufacturer wanted to cover itself against lawsuits, but not enough to risk alarming possible repeat buyers. The writers also probably had to deal with language mandated by the government and with the difficulty of writing documents by committee. To speculate whether its motives might also have included minimizing the costs of a massive recall is perhaps unnecessarily cynical.

The proximate cause of this obscurity, however, is also perfectly clear: The writers systematically, perhaps deliberately, constructed a document that violated three fundamental principles of clear sentences. In almost every instance, the writers expressed critical action not in verbs but in abstract nominalizations, deleted agency, and buried the most significant information in the middle of sentences. As a result, the text became abstract, impersonal, and cognitively demanding. Here is what I mean. On the left are the verbs in the passage; in the middle are the actions, on the right are all the actions expressed as verbs:

	Verbs	*Actions as nouns*	*Actions as verbs*
(1)	involve		
(1)		failure	fail
(2)	may exist		
(3)	connects		connect
(4)		failure	fail
(4)	could affect		
(4)		directional control	not steer
(5)		brake application	brake
(6)	may require		
(6)		adjustment service	adjust
(7)	may be misaligned		not align
(8)	may not be restrained		not restrain
(8)	to prevent		not prevent
(8)		fly-up	fly up
(9)	is left unengaged		not engage
(9)		fly-up	fly up
(10)		driving	drive
(10)	could impair		
(11)		visibility	not see
(11)		occurrence	occur

(12)	could result		
(12)		crash	crash
(12)		warning	not warn

In almost every case, the writers expressed the potentially damaging part of their story in nominalizations and passives, and with three exceptions (*your vehicle,* twice; *driver visibility),* deleted all references to the cast of characters. If we merely undo those three operations — if we express crucial actions as verbs, make the verbs active, and restore the cast of characters in their subjects — the passage becomes not just more readable, but appropriately more threatening:

> Your car may have a defective part. If this part fails, you will not be able to steer, especially if you brake hard. We may also have misaligned the secondary catch on your hood. If you don't engage the primary latch, your hood could fly up. If the part fails or your hood flies up, you could crash.

To edit in this way requires a very slight level of skill and judgment. And having said that, you will understand why I was not pleased to read the sentence that concluded the *Times* article: "The agency has given a linguist five months and $23,000 to write an understandable form letter." Somewhere in the bureaucratic bowels of the Federal government there stirred an impulse toward a scientific, empirical, *data*-based argument that letters such as this one are less than entirely reader-friendly. It is an impulse by no means foolish, or even contemptible. But it is a great waste of the taxpayer's money. And it is a striking bit of evidence of how incompetent some are in their inability to read a text, recognize that it is marginally comprehensible, and to say so without needless statistical support. We do not need five *minutes* to rewrite this letter, much less $23,000. We do not need five months of testing to recognize that by applying almost mechanically a few simple principles of style, we have produced something entirely comprehensible.

In fact, I would like to make a claim that some of my more research-minded colleagues may find outrageous: At the level of sentence structure, we know about 90% of all we need to know to write plain English. And it does not include formulae by Flesch or Gunning or Dale-Chall or any of the legion of others who have reduced readability to numbers. For all *practical* purposes, we need only three simple principles of prose discourse:

(1) Express *crucial* actions as verb.
(2) Name in the subject of the verb one of the cast of characters involved in the action, the *agent* of the action, if possible.
(3) Put at the beginning of your sentence that information which links the sentence to what has gone before or which is relatively more familiar to your audience than anything else in the sentence; put at the end that information which is relatively more complex, less familiar, less predictable.

The first principle invites the second, because once you have arranged your information around specific verbs, you are more likely to make the subject of the verb one of the participants — usually the agent — in the action. And this second principle reflects the third, because the cast of characters is the most familiar component in any story. If they are put into the subject of the sentence, the newer information will by default fall out closer to the end.

I will simply assert — flatly — that any discourse that follows these three principles will be significantly more readable than discourse that does not. Such discourse may have other problems of style: unfamiliar vocabulary, interruptions, excessively multiplied clauses, confusing negatives. But I will simply assert again that these problems are less likely to appear in prose that meets the three criteria. Readability tests that measure word length, sentence length, etc., merely record the *symptoms* of overly complex prose. The *etiology* lies in the systematic dislocation of action away from verbs, agents away from subjects, and familiar information away from the beginning of the sentence.

Those who would demand numbers to verify their response are like a person lying in bed, shivering, vomiting, wracked by spasms of the gut who, when asked if he were sick, answered, "I don't know, I haven't taken my temperature yet."

In schematic terms, the principles can be collapsed into a hierarchical array:

topic	comment
old	new

subject	verb	object
agent	action	—

Figure 1.

Express familiar information in the Topic of the sentence (usually, but not always the subject). In these sentences, *style* is the topic, but in neither case the subject: *As for style, there is much to say. Style I know very little about.* Express newer, less familiar, more complex information in the Comment of the sentence, in that part of the sentence that follows the Topic. Use the Subject to name the Agent (or at least one of the cast of characters), and use the verb to express the crucial action involving that character. The rest of the sentence will for the most part take care of itself.

Now it is true that there are a good many other things about the nature of discourse about which we know very little. We do not know very much about how writers communicate their intentions. We know relatively little about how pre-existing knowledge influences how we read. We know relatively little about how the *reader's* intention in reading influences how he or she reads. We do not know the relative importance and interplay of the different components of discourse that contribute to a sense of form. In fact, we don't really know how we get from one sentence to the next, how we fill in what is not said. In fact, we are rather in the dark about the whole concept of coherence in dis-

course. But even if we do not know as much as we would like about these matters, we know enough to create documents more readable and usable than that automobile recall letter. And we should know enough not to have to test the revised one.

Yet even if we do know 90% of what we need to create readable, usable documents, we are, I think, ignorant of about 90% of what we need to know to teach, to communicate, to get people to learn and use this knowledge. For example, what is it that makes some among us genuinely unable to tell the difference between these sentences:

> This agreement may be terminated by either party without cause upon thirty days written notice to the other party. Further provided that such termination would not be effective to terminate any Advisory Agreement or to terminate any commitments made by the Bank as agent for an investor with termination of obligations under such latter Agreements or commitments to be terminated as provided in the Advisory Agreement and the commitment.
>
> Either party may terminate this agreement without cause 30 days after it notifies the other party in writing. However, if either party wishes to terminate the Advisory Agreement or any commitments made by the Bank as agent for an investor, the party must observe the provisions they contain.

In every one of our writing programs, some participants seem intrinsically unable to distinguish between clear and unclear writing, or if they can, unable to fashion a sentence, even with help, that improves substantially on a terrible example.

There are more complex issues. We all need the technical vocabulary, tone of voice, that makes us sound like one another's professional peers. We often disparage it, but to what degree is it in fact a psychologically or rhetorically effective device? With young professionals not yet thoroughly socialized into a field, it serves a perfectly apparent psychological purpose. This was perhaps best expressed by a very new lawyer in a writing program we had just completed. He said, without the slightest trace of irony, "We've just spent three years learning to sound like lawyers, and now you want us to sound like ordinary people."

Professional dialects serve a rhetorical purpose, despite the more general abuse they receive in the popular press. But what are the limits? How do we best approach the problem of what is essentially bi-dialectalism? Indeed, the research on the range of professional languages, the range of professional argumentation, is just beginning to become a substantial field.

And *when* do we teach all of this? The stereotypical argument at every level in the process of education is that the teachers at the prior level did not do their job, did not teach their students what *we* (at whatever level "we" might be) think they should be taught. Thus teachers of freshman English deplore high school education, faculty in advanced courses deplore freshman English, graduate schools deplore undergraduate education, and professionals regularly deplore the quality of graduates joining their ranks. We might conclude

that if those high school teachers had just done their job, this paper would be irrelevant.

In fact, there is an increasing body of evidence arguing for the proposition that one cannot learn complex activities like writing, problem solving, critical thinking, argumentation, etc., as generic skills. The skills of a good writer, problem solver, critical thinker, or teacher of rhetoric are so deeply enmeshed in a total understanding of the field itself, so tightly woven in and around sheer knowledge about a subject matter, that we cannot reasonably expect to graduate from almost any level students ready to behave in an entirely competent way at the next. The demands of simply learning a broad subject, of being socialized into the universe of discourse, of becoming part of that universe are so severe that we ought not be surprised when those graduates appear to be less than entirely competent. Thus a new doctor, a new lawyer, a new engineer will predictably suffer through a period while he or she is learning to sound like a doctor, lawyer, or engineer — or freshman at college, or student just starting to major in psychology, or new graduate student.

And this brings us to a yet more difficult problem. As I said, it is easy for any of us here to teach these issues. We all have a professional interest in writing and teaching writing. Many of us act as consultants to large organizations that perceive a need for our assistance. But however lucrative that perceived need may prove to be for us, we must acknowledge that ultimately those on the scene will have to assume the responsibility of passing on whatever we teach. In short, we are professionally obligated to make ourselves obsolete. We must be able to train people not merely to write well, but to train others how to write well, to train others how to manage the writing of those for whom they are responsible.

In this regard, the range of managerial styles we have to deal with is quite varied. It ranges from accepting a document from a subordinate, rewriting it to fit what the manager wants it to be, and sending it out without ever telling the subordinate what was done to the subordinate's document, much less why. Slightly more helpful are those who rewrite and at least send a copy of the rewrite to the original drafter, on the assumption perhaps that merely by privately comparing originals and revisions the drafter will eventually figure out what he should be doing. Only slightly more helpful are those who send the document back with advice like "tighten up," "be more organized," "clarify," etc. It may be useful advice, but it is about as helpful as a doctor telling that person lying in bed trembling and vomiting that he should "get better," "be healthier." Accurate advice, but not very useful.

More helpful are those who return a document, edited, with some specific comments about the reasons for the changes in that particular document: "I changed this sentence to make the FCC the subject because you said you were going to talk about new FCC policy in this section." It is not a great leap to, "Make whoever is most responsible for the actions you are describing the subject of your sentence." But it is a leap most managers are unable to make, because they simply have never had the occasion to study language, discourse,

or to articulate the generalizations that apply not just to *this* text to make it clearer, but to texts in general.

But that is the kind of managerial style that subordinates find most useful: Unless they are explicity instructed in principles of action general enough to rise above trivial issues but powerful enough to apply to a wide range of potential behavior, they will learn only by trial and error, or not at all. These are the principles we began with: actions as verbs, subjects as agents, old before new. They are general, powerful, and specific.

They are also the principles that those who are responsible for the writing of others must control. They must know them not as tacit knowledge, but as active, articulatable knowledge. And they must be able to connect them to their gut response to a text that prompts such responses as "I keep losing the thread of the argument here," "I just can't get through this stuff," "I keep having to skip back to the previous sentence." They have to be able to locate quickly *in the text* the cause of their response, to analyze it, and to explain it.

In short, *we* as professional educators, consultants, and writing teachers may control the abstract knowledge that underlies discourse. Indeed, we must. But if we are substantially to serve social and economic objectives we have to be able to pass that abstract knowledge on in a way that makes it seem relevant, useful, nonthreatening, concrete, even interesting and challenging.

Whatever else we may think we know or don't know about language and discourse, we know precious little about demystifying it for those who perhaps remember from their English classes only that bewilderment and despair attendant on diagramming a sentence more than 10 words long. Language study has too often been a terrifying experience for too many of us. Replacing that deep dislike with an informed and easy knowledge of how discourse works is no small task.

We have been reassured that one way toward that end is through the use of computers. We are told that programs such as *Writer's Workbench* or *Epistle* will analyze our prose for us, point out our possible weaknesses, and even teach a lesson on correcting them. From what I have seen of these programs, they are simultaneously too powerful and not powerful enough. A simple command gives us much more information than any reasonable person probably wants to know. We get a statistical profile of our passives, nominalizations, occurrences of *be, there, it,* etc. A statistical profile of my automobile letter would have told us that it was probably suitable for a college level audience. But I would think that the most modest education would allow one to come to that conclusion before it came up on the screen. We do not wait until we read a thermometer before we take an aspirin.

Certainly, such text editing programs may be useful for those who think they need a thermometer before they can tell whether they feel sick. There is an irony here: Such programs are attractive to those who are not skilled enough to work through a text quickly and efficiently. If they lack those skills, we must assume they lack the more sophisticated skills of understanding the powerful role of form on the way we process text. Given that more serious incompetence, how will the user use such programs? Surely not in the skilled

way competent editors would. Given our experience of how such rubrics have been used elsewhere in our lives, we should not be surprised to see managers using these programs in ways that rely essentially on getting the right numbers out of the statistical profile.

What I want to conclude with has been in my experience the single most crucial aspect of any successful program in improving the discourse in an organization. We can control and pass on all the knowledge, all the skills, all the theory any manager might need to pass it all on in turn to his or her subordinates. We can teach managers how to handle the writing of others, how to analyze, edit, or explain. But unless we have been successful in achieving a prior objective, none of this will prove very useful, or enduring — at least it has not in the experience of my colleagues and me. That prior objective is obtaining from the most senior levels of management not just approval for a concerted effort to improve the quality of discourse in the organization, but a commitment that communicates itself through every component of the organization. Every senior manager wishes that those under him or her communicated better. But not every senior manager is willing to commit the time and effort to a program in communication to achieve that end. In short, in my experience, it has not been the technology, the knowledge, the skills, or the teaching situation that has made the difference between successful and unsuccessful programs in teaching written communication. What has made the biggest difference has been from senior management a commitment of time, of visible presence, of articulate and continued support *over a sustained period of time.*

My colleagues and I are a fairly successful group of consultants. Clients invite us back. But I am increasingly convinced that it is not because of what we know or how we teach it. It's because we repeat and repeat again how important it is that every manager of the group we are working with makes it clear to the group, *by participating in the group,* that what we are doing is not just important, but must and will be done. In fact, if truth be told, if the managers simply articulated their determination to improve the quality of writing in their organization, consultants would probably be out of a job.

This, then, is the remaining problem in the plain English movement: not more knowledge about the structure of discourse (though that is very important); not more knowledge about how to teach it (though that is more important yet); not more technology in the form of ever-more detailed text-editing programs (though that is important, too). The remaining problem is convincing those with the authority that teaching clear written communication does not begin with those who do the communicating. It begins with those who bear the ultimate responsibility for it; it begins with those with the authority.