

# Unruly Writing

Lift the restraints on your educational prose and you'll find that your readers learn more.

By YVONNE MACMANUS

**T** rue or false: Educational material must be lifeless and dull in order to be taken seriously.

False. Proof is the uncommon article, manual or script that provides all the necessary information in a readable, lively style. Not only do the readers or film-watchers grant the writing due respect, they also pay better attention (so grateful are they for the relief) and usually learn a lot more. Information presented in an interesting manner is more likely to be retained by the reader.

As editors know, fiction writers often are outstanding nonfiction writers too, but the reverse is rarely true. Why? Because fiction writers are accustomed to a more relaxed style, to a conversational approach to the topic. Reading their educational material is a pleasure.

The most basic and frequent mistake made by authors of educational works is that of writing totally in the past tense. The material could be read to a metronome's clicking. It's unbearably predictable and boring.

The second most common error is failing to use the gerund (words ending in "ing") whenever appropriate. From there we go on to the glaring lack of descriptive and evocative adjectives and the equal absence of action verbs.

The very things that make fiction work are the elements that transform dry nonfiction into interesting learning. Let's take the use of the past tense first:

*The 1985 board of directors' report stated that the fiscal year showed a loss of 13.5 percent in gross revenues. The chairman of the board decreed that this will not do. The CEO stated, "If we continue to lose profits at this rate, the southern plant will have to close down." The reaction of the directors was dispirited.*

There are more interesting ways of saying the same thing—without, of course, changing a single word of the quote. Here's an alternate for the paragraph above:

*Showing a loss of 13.5 percent in gross revenues, the 1985 board of directors' report was a disappointment to everyone—especially the chairman of the board. In an emphatic voice, the CEO declared, "If we continue to lose profits at this rate, the southern plant will have to close down." While the directors were dispirited, none could disagree.*

Why is one version livelier than the other? You guessed it. The first one is written totally in the past tense; only the direct quote opens with a preposition (a good attention-getter) and uses the future tense—" . . . will have to close down." The second version, however, opens with an action verb: "Showing" (use of the gerund). Here's the same paragraph another way:

*Concerned disappointment in the 1985 board of directors' report was evident. Revealing a 13.5 percent loss in gross revenues, the chairman of the board grew livid, threatening to close down the southern plant if profits didn't increase immediately. While none could disagree, no one seemed to have a solution.*

All three versions say the same thing. The only difference is in *how* it's said. In the last version, "disappointment" and "concern" create the hooking lead. They're followed by an image-provoking description of the chairman's reaction and, again, action verbs. The prepositional phrase in the last sentence conveys immediacy, as if the reader were present.

You'll have to determine what styles or combination of styles is best for your particular audience. The main point to remember is pace.

Contractions are extremely useful in keeping a text lively. Remember—you're not writing for English 101, but for eager-

to-learn human beings. What's more important—formality or interest?

Go ahead and start a sentence with "and" if it seems appropriate to your reading ear. Conversational writing is infinitely more readable and, thus, more interesting. There will be times when you'll *want* to split an infinitive for effect, or end a sentence with a preposition. Winston Churchill frequently was criticized for ending his sentences with a preposition. In a pique of exasperation, and with wry humor, he retorted, "I will no longer up with this put!" His point was well made. If your message is better served, go ahead—break the "rules!"

Obviously, if you're writing textbooks, you'll have to stick to the rules. However, for anything else, make your words as colorful and pace-filled as you do when telling co-workers about your vacation. Mix short sentences (even one-word ones) and long sentences. Don't be afraid of dashes or ellipses either. Project future action into the text to break up monotony: *The seminar leader was about to tell the group something, then obviously changed his mind. Or: When applying these demographics, keep in mind that they are only useful for the next three months.* (Compare the second example to: *These demographics are valid for a three-month period.* The latter version is dull.)

By breaking up the pace with past and future tenses, and by prudently using a gerund (clearly, not every sentence should use a gerund), you'll sustain reader interest subliminally.

Think back to your college days . . . Who were your most interesting professors? The ones who imbued a subject with life, or the ones who relayed the basic information only? Now, think about it a bit more. After all these years away from school, in which subjects have you best retained information? Chances are that you remember more from teachers who made the course entertaining as well as informative. . . and "entertaining" doesn't mean being a stand-up comic. All you have to do is hold your audience's interest.

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The same applies to the written word. In fact, since the reader cannot hear your tone of voice or see your gestures or facial expressions, it's all the more vital that you bring the written word to life.

Another way to accomplish this,—though it isn't always possible—is to insert anecdotal or historical information. Even statistics can be made interesting if they are germane to the subject. How many people know that the English had television before the Americans did? Did you know that the tuxedo is derived from a colony of wealthy people in Tuxedo Lake, New York? Who was the first president of the United States? No, not George Washington—it was John Hancock. George Washington was the first *elected* president.

Just tidbits of anecdotal information can turn dull reading into "Hey, I didn't know that!" Or amuse, or enliven. The point is to capture the reader's interest and hold it.

Loosen up. Be free to share your expertise in such a way that others will be fascinated, even if they showed no interest in the subject before. When writing for educational purposes, you already know the reader wants to learn. Readers will learn better, and retain longer, that which holds their interest. And that's why style and pace can convert arid information into fascinating reading. The subject matter may be the same, but the old saw still holds true: It's not what you say, but how you say it.

## Common Grammatical Errors

The dictionary allows for the fact that English is a living, changing language. Still, as educators, you should use traditional grammar. Following are some grammatical tips to help you.

**THAT/WHICH:** One of the most frequent errors. *That* is restrictive; *which* is nonrestrictive. The simplest way to determine which one is correct is to think of *which* as an aside set off with commas. For example: *The fish that he caught was huge; the fish, which got away, was huge.*

**FOUNDER/FLOUNDER:** Common usage now permits the use of either; but then, Merriam Webster is also permitting "Febuary" instead of "February." To be accurate, a *flounder* is a fish; one *founders*, not *flounders*.

**THAT/WHO:** The use of the word *who* is all but disappearing except when used with a direct question. People are *who*; things, corporations and other inanimates are *that*.

**EVERYONE/THEY:** One wouldn't expect to find this mistake in educational materials, but it occurs all the time. If *everyone* is used, it's singular; *they* cannot be used with it. Because we are all

so conscious of nonsexist language these days, the problem is solved if you write only in the plural. If that isn't feasible, use *s/he* instead.

**FROM/THAN:** Again, common usage is altering the correct way to phrase it, but someone or something is different *from*—never *than*.

**FLOUT/FLAUNT:** To *flout* is to scorn or mock, as to *flout convention*. To *flaunt* is to show off (a new car or your bonus check).

**FERMENT/FOMENT:** *Ferment* comes from *fermentum* (Latin for yeast). The dictionary permits also using *ferment* to suggest the act of rousing or inciting. But, for that meaning, *foment* is grammatically correct.

**ANXIOUS/EAGER:** If you're *anxious*, you're apprehensive or worried. If you're *eager*, you're looking forward to something.

One final note, subject to vocal rather than written usage: When pronouncing the word *forte*, meaning one's particular area of expertise or strength, pronounce it "fort," from the French. "For-tay" is from the Italian, and is a musical term.

**"I will no longer up with this put!"**