

REVIEW:

STYLE: TEN LESSONS IN CLARITY AND GRACE

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Joseph M. Williams' *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace* (Scott, Foresman: 1981) is intended, according to the book's jacket, for writers "who no longer worry over their spelling and verb forms but are concerned with writing prose that is clear, direct, and even graceful," that is, for writers in advanced composition courses or professional writers. In his preface, however, Williams protests that beginning writers can use his book as well, since he has concentrated on the process of revision and has avoided overburdening his readers with grammatical terminology.

The problem I foresee in using *Style* with novice writers is that the book is not a complete rhetoric—nor does it pretend to be. As Williams points out, the book "does not take up matters of intention, invention, or organization" (xii). *Style* is, instead, a text about revising and editing, which perforce assumes that its readers (a) already know how to produce prose and (b) desire to invest considerable energy in revising their work. For student writers who can work within these parameters, Williams' book is the best I've seen; its only worthy competitor in the genre is Richard Lanham's *Revising Prose*, which is perhaps more entertaining but much less ambitious.

Style is divided into lessons to achieving clarity within sentences (Chapters 1 and 2), eliminating wordiness (Chapter 3), controlling longer sentences (Chapters 5 and 6), writing for minimally-prepared audiences (Chapter 7), and aiming for elegance (Chapter 8). The last two lessons (9 and 10) present sensible although potentially controversial discussions of usage and

punctuation. The organizational principle of the early lessons, Williams writes, derives from the process he uses in editing his own prose:

In Lesson 2, I concentrate on getting the backbone of a sentence straight, on getting the crucial ideas in the right grammatical places with the right grammatical connections. In Lesson 3, I address the problem of clearing away that wordy underbrush that can choke off the flow of your ideas. In Lesson 4, I take up the problem of excessively long sentences: Even when you've expressed your ideas cleanly and clearly, you can still pack too many of them into a single sentence. In Lesson 5, I discuss how to make a long sentence clear and fluent, how to avoid the discontinuities and interruptions that can confuse your reader (xiv).

Each lesson is plentifully illustrated by series of examples which are intended to show how the process of revision occurs. In addition, Williams supplies readers with plenty of exercises which are introduced by clear instructions. Possible solutions to the problems are provided in an appendix.

The lessons are sometimes heavy going, even for advanced writers. Lesson 2, for example, addresses the grammatical and functional parts of sentences—what Williams calls the “bones” of the sentence—as well as nominalization and passive constructions. Williams is aware of the text's compactness, and he offers students sound advice on how to use it: “Do a section at a time, up to the exercises. Do the exercises; find someone else's writing to edit; find some old writing of your own and edit it. Then look hard at what you've written today—first only for the point of the lesson, or section. Then go through it a second time, looking for another point, and if you have the time, again for other points” (xiv). As further help, the main points of most lessons are summarized into useful checklists.

While his process orientation to editing is refreshing, most of Williams' advice in the early chapters can be found in many good handbooks of style. The most original and exciting chapters in *Style* are Lessons 7 and 8. Lesson 7 is premised on the assumption that many audiences are functionally illiterate.

Hence Williams gives advice for organizing and presenting information in graphic ways, and he refines the conventional definition of stylistic economy in the process; economy entails “whether we have achieved our ends, whether our readers understand what we want them to do and then do it” (127). In Lesson 8, “A Touch of Class,” Williams treats the classically revered concepts of balance, symmetry, and rhythm by means of liberal quotations from professional writers as well as carefully wrought illustrations and exercises.

Williams introduces some sorely needed terms into his discussion of style, terms which should prove useful to all writing teachers. A good example is “metadiscourse,” which, according to the glossary, is “writing about writing, whatever does not refer to the subject matter being addressed” (209-10). Metadiscourse, then, is aimed at assisting readers to follow the discourse itself; it includes qualifiers, hedges, transitions, and the like. The relevance of the concept to rhetoric is that the use or omission of metadiscourse controls to some extent the perceived writer-audience relation in any piece of discourse. My use of the qualifier “to some extent” in the preceding sentence, for instance, is intended to assure readers that both Williams and myself are willing to be reasonable about this matter.

Williams makes a second important distinction between “punctuated” and “grammatical” sentences (punctuated sentences occur between initial and terminal marks of punctuation; grammatical sentences are kernel sentences). Williams’ advice for using the distinction is rhetorical: “If a very long punctuated sentence is a single grammatical sentence, it may be difficult to read because it gives a reader no place to pause and begin again. On the other hand, if a very long punctuated sentence consists of several short grammatical sentences, it may be simple to read, but it may also sound a bit childish” (64). Here Williams not only avoids the thorny problem of defining a sentence semantically, but manages to show that grammatical rules are not the only governing principle to be observed in the construction of sentences. He is careful throughout the text to distinguish between stylistic choice and grammatical rules, that is, between the uses to which writers may put the rules of English, and what those rules permit. As here, his introduction of a grammatical concept is done only in order to make the stylistic point.

As some of my readers may be aware, Williams has earned a scholarly reputation for his research on usage and style. (See, for example, his article with Rosemary Hake in *College English*, September, 1981.) While a reputation for capable scholarship should not necessarily command the profession's immediate attention to Williams' textbook, it should help to forestall the inevitable objections that will be made to the chapters on usage and punctuation in *Style*. Williams' advice is governed here by his knowledge of what writers do rather than a concern for real or presumed rules of correctness. He seems to condone the run-on sentence, for example, when he writes that if "two sentences are relatively short, closely linked, and balanced, you can link two grammatical sentences, two independent clauses, with just a comma" (187). He immediately notes, however, that although "it is not difficult to find sentences punctuated this way in the best prose, many teachers consider this kind of punctuation incorrect, so it is wise to have a sense of your audience before you experiment." And I expect that Williams' consistent debunking of "Transcendental Correctness," which he categorizes as "real rules"—those covering errors that no writers of standard English make—"nonrules," "optional rules," and "betes Noires"—symbolic flags around which some of those most intensely concerned with linguistic purity (whatever that may be) have tacitly agreed to rally—will earn him undying enmity in some camps (177).

Williams seldom gives negative advice. His rules for revision are phrased in terms of available alternatives and are always carefully qualified. In the chapter on wordiness, for example, he laments that he "can't offer any strong generalizations to equal those I suggested about making subjects coincide with agents, verbs with actions. Diffuse wordiness is more like a chronic accumulation of specks and motes that individually may seem trivial but together blur what might otherwise be a clear and concise style" (58-59). Williams' voice is generally firm and reasonable, as in the passage just quoted, and he can be tactful when necessary, as in his discussion in Chapter 3 of the psychology underlying the composition of bureaucratic prose.

Williams' concentration on a single canon of rhetoric places his book squarely in the hoary tradition of the rhetorical handbook which provides pragmatic rules for the composition of dis-

course. Prescriptive texts have been around nearly as long as the discipline of rhetoric itself; Aristotle complains about the proliferation of handbooks in his *Rhetoric*. Yet Williams' text is a handbook with a difference. Although he admits to its prescriptive nature, he has been careful to prescribe rules that are procedural rather than formal. As he says, his text presents style "as a process, as an achievement" (xii). His chief teaching device, imitation, is derived from classical rhetorical pedagogy—students learn by revising sample sentences and imitating those revising processes in their own composing.

My students' response to *Style* has been positive. The exercise, they say, are "challenging and fun;" the text is "actually enjoyable to read." One student pinpointed the text's major strength in Williams' treatment of "pieces of the language as *tools*" rather than as restricting conventions. This approach, she wrote, raised her consciousness of herself as a writer who is free to choose among the linguistic resources at her disposal. I agree, and for this reason would freely commend *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace* to teachers of advanced or technical writing.

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This is a twenty year old book already in its sixth edition, and the author admits that it's still "evolving", which is a good sign that serious thought is going into its composition. *Style ten lessons in clarity and grace* is based on a course Joseph Williams teaches at the University of Chicago. His approach is based on two principles "that it's good to write clearly, and anyone can" and the second part of the proposition is what he's teaching here. His approach is to draw attention to the finer issues of clarity in prose, and to show how language can be used with subtlety to effect it. H