In the front line of battle are almost always ready to die; there is a promise of some swift transit. . . (it goes on).

- Norman Mailer, *The Armies of the Night*

Almost feel we are eavesdropping on Mailer's stream of light. But of course, such a sentence is the product not of a gratuitous element of human action, but the product of Mailer's stream of almost feel we are eavesdropping on his. . .

Which sentence better reflects what really causes Serbs and Albanians to distrust each other because they have

**Beyond Polish**

-Alfred North Whitehead

—Bertrand Russell

**The Ethics of Style**

- Norman Mailer, *The Armies of the Night*
So our choices of what character to tell a story about—people or their circumstances—involve more than ease of reading, even more than a philosophy of action, because such choices also have an ethical dimension.

The Ethical Responsibilities of Writers and Readers

In the last nine lessons, I have relentlessly emphasized the responsibility we owe our readers to be clear. But if we are responsible readers, we also have a responsibility toward writers to read hard enough to understand the genuine complexity of ideas that can't be expressed in snap judgments. It would be impossible, for example, for an engineer to revise this into language clear to everyone:

\[ F = \frac{1}{2} C_D u^2 A, \]

where \( A \) is the cross-sectional area of the particle at right angles to the motion.

Most of us do work hard to understand—not until we decide that a writer failed to work equally hard to help us reach that understanding, or, worse, has deliberately made our reading more difficult than it has to be. Once we decide that a writer was careless or thoughtless or lazy—well, our days are too few to spend them on those indifferent to our needs.

But that response to gratuitous complexity only reemphasizes our responsibility for our own writing, for it seems axiomatic that if we don't want others to impose carelessly complex writing on us, then we ought not impose it on others. If we are socially responsible writers, we should make our ideas no simpler than they deserve, but no more difficult than they need to be. We write clearly when as a matter of principle, we would write the way we would have others write to you.

Write to others as you would have others write to you.

You probably recognize:

Responsible writers follow a rule whose more general theme is:

Write to others as you would have others write to you.

Few of us violate that principle deliberately. It's just that we are so inclined to think that our own writing is clear that if our readers struggle to understand it, then the problem must be not our readers' understanding, but our own writing that needs to be clearer. But that's not necessarily because if you understand your own writing, does the character that readers infer from your writing do justice to the character that you project in your writing? If so, then you think you are difficult to access; if not, then you think you are difficult to understand. Does your writing make them think you are difficult to access? Of course, that doesn't mean we can't express in quick and plain sentences. If we are responsible writers, we also have a responsibility toward readers to make our writing easy to read. In the last nine lessons, I have relentlessly emphasized the re-

The Ethical Responsibilities of Writers and Readers

Also where an ethical dimension.

and a philosophy of action, because such choices reflect their circumstances—involve more than ease of reading.
Clarity and Grace

Planned Prior to its delivery. Adult speech behavior takes on many of the characteristics of child language, where the communicative is spontaneous and relatively unpredictable.

-E. Ochs and B. Schieffelin, Planned and Unplanned Discourse

That means (I think), when adults speak spontaneously, they rely on patterns of child language.

The authors might object that I have oversimplified their meaning, but those eleven words express what I remember from their forty-four, and what really counts, after all, is not what we understand as we read, but how well we remember it the next day.

The ethical issue here is not those writers' willful indifference, but their innocent ignorance. In that case, when writers didn't know better, readers who do (as you now do) have the duty to meet another term of the reader-writer contract: we must not just read carefully, but when given the opportunity, respond candidly and helpfully. I know many of you think that right now you do not have the standing to do that. But one day, you will.

Intended Misdirection

The ethics of writing are clearer when a writer knowingly uses language in self-interested ways.

Example #1: Who Made the Mistake? For example, a few years ago, the Sears Company was accused of overcharging for automobile repairs. It responded with an ad saying:

With over two million automotive customers served last year in California alone, mistakes may have occurred. However, Sears wants you to know that we would never intentionally violate the trust customers have shown in our company for 105 years.

In the first sentence, the writer avoided mentioning Sears as the party responsible for mistakes. He could have used a passive verb:

... mistakes may have been made.

But that would have encouraged us to wonder "By whom?" Instead, the writer found a verb that moved Sears off stage by saying mistakes just "occurred," seemingly on their own.

In the second sentence of that ad, though, the writer focused on Sears, the specific responsible agent, because he wanted to emphasize its good intentions.

Sears... would never intentionally violate...
Example #3: Who Crashes? Finally, here is a passage that raises an even greater ethical issue, one involving life and death.

Some time ago, the Government Accounting Office investigated why more than half the car owners who got recall letters did not comply with them. The GAO found that car owners could not understand the letters or were not sufficiently alarmed by them. I received the following. It shows how writers can meet a legal obligation while evading an ethical one (I number the sentences):

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

(When asked what make of car the letter refers to, I dodge the question.) First, look at the subject/topics of the sentences:

- crash
- vehicle directional control
- vehicle secondary catch
- failure
- hood fly-up
- sudden hood fly-up
- vehicle frame
- heavy brake application
- misalignment
- driver visibility
- primary latch
- unrestrained

The main character/topic of that story is not me, the driver, but my car's parts. In fact, the writers ignored me almost entirely (I am in your vehicle twice and driver once) and omitted all references to themselves. In sum, it says, "There is a car that might have a defective part. Here's what could fail:

- There is a car that might have a defective part. Here's what could fail.
- The main characteristic of this story is not me, the driver, but
- The writers—who probably a committee of lawyers—also nominalized verbs and made others' passive when they referred to actions that might alarm me:
- Failure
- Vehicle directional control
- Heavy brake application
- Hood
- Driver's visibility
- Unrestrained

If the writers intended to deflect my fear and maybe my anger, then they violated their ethical duty to write to me as they would have me write to them, for surely they would not swap places with a reader deliberately lulled into ignoring a condition that threatened his life.

Of course, being candid has its costs. I would be naive to claim that we are all free to write as we please, especially when certain circumstances occur. We programmer direct writers about what is due when, what is due, how it is due, and what will happen if it is not due. Writers who don't follow these instructions, even when they are clear, are not doing their jobs. Writers have an obligation to be explicit and clear when they write to others. If the writer intended to deflect responsibility, then we can reasonably charge him with breaching the First Rule of Ethical Writing, for surely, he would not want that same kind of writing "systematically hiding who is doing what in a matter close to his interests."
We should not, of course, confuse unethical indirectness with the human impulse to soften bad news. When a supervisor says "I'm afraid our new funding didn't come through" we know it means "You have no job." But that indirectness is motivated not by dishonesty, but by kindness.

It is important to note where these writers focused their attention. They chose the subject/topics of their sentences carefully to deflect attention from themselves and their readers. Our choice of subjects is crucial not only when we want to be clear, but also when we want to be misleading.

Rationalizing Opacity

A more complicated ethical issue is how we should respond to those who know they write in a complex style, and yet claim that they must; "because" they are "breaking new, intellectual ground." Are they right, or is that just self-serving rationalization? This is a vexing question, not just because we can settle it only case-by-case, but because we may not be able to settle it at all, at least not to everyone's satisfaction.

Here, for example, is a sentence from a leading figure in contemporary literary theory:

If, for a while, the ruse of desire is calculable for the uses of discipline soon the repetition of guilt, justification, pseudo-scientific theories, superstition, spurious authorities and classifications can be seen as the desperate effort to "normalize" formally the disturbance of a discourse of splitting that violates the rational, enlightened claims of its enunciatory modality.

-Homi K. Bhabha

Is that the expression of a thought so complex, so nuanced that what it says can be expressed only as written? Or is it babble? How do we decide whether in fact his nuances are, at least for ordinarily competent readers, just not accessible, given the time most of us have for finding them? And when, if ever, do we owe readers an ethical duty to write precise and nuance-filled prose, but not assume that they owe us an infinite amount of their time to unpack it? If we choose to write in ways that we know will make readers struggle—well, it's a free country. In the marketplace of ideas, truth is the prime value, but not the only one. Another is the ease with which we can convey our thoughts. Whatever our subject, we can usually write more clearly, with just a bit more effort.

We lose in clarity, but we gain in definiteness. The philosopher of language Ludwig Wittgenstein said, "Whatever can be thought can be thought clearly; whatever can be written can be written clearly." I'd add a nuance: Whatever can be written can usually be written more clearly, with just a bit more effort.

Lesson 10 The Ethics of Style
It's easy to abuse writers who manipulate us. It's more difficult to think about these matters when we are manipulated by those whom we would never charge with deceit. But it is just such ethical questions that force us to think hard about matters of style and politics, ideology, and control. In our early history, the educated elite used writing itself to exclude the illiterate, then Latin and French to exclude those who knew only English. More recently, those in authority have relied on a vocabulary thick with Latin nominalizations and on a Standard English that requires those aspiring to join the Ins to submit to a decade of education, during which time they are expected to acquire not only the language of the Ins, but their values, as well.

Moreover, clarity is not a natural virtue, corrupted by academics, bureaucrats, and others who profit from it. Clarity is a value that is created by society and that we must work hard to maintain, for it is not just hard to write clearly, but also painful (as this book demonstrates). As we have seen, he was right to worry. Anticipating that outcome, Lincoln tried to reconcile North and South in words engraved in our national memory:

"So is 'clarity' an ideological value? Of course it is. How else could it be otherwise? But those who attack clarity as part of an ideological conspiracy overlook the fact that we are in the midst of a great contest which still absorbs the attention and engrosses the energies of the nation, little that is new could be presented."

Style: The Basics of Clarity and Grace

Lesson 10: The Ethics of Style

AN EXTENDED ANALYSIS

That seems simple enough. But it's not. If clear prose would naturally be the object of such mimicry as nearly as is within our power, by showing motives can we know whether a writer is managing his own and whether the reader's own motives behind each guilty tricks of those whose careers depend on the motives behind every sentence we write. We have to choose to take the path of 132
The progress of our arms, upon which all else chiefly depends, is as well known to the public as to myself; and it is, I trust, reasonably satisfactory and encouraging to all. With high hope for the future, no prediction in regard to it is ventured.

In fact, should we neglect the progress of the war, we might judge it pedestrian, because it is as abstract and impersonal as the worst institutional prose. Lincoln could have written this:

"Fellow-countrymen: As I appear here for the second time to take the oath of the presidential office, I have less occasion to address you at length than I did at the first. Then I thought it fitting and proper that I state in detail the course to be pursued. . . ."

In fact, that is close to the style of his First Inaugural Address:

"Fellow-citizens of the United States: In compliance with a custom as old as the government itself, I appear before you to address you briefly; as you have heard the Oath prescribed by the Constitution . . . I do not consider it necessary at present for me to discuss. . . ."

Or he could have written this:

"Fellow-countrymen: As we meet for this second taking of the oath of the presidential office, we have less need for an extended address than we had at the first. Then we felt a statement, describing in detail, the course we would pursue, would be fitting and proper. . . ."

And that is close to the style of the Gettysburg Address:

"Now we are engaged in a great Civil War, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field. . . ."

In fact, Lincoln seems so intent on impersonality that in his last sentence he dangled a modifier:

"With high hope for the future, no prediction in regard to it is ventured. (With high hope for the future, I do not venture to predict it.)

Either Lincoln dozed, or he had something else in mind.

Lesson 10 The Ethics of Style

In that first paragraph, the topics of his sentences deflect our attention from the participants and focus it on the event and his message. (They are bolded:

- the progress of our arms
- upon which all else chiefly depends
- is as well known to the public as to myself
- and it is, I trust, reasonably satisfactory and encouraging to all
- with high hope for the future
- no prediction in regard to it is ventured.

Why did he choose such an impersonal style (assuming he actually made a choice)? We might understand better if we looked at the rest of the speech. As you read, notice his subjects (boldfaced):

- the progress of our arms
- upon which all else chiefly depends
- is as well known to the public as to myself
- and it is, I trust, reasonably satisfactory and encouraging to all
- with high hope for the future
- no prediction in regard to it is ventured.

If these sentences are not the first sentence of the speech, as you read, notice his subjects (boldfaced):

- the progress of our arms
- upon which all else chiefly depends
- is as well known to the public as to myself
- and it is, I trust, reasonably satisfactory and encouraging to all
- with high hope for the future
- no prediction in regard to it is ventured.

Did he choose such an impersonal style (assuming he actually made a choice)? Why?

If not, consider it necessary at present for me to discuss the progress of our arms, upon which all else chiefly depends.
God; and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wring their bread from the sweat of other men's faces; but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered yet. The Almighty has His own purposes. "Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh." If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offences which in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South, this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offence came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a Living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope—feivently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondmen and the blood shed by the slaves is sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand year ago, so still it must be said, "the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether." With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.

In the first sentence of the second paragraph, Lincoln continues the impersonal style of his introduction, both nominalized and passive:

"On the occasion corresponding to this four years ago, all thoughts were..." directed to an impending civil war.

He could have written "everyone was thinking of an impending civil war." Then for two short clauses, he switches to the simplicity we expect:

"Al dreaded it—al sought to avert it." Then for a short period of the inattention of the Union's leaders, Lincoln seems to hold on the South.

These slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest. In the indecisiveness of this sentence, Lincoln seems to hold on the South.

The South were one eighth of the population, most of them in the

South.

"Slaves were one eighth of the population. Wherever you find one eighth, you find slaves." This would have been more direct:

"Part of the Negroes were in the city seeking to destroy it."

The then writes an oddly awkward passive sentence about the

price:

"How can we say justly, 'How else could he have expressed..." and the war came.

"And the other would accept war."

But in his next sentence, he shifts to the direct style that we associate with Lincoln, and continues:

"Both parties deprecated war."

"But, in the city seeking to destroy it..."

Great, you spotted it.

"For several reasons (note, however, that the subjects are gen-

eral, not specific) but..." While the inaugural address was being delivered...
Lesson 10 The Ethics of Style

Believers in a living God always attribute to Him the attributes of those divine attributes which the Almighty has His own purposes. If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which in the providence of God, must needs come, but which He now wills to remove, He will remove it by some natural or necessary consequence; otherwise He would will not have introduced it, nor would He be an unfaithful debter to those whom He had created. Yet in the mean time we must exercise patience and hope. Then the majestic climax we all remember:

"With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in."

In other words, once Lincoln gets past that first abstract and indirect paragraph and a half, he demonstrates what we take to be his classic American prose style: clear, candid, simple, and direct.

Lesson 1 The Basics of Clarity and Grace

Style: The Basics of Clarity and Grace

The subject of four of the next eleven clauses is an accusative, pur-

poses of each of the sentences crafted by American writers, none of

which so perfectly Hughes the spacious syl.: clean, candid, simple, and

direct, as this classic American prose style. clear, candid, simple, and
direct...

Each looked for an easier triumph.

They read the same Bible, and pray to the same God;

Each invoked His aid against the other.

But men should never be at enmity, even as Christ became a

passive object of prayers and requests.

Then in three short passive clauses, Lincoln implies that God

can act, but has not yet acted as either side has prayed:

Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God.

Let us judge not.

That we be not judged (by God?)

The prayers of both could not be answered (by God?)

Let us judge not.

Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God.

Each invoked His aid against the other.

Each looked for an easier triumph.

(References to God are italicized.)

At this point, Lincoln's style quickens through a series of

short clauses that introduce God as a character, not yet as an

active agent, but as a passive object of prayers and requests.

Now can authority and ver just "cease?" How else could he have

written that?

The case of the conflict within the case

Neither party asked for the war, the magnificence of the duration

of it was already at hand.

Neither party expected for the war the magnitude of the duration.

The insurgents would rend the Union in its best read, that firm

hope is not dead.

The American.

faded away. The Almighty has His own purposes.

The government would read the Union.

To adjustment, perpetuation, and extension this interest was the

end of it, and balance supersedes topics.

how indirectly he keeps referring to slavery (ital. ref.)
Style: The Basics of Clarity and Grace

Lesson 10

The Ethics of Style

God provided that Americans enslave Africans, and their offspring

If God wills (to) continue (the war), it will pass away. He also knows that the war will go on, because he plans the war in advance, and though he may delay it for a while, the war will continue and end sooner or later.

If we reasonably suppose that Lincoln thought a statement so direct would raise a theological issue so thorny that, at least on this occasion, he would just as soon avoid it?

To be sure, Lincoln believed that God had ordained every terrible thing that happened to both North and South, and that the war itself happened in God's providence. But Lincoln seems unwilling to assign the origin of slavery to God. He used direct verbs to express God's agency in bringing the war and ending both it and slavery, but he nominalized verbs that would make God responsible for slavery, then buried that agency and action in the middle of the sentence (in the providence of God). But Lincoln seems unwilling to assign the origin of slavery to God.

That seventy-eight-word sentence is, I think, the stylistic tour de force of American literature. But what does that have to do with his impersonal opening paragraph? Perhaps this: Lincoln believed that the enormity of
Lesson 10

The Ethics of Style

SUMMING UP

I thought was not clear and, I think, deliberately and rightly so.

But now recall the question that motivated this discussion. How, finally, do we decide what counts as "good" writing? Is it clear, graceful, and candid, even if it fails to achieve its end? Or is it writing that does a job, regardless of its integrity and style? The Basics of Clarity and Grace

SUMMARY

Finally, there should grow the most austere of all mental qualities; I mean the sense for style. It is an aesthetic sense, based on admiration for the direct attainment of a foreseen end, simply and without waste. Style in art, style in literature, style in science, style in logic, style in practical execution have fundamentally the same aesthetic qualities, namely, attainment and restraint. The love of a subject in itself and for itself, where it is not the sleepy pleasure of pacing a mental quarter-deck, is the love of style as manifested in that study. Here we are brought back to the position from which we started back to the position from which we started.
I" Style: The Basics of Clarity and Grace

"...the ultimate morality of mind is the ultimate morality of style. The architect, with a sense for style, prefers good work. Style materializes the ideal; the engineer with a sense for style economizes his means; the artist with a sense for style transcendeth the world of being. The administrator with a sense for style ist the last achievement of the educated mind; it is also the most useful. It was stated, the utility of education. Style, in his meant sense, is the..."