

Comp Quickreads

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Emphasizing Clarity

Some Sources of Unclear Writing (taken from Williams' *Style*)

Besides asking for clarity, expecting clarity, and signaling our disapproval when we don't get it, we can help students identify the sources of unclear writing. Here's a short list:

- Writing that tries to impress or intimidate us rather than communicate with us
- Writing that has been padded (the three page paper turned into the four-and-a-half page paper simply through the addition of words not ideas)
- Writing that is tentative and has nothing to say, usually because the writer cannot locate his or her authority to speak (this is really an audience problem)
- Writing full of long abstract nouns and no active verbs—"who is doing what to whom?" we might ask of sentences and not be able to answer

What can students do about problems with style? Here's some advice:

- Write with the needs of readers in mind
- Make your nouns concrete and precise
- Make your verbs active
- Be able to look at your sentences and say "I know who is doing what to whom"
- Be concise

In our collective anxiety about being overwhelmed by error-ridden sentences, many of us have neglected a crucial aspect of writing: style. For literature-types (hey fella, that's me you're talking about!), a writer's style can be as distinctive as a fingerprint and might have been the source of the initial interest in if not lasting appeal of the writer. Many of us became interested in writing because of an early fascination with style, whether it was the Keatsian romance of Fitzgerald, the syncretical and antithetical balancing of words, phrases, and clauses of Johnson, or the "enwinding" complexity and nuance of James.

When we talk about style in student writing we are usually talking about something else, something more like clarity and a certain amount of grace. Writing teachers will recognize those two terms as the subtitle of one of the best books on teaching style, Joseph Williams' *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*. Williams and others have redefined the discussion of style, moving it away from what we might call the "writerly" style of literary texts and towards what we might call the "readerly" style of primarily communicative texts (with due apologies to Barthes). As the name implies, a "readerly" text is one that is more attuned to the needs of the reader. If the writer's primary purpose is communication, then the expression should be clear. If a writer is not clear, the reader (or an instructor reading a student's writing rhetorically) needs to signal this lack of clarity.

Rather than marking and rewriting a student's sentences (something every teacher of writing struggles to avoid), we can identify for students when their expression interferes with communication. For example, a teacher might note where he or she has trouble understanding

the writer by writing in the margin "I get lost here," or "This sentence confuses me." We might also help the writer see the importance of clarity by signaling basic understanding but the need for greater clarity. We might note such moments in an essay by writing in the margin, "This part here strikes me as really important, but I had trouble with it." By calling attention to these clarity "hot spots" (topic sentences, thesis, transitions, and so on), we help students focus on improving clarity where it matters most. Of course, we want every word, sentence, and paragraph to be clear and effective, but in any piece of writing some words and sentences are more important than others. These "hot spots" usually constitute the argumentative skeleton of the essay so the "work" the writing is doing at these points is simply much more challenging than the work being done in other places. When students encounter complex rhetorical tasks and when they are wrestling with challenging ideas, clarity and grace suffer and even errors return. Attention to these "hot spots" then will help students clarify their own ideas and improve the clarity of their expression.

Finally and at a minimum we should communicate our expectations about style when we assign writing. Teachers are sadly familiar with the difficult and long-winded prose that students produce when trying to imitate academic prose. Students do not produce such prose out of perversity (though at this point in the year it certainly feels that way); they do so out of ignorance. We might advise students to try for an easy, graceful, but not overly casual writing style and suggest that they read their papers out loud to make sure it sounds like spoken English and not like paper-ese.