

The Secret Life of Sentences: Writing with Clarity and Style

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 **robotnik**

(Slides & handout available on request.)

“Have something to say, and say it as clearly as you can. That is the only secret of style.”

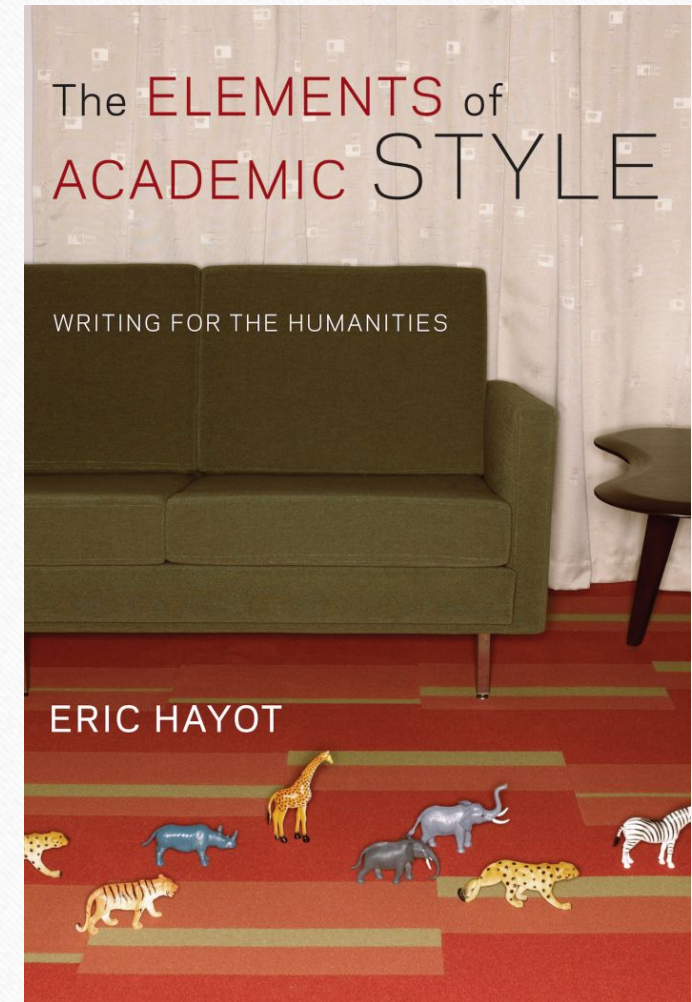
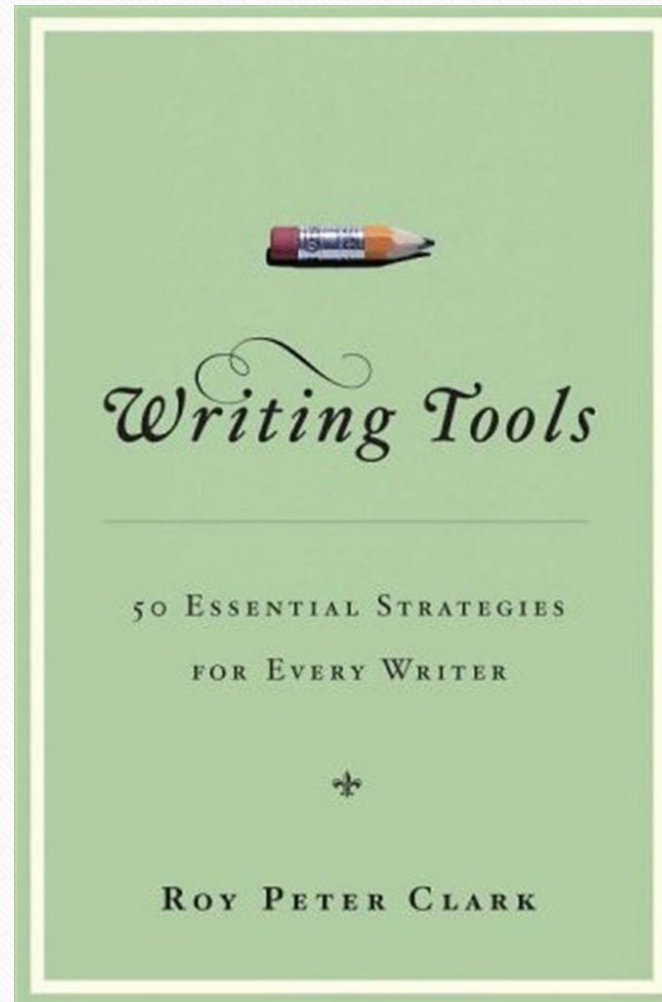
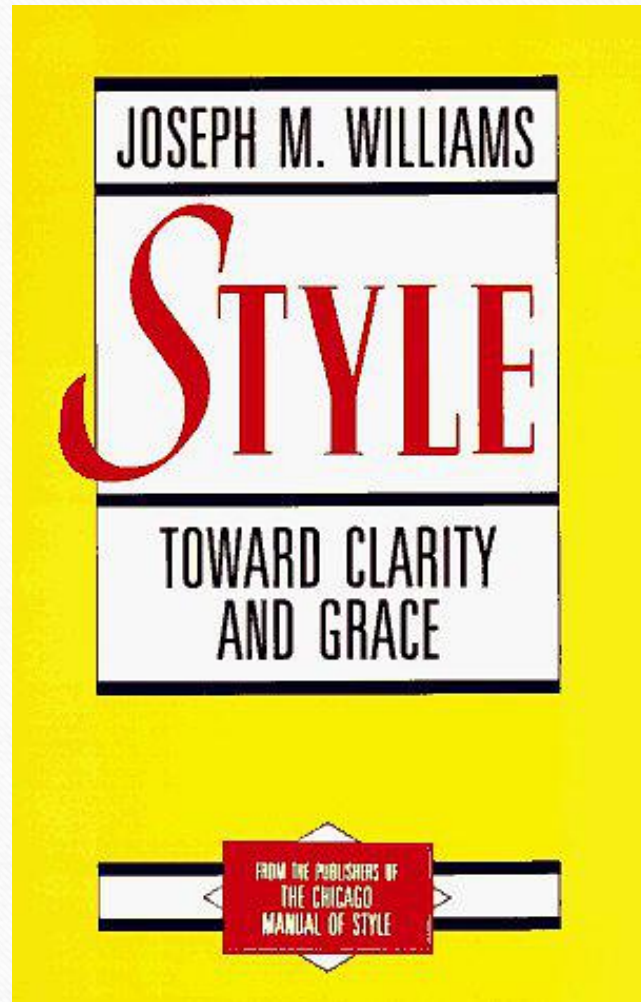
Matthew Arnold

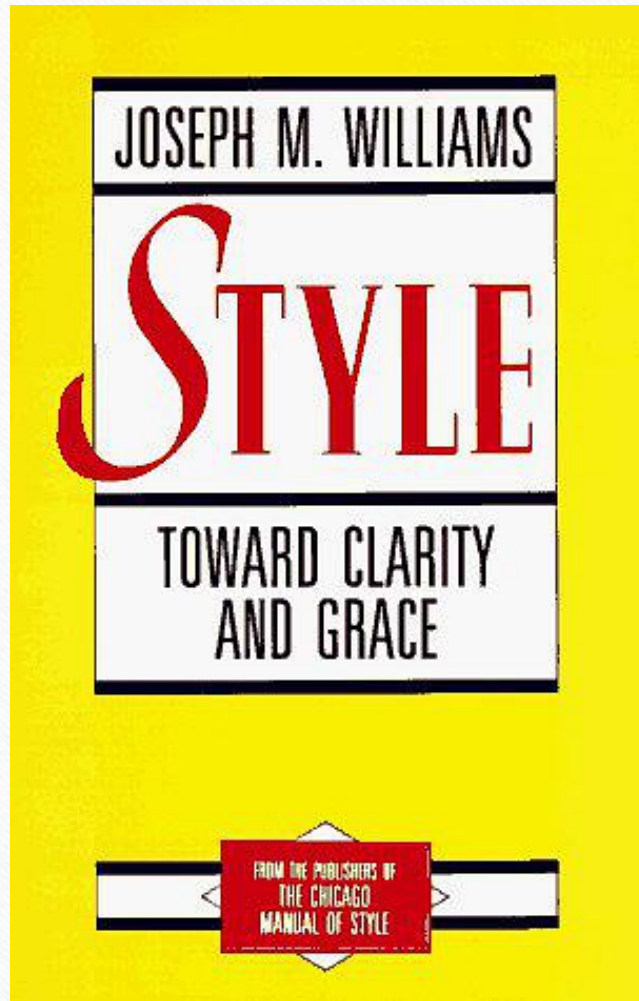
Disclaimer #1: Writing clearly means **re-writing**, and re-writing takes **time**.

The advice in this workshop is not first draft advice.

Disclaimer #2: Writing clearly means knowing **what you want to say**, and having **confidence** that it is worth saying.

I can't teach you that in a one hour workshop.





“Telling me to ‘**be clear**’ or ‘**omit needless words**’ is like telling me to ‘hit the ball squarely.’ I know that. What I don’t know is **how to do it.**”

Joseph Williams, *Style*

No ideas but in readers.

You have only written what your reader understands.

Subjects and Verbs

A. China, so that it could expand and widen its influence and importance among the Eastern European nations, in 1955 began in a quietly orchestrated way a diplomatic offensive directed against the Soviet Union.

B. In 1955, China began to orchestrate a quiet diplomatic offensive against the Soviet Union in order to expand its influence in Eastern Europe.

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Principle #1: Readers are likely to feel that a sentence is clear and direct when the **subject** and the **verb** of the sentence appear **close to the start of the sentence** and **close to each other**.

“Rebels seized control of Cap Haitien, Haiti’s second largest city, on Sunday, meeting little resistance as hundreds of residents cheered, burned the police station, plundered food from port warehouses and looted the airport, which was quickly closed.”

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Strategy #1: If you have to go more than seven words into a sentence to reach both the **subject** and the **verb**, consider revising.

“The stories about my childhood, the ones that stuck, that got told and retold at dinner tables, to dates as I sat by red-faced, to my own children by my father later on, **are** stories of running away.”

Anna Quindlen, *How Reading Changed My Life*

Characters and Actions



“Action is eloquence.”

William Shakespeare

A. Decisions in regard to the administration of medication despite the inability of irrational patients voluntarily appearing in trauma centers to provide legal consent rest with a physician alone.

B. When a patient voluntarily appears at a trauma center but behaves so irrationally that they cannot legally consent to treatment, only a physician can decide whether to administer medication.

A. **Decisions** in regard to the **administration** of **medication** despite the **inability** of irrational patients voluntarily appearing in trauma centers to provide legal **consent** **rest** with a physician alone.

B. When a patient voluntarily **appears** at a trauma center but **behaves** so irrationally that they cannot legally **consent** to treatment, only a physician can **decide** whether to **administer** medication.

Principle #2: Readers are likely to feel that a sentence is clear and direct when the **subject** of the sentence names the **character** who is acting, and the **verb** that goes with that subject names the **action** being performed.

Grammar	Subject	Verb
Meaning	Character	Action

Strategy #2: Identify your main “characters.” When possible, make the grammatical **subject** of your sentence a **character**, and the **verb** of your sentence the **action** that character performs.

The White House **announced** that a second summit will take place between President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.

The business sector **is** cooperating.

Many instances of malignant tumors **go** undetected.

This evidence **proves** my theory.

Recovery in equity **does not require** strict compliance with statutory requirements.

Although **P. aeruginosa**, an opportunistic pathogen, **does not** generally **produce** alginate, **muroid variants** which produce copious quantities of extracellular alginate **have been** isolated from cystic fibrosis patients.

Zombie Advice



Zombie Advice #1: “Avoid nominalizations.”

A **nominalization** is a noun derived from a verb or adjective:

decide	→	decision
react	→	reaction
investigate	→	investigation
applicable	→	applicability
unable	→	inability

Helen Sword (*Stylish Academic Writing*) calls these “**zombie nouns**.”

A. A **need** exists for greater candidate selection efficiency.

B. We **must select** candidates more efficiently.

But there are times when nominalization is fine:

These arguments depend upon an unproven claim.

My **denial** of his **accusation** impressed the jury.

abortion **taxation without representation**

evolution **love** **death** **wisdom**

So I prefer to refer you back to **Principle #2**.

Zombie Advice #2: “Avoid the passive voice.”

In active voice, the subject is the active agent of the action:

The partners broke the agreement.

In passive voice, the subject is the goal or recipient of the action; the agent may or may not be named:

The agreement was broken (by the partners).

Zombie Advice #2: “Avoid the passive voice.”

This is often good advice:

It **was found** that data concerning energy resources **allocated** to the states **had not been obtained**.

A burglary suspect **was shot and killed** in an officer-involved shooting.

Mistakes **were made**.



But there are times when passive voice is fine:

By March of 1945, **the Axis nations** **had been** essentially defeated; all that remained was a final, but bloody climax. The **borders of Germany** **had been** breached, and **both Germany and Japan** **were being** bombed around the clock. **Neither country**, though, **had been** so devastated that it could not resist.

A. Astronomers have raised profound questions about the universe by exploring the nature of black holes in space. **A black hole is created** by the collapse of a dead star into a point no larger than a marble.

B. Astronomers have raised profound questions about the universe by exploring the nature of black holes in space. **The collapse of a dead star into a point no larger than a marble creates** a black hole.

Managing Information

Principle #3: Readers are likely to feel that writing is clear and coherent when sentences **begin** with information the reader **has already encountered** and introduce **new** information at the **end**.

A. Astronomers have raised profound questions about the universe by exploring the nature of black holes in space. A black hole is created by the collapse of a dead star into a point no larger than a marble.

B. Astronomers exploring the nature of black holes in space have raised profound questions about the universe. Does time stand still in a black hole? How is it possible for something to have zero volume and infinite density?

Strategy #3: Begin sentences with information you have already mentioned, or that is already familiar to your reader. **End** sentences with **new** information, putting the **most important** information at the very end.



Putting Sentences Together

Principle #4: Readers are likely to feel that writing is clear and coherent when grammatical subjects **repeat**, are **related**, or form a **coherent string of topics**.

In this paragraph, **bold type** is used to indicate the subject of each sentence or clause. **The information and characters** introduced at the beginning of each sentence define what a sentence is centrally “about” for a reader, so **a sense of coherence** depends on these subjects. Cumulatively, **the thematic signposts** provided by these ideas should focus the reader’s attention toward a well-defined and limited set of ideas. **Moving through a paragraph** with a consistent point of view is made possible by a coherent sequence of subjects. **A seeming absence of context for each sentence** is one consequence of making random subject shifts. **Feelings of dislocation, disorientation, or confusion** are the result.

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In this paragraph, **the subject of each clause** is indicated with bold type. **Readers** focus their attention on the information and characters introduced at the beginning of each sentence. **These subjects** tell the reader what **each sentence** is centrally “about,” and determine whether **the reader** will feel a passage is coherent. Cumulatively, **the sequence of subjects** provides a thematic signpost that focus the reader’s attention on a well-defined and limited set of ideas. If **the subjects** seem coherent, **that series** will move the reader through a paragraph with a consistent point of view. But if **the subjects** shift randomly, **the reader** will feel dislocated, disoriented, or confused.

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Strategy #4: To achieve **coherence across sentences**, connect the **grammatical subjects of each sentence**. They don't have to be identical, but should **relate** or form a **logical string**.

Words about war	are slippery,
and “war” itself	may be the slipperiest of all.
War	is hell,
we	say ,
and war	's a game.
War	is a contagion, the universal perversion.
War	is politics by other means.
We	say many things about war, not all of them profound, and few as pithy as these.
Eminently quotable remarks aside, war	is perhaps understood best as a violent contest for territory, resources, and power, and, no less fiercely, for meaning.
At first, the pain and violence of war	are so extraordinary that language fails us:
We	cannot name our suffering
And, without words to describe it, reality itself	becomes confused, even unreal.
But we	do not remain at a loss for words for long.

Modern day QTN prospecting	is the Sierra Nevada of the 1850s.
The shiny (Mendelian) nuggets	are rapidly being collected,
and ever larger teams of researchers with ever more powerful technologies	are now probing whole genomes to find their quarry.
But visible flakes of placer gold	represent a small fraction of the global gold reserve;
most gold	is in microscopic particles concealed in low-grade ore.
These particles	are immune to mechanical separation.
If the stuff of evolution	is often alleles of microscopic effect,
large-effect nuggets	can tell us little about the material basis for evolution.
All the questions that the QTN program proposes to answer	are confounded by a more basic question:
what	is the phenotypic effect-size distribution of evolutionary relevant mutations?

It	is 1854,
and London	is a city of scavengers.
Just the names alone	read now like some kind of exotic zoological catalogue: bone-pickers, rag-gatherers, mud-larks, sewer-hunters, dustmen, night-soil men, bunters, toshers, shoremen.
These	were the London underclasses, at least a hundred thousand strong.
So immense were their numbers	that had the scavengers broken off and formed their own city, it would have been the fifth-largest in all England.
Early risers strolling along the Thames	would see the toshers wading through the muck of low tide, dressed almost comically in flowing velveteen coats, their oversized pockets filled with stray bits of copper.
The toshers	walked with a lantern strapped to their chest to see in the pre-dawn gloom, and carried an eight-foot-long pole that they used to test the ground in front of them.
The pole and the eerie glow of the lantern	gave them the look of ragged wizards, scouring the foul river's edge for magic coins.

The Iran-Contra Affair of 1986-87	has often been seen as a constitutional crisis that challenged the system of checks and balances in the United States government.
During this period, the number of covert operations embarked on by the Reagan Administration	greatly increased .
Despite attempts made by Congress to introduce legislation that would make it more difficult for the executive branch, the NSC, and the CIA to create such operations, these efforts	were unsuccessful.
The revelation of the scandal	sent shock waves across the entire nation.
The people of the United States	were faced with a political crisis, and a challenge to their democratic system.
Despite the numerous investigations that followed the scandal, the guilty individuals	experienced minimal punishment, igniting doubts in the justice system and leaving the question of presidential responsibility unanswered.

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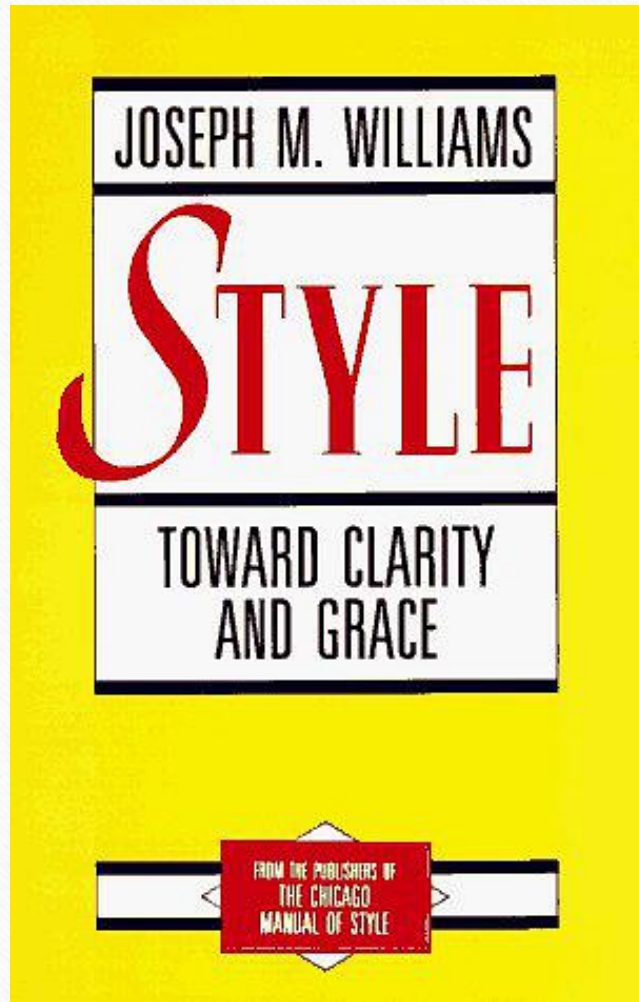
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Everything good in this workshop comes from:
Joseph M. Williams, *Style: Towards Clarity and Grace* (4th ed.), 1990.

And also:

Roy Peter Clark, *Writing Tools: 50 Essential Strategies for Every Writer*, 2006.

Eric Hayot, *The Elements of Academic Style: Writing for the Humanities*, 2014.

Barbara Kamler and Pat Thomson, *Helping Doctoral Students Write: Pedagogies for Supervision* (2nd ed.), 2014.