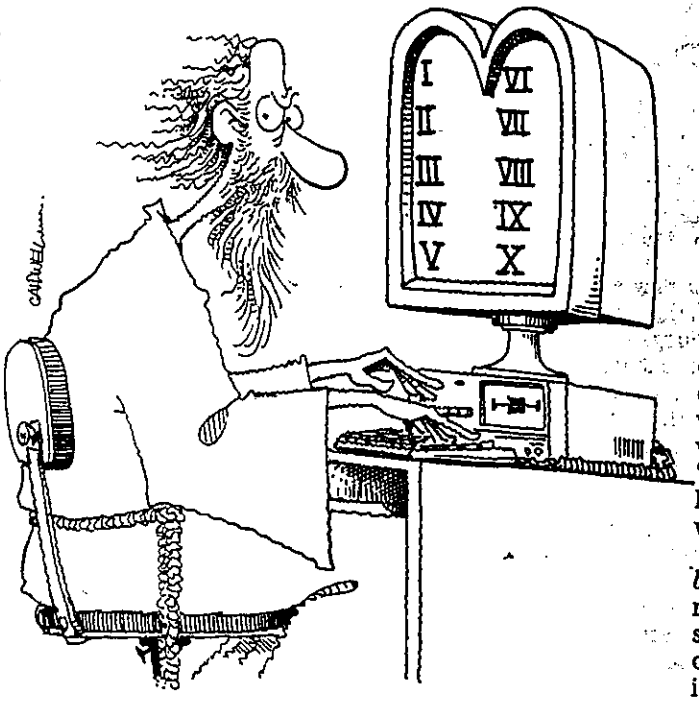
How *Not* to Write a Sentence

TEN SINS THAT GUARANTEE YOU'LL GET THE BLUE-PENCIL BLUES.



When editors talk about writers who are easy edits, they of course mean writers who get all their facts straight, answer readers' basic questions, take care of transitions and (let's not forget!) follow the assignment. But when it comes to *line editing*—working with the nuts and bolts of copy—writers who are easy edits are writers who have mastered the sentence.

I don't mean writing a grammatical sentence or a sentence in which all the words are spelled right. And I'm not talking about mere mastery of punctuation, knowing where to put a period to end a sentence. Those skills are part of the price of admission.

But editors also demand sentences that work hard, that get maximum mileage for the expenditure of words. Ultimately, after all, an article is just one sentence after another—so it's vital to make each sentence as strong as it can be. If you're trying to make a living as a writer, sentences are your stock in trade.

While striving to make every sentence sing, at minimum you must avoid some fundamental sentence-writing sins. Every editor has pet peeves, but some sentence no-no's are almost universal. If you can eradicate these stylistic errors—let's call them *The Top Ten Ways* Not *to Write a Sentence*—you'll go a long way toward becoming an easy edit and being an editor's first choice for an assignment.

First, a Caveat

Can you ever break these rules? Of course, and every good writer does. But do it consciously, for a reason. Know that you're taking a stylistic chance with a sentence, to achieve a particular effect or build a certain rhythm. Just don't commit sentence-writing sins out of ignorance or sloth. Rules are made to be broken, but mostly they're made to be kept.

Bring on the Sinners . . .

• *Beginning with* There is *or* There are. I'll confess, this is a pet peeve of mine—but I'm making up the list, so I get to lead off with one that sticks in my craw. There are few weaker ways to start a sentence than *There is* or *There are*.

See what I mean? The lifeless *there*, a word devoid of information or action, starts your sentence going nowhere. Following with a form of *to be*, rather than an action verb, keeps your sentence in neutral. By this point you're at word #3 and have yet to tell the reader a thing!

Instead of "There are few weaker ways to start a sentence than *There is* or *There are*," try: "Starting a sentence with *There is* or *There are* sucks the life out of whatever follows." Or: "Avoid starting your sentences in neutral with the directionless *There is* or *There are*."

• *Preferring passive voice.* A spiritual kin of *There is*, passive voice likewise drains the zip from your sentences. Passive voice is the language of bureaucrats, of ivory-tower academics and Pentagon paper-pushers. Passive voice reverses the English language's good old subject-verb-object scheme and makes events happen before their causes.

That model of powerful English prose, the King James Bible, shows a clear understanding that "Thou shalt not use passive voice" would have been commandment #11 if Moses hadn't had to hurry down the mountain.

Consider the opening line: "In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth." A bureaucrat or other writer infected with passive voice would have written, "In the beginning, the heaven and the earth were created by God."

Watch out for that *by* construction: It's a red flag for a sentence sin. It's a weaselly way of writing, as if no one is responsible for the actions therein: "Criminal offenses were perpetrated by congressional staffers!" (Oops!) instead of "Congressional staffers broke the law"; "Cost overruns were incurred by the application of incorrect expense-tracking procedures" instead of "The department spent too much."

• *Settling for wimpy verbs.* "Verbs," wrote William Zinsser, "are the most important of all a writer's tools." So why do so many writers weigh down their sentences with wimpy, punchless verbs?

Consider another example from the King James Bible: "Moses lifted up his hand, and with his rod he smote the rock twice." Now, *smote* isn't a verb we use much nowadays, but it's a darned good one and maybe worth resurrecting. *Lift, smite, jump, grin*—our language sparkles with potent verbs that put a picture in the reader's head. But see how that Biblical sentence reads with its verbs anesthetized: "Moses made an upward motion of his hand, and used his rod to impact the rock twice."

• *Cluttering your sentences with quite a few rather needless words.* Like *quite a few* and *rather*, for example. Strunk and White, in their indispensable *The Elements of Style*, call such clutter "the leeches that infest the

pond of prose, sucking the blood of words."

Don't use three or four words when one will do; don't use an empty word when none will do. Don't write "the reason why is that" when the simple *because* will suffice. Don't waste your time even typing "the fact that." Ruthlessly rub out *little* and *pretty* unless you're referring to size and beauty.

Such cluttered sentences make the editor's delete key click with fury. Too many of them and it's the editor who's furious, ripping you from her Rolodex file.

• *Applying adverbs very liberally.* Yes, *very* is another of those clutter words that you should root out like a dandelion on a putting green. But it's not the only adverb that offends against strong sentences.

Especially eschew adverbs in reporting quotations. Phrases such as *he said glumly* or *she opined hopefully* make editors' teeth hurt. Stick to an unadorned *he said* and *she said* except in extraordinary circumstances, and let the power of the quotation make your point. Or attach an action to the quote: "he said, wadding the report into a ball and flicking it across the room." Rely on your ears and your eyes, not the random insertion of words ending in *ly*.

• *Piling on the adjectives.* Like adverbs, adjectives must hitch a ride on your nouns and verbs; overload a sentence with adjectives and the whole contraption goes nowhere.

Keep in mind these words of Mark Twain: "Thunder is good, thunder is impressive, but it is lightning that does the work." You can thunder all you like with adjectives, but it's nouns and verbs that do the zapping.

That doesn't mean you should skip descriptions. But let the facts, not your thesaurus, do the work. Instead of writing that a man is *tall*, say he's *6'4"*. Instead of describing a profile subject's desk as *cluttered*, list some of the things that clutter it, each of which in turn adds information: computer disks, dog-eared copies of *The Wall Street Journal*, a bottle of Maalox—get the picture? You could write that it's cold, or you could report some result of the temperature: "The dog's breath fogs the air."

• *Going for the general and the vague.* It's not just in your use (or avoidance) of adjectives that you should veer toward the specific and the concrete. Details, numbers (not *a lot* but *137*), quotes, names, sensory specifics all make sentences sparkle.

Listen (yes, *listen*, because effective sentences make a music in the mind) to Sydney Lea, founder of the *Bread Loaf Quarterly*, describe the beginning of a grouse-hunting trip:

> Behind the creamery, land plummets down a steep lane of haw and blasted apple. I follow. A blaze flares from a trunk where a buck has hooked, and here and there his cuff marks and the orange dribble of his rut show as I wobble downhill.

If you'll pardon my adjective indulgence, that's vivid, vigorous writing; the sentences catch in your brain as clearly as the mark of the buck. What if instead Lea had written:

> Behind the building, the land goes downhill among some trees. I go down there. I see some signs of a buck on and around a tree as I walk downhill.

Bleah! Take a look at your own writing: Which version does it more resemble?

A classic example of the ills of generalized writing was crafted by George Orwell. As an experiment in doublespeak, Orwell rewrote this passage from Ecclesiastes in our old friend the King James Bible:

> I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favor to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.

Here's Orwell's genericized translation:

> Objective consideration of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must inevitably be taken into account.

• *Letting your sentences run on too long.* Take another look at the Orwellian version of Ecclesiastes. Gobbledygook aside, it also runs on so long that the reader's eyes begin to roll up. Compare it to the rhythm of Lea's grouse-hunting account, which mixes a medium sentence, a two-word sentence (*I follow.*) and a longish sentence.

Don't be afraid to use the period. William Faulkner could get away with sentences that ramble on for pages, but he was Faulkner. Express one thought, then end your sentence. Spend another sentence on the next thought, and so on. Don't make your editor have to try to figure out where to break up your indigestible globs of prose.

Too many short sentences is as bad as too many long sentences, of course, but that's seldom a failing of apprentice authors.

• *Writing sentences backwards.* Wolcott Gibbs nailed this sin against strong sentences in a critique of the stilted *Time*-ese of Henry Luce's *Time*, *Life* and *Fortune* magazines of the 1950s: "Backward ran sentences until reeled the mind." (He concluded his skewering with: "Where it will all end, knows God!")

Check your sentences for this symptom of stiltedness. Your sentences should read as though you were saying them to a friend, not as though you were making a speech to an academic gathering. It's impossible to turn a backwards sentence rightside-out without rewriting the whole thing, a task not many editors relish.

• *Ending sentences on a weak note.* Strunk and White advise placing your most prominent or important words at the end of your sentence, for emphasis. Because this word or phrase is typically the new idea introduced by the sentence, this strategy also pushes your prose along—from one new idea to the next.

To take one last example from the King James Bible, think of how the commandments are worded: "Thou shalt not kill." Killing is the point of this sentence—as in don't do it—so the word *kill* waits till the end. Much weaker would be: "Killing is something thou shalt not do"—by the time the sentence finishes, you've forgotten what you're not supposed to do!

A specific version of the sin of ending sentences on a weak note is the trailing *he said.* You're barreling along with a dynamite quote, full of color and character, and then you end with *he said.* Whoosh! goes the steam out of your sentence. Work that attribution in earlier, typically after the first phrase or clause of a quote.

For example: "That writer avoids the Top Ten Ways *Not* to Write a Sentence," the editor said. "She's an easy edit." ■

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