

Excerpt from *Do I Make Myself Clear?* by Harold Evans

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from Introduction

...Words have consequences. The bursting of the housing bubble that led to the Great Recession revealed that millions had signed agreements they hadn't understood or had given up reading for fear of being impaled on a lien. But as the book and movie *The Big Short* make clear, the malefactors of the Great Recession hadn't understood what they were doing either. This book on clear writing is as concerned with how words confuse and mislead with or without malice as it is with literary expression: in misunderstood mortgages; in the serpentine language of Social Security; in insurance policies that don't cover what the buyers believe they cover; in instructions that don't instruct; in warranties that prove worthless; in political campaigns erected on a tower of untruths.

Fog everywhere. Fog online and in print, fog exhaled in television studios where time is anyway too short for truth. Fog in the Wall Street executive suites. Fog in the regulating agencies that couldn't see the signals flashing danger in shadow banking. Fog in the evasions in Flint, Michigan, while its citizens drank poisoned water. Fog in the ivory towers where the arbiters of academia all over the world are conned into publishing volumes of computer-generated garbage. Fog machines in Madison Avenue offices where marketers invent diction arcs of fluff so that a swimming cap is sold as a "hair management systems" (speedousa.com, April 14, 2014). Fog in pressure groups that

camouflage their real purpose with euphemism; fog from vested interests aping the language of science to muddy the truth about climate change. Fog in the Affordable Care Act and in reporting so twisted at birth it might as well have been called the Affordable Scare Act. Fog in the U.S. Supreme Court, where five judges in *Citizens United v. Federal Elections Commission* (2010) sanctified secret bribery as freedom of speech. But never come there fog too thick, never come there mud and mire too deep, never come there bureaucratic waffle so gross as to withstand the clean invigorating wind of a Sound English sentence.

from Chapter 3: The Sentence Clinic

Who's for Slavery?

Colorado citizens voting in 2016 were invited to accept or reject a constitutional amendment. As Peter Kessler recounted in *The New Yorker* (November 21, 2016), he stood in a voting booth in the Ouray County Courthouse, at an elevation of 7,792 feet. He could cope with the thin air, but experienced a sensation of vertigo trying to find a way to oxygen through language shrouded in clouds of unthink. It helps to clarify one's own writing to ask questions of a muddled sentence. This was the enigmatic proposition:

Shall there be an amendment to the Colorado constitution concerning the removal of the exception to the prohibition of slavery and involuntary

servitude when used as punishment for persons duly convicted of a crime?

The bad writing begins with the inert, negative construction *Shall there be an amendment concerning the removal?* which means, “Shall we amend the constitution to remove the exception?”

What exception? An exception to the general rule that the state of Colorado prohibits slavery and involuntary servitude. The exception allows slavery and involuntary servitude as punishment *for people convicted of a crime*. So all the verbiage comes down to: Shall we keep slavery and involuntary servitude as punishment for criminals? Eleven words against the thirty-four in the state’s question.

Just over half the 2.2 million voters voted not to remove the exception, meaning it remained legal for the state to refuse pay or restitution for work done by prisoners. Mr. Hessler says, “I honestly cannot remember whether I voted for or against slavery.” Who can blame him?

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The Pope and a Pronoun

During the 2016 presidential campaign, Donald Trump, presumptive builder of a wall between Mexico and the United States, squared off for a word war with the pope, who said that anyone who obsesses about building walls to keep people out “is not Christian.” Then Trump thought better of it: “It was probably a nicer statement than was reported by you folks in the media.” Of course, the media is to blame just for reporting what the candidate said, but a fine columnist, commenting on Trump’s soft soap, should not have left us uncertain whether His Holiness enjoyed his Big Mac:

Now, you could see how he might have jumped to the wrong conclusion if somebody had yelled, “Hey, the pope thinks you’re not acting like a Christian!” while

he was walking into McDonald’s for lunch.

Let’s make it clear who was walking into McDonald’s:

Now, you could see how Trump might have jumped to the wrong conclusion if, while he was walking into McDonald’s for lunch, somebody had yelled, “Hey, the pope thinks you’re not acting like a Christian!”

from Chapter 4: Ten Shortcuts to Making Yourself Clear Get Moving

We’ve seen how even writers of renown try to squeeze in more words than the structure can accommodate. That confusion advertises itself. More insidious is the passive voice that so often sneaks past usage sentries. It robs sentences of energy, adds unnecessary words, seeds a slew of wretched participles and prepositions, and leaves questions unanswered: *It was decided* to eliminate the coffee break. Which wretch decided that?

Vigorous, clear, and concise writing demands sentences with muscle, strong active verbs cast in the active voice.

Active voice:

The pope kissed a baby on the forehead, leading the crowd of thousands to erupt in cheers and praise. (19 words)

Passive voice:

A baby was kissed the forehead by the pope, leading the crowd of thousands to erupt in cheers and praise. (21 words)

...When you write in the passive voice, you can’t escape adding fat any more than you can escape piling on adipose tissue when you grab a doughnut....

Prolonged exposure to business and official documents will give anyone a more intense aversion to the passive voice than

generally expressed in grammars, stylebook, and tutorials. While all duly mention its weakness, I froth at the mouth. In 1978, Jefferson D. Bates, charged with rewriting U.S. Air Force regulations, manuals, and reports, got so mad about his immersion in passives he dared to strafe “most of the experts—Strunk and White, Gunning, Flesh and all the rest, for not making the active voice Rule No. 1 for conciseness, readability, and precision.” A generation later I think he would have exempted the word warriors William Zinsser and Richard Mitchell; Zinsser regarded the difference for a writer between the active-verb style and a passive-verb style as “the difference between life and death.” Mitchell excoriated the passive and pretentious in academic writing. For me, the offense of the passive that most rankles is the escape hatch it offers to shuffle off responsibility. In chapter 9, I edit an Obama administration document on national security, riddled with cover-your-ass passives If ardor all this hectoring from me, you or your editor still find passive sentences lying prone in your paragraphs, post this one on your screen: *The moon was landed on by Neil Armstrong today.*

Be Specific

All great writing focuses on the significant details of human life and in simple, concrete terms. You cannot make yourself clear with a vocabulary steeped in vagueness. Comb through passages you are writing or editing on the art for strings of overlooked abstract nouns:

amenities, activities, operation, purpose, condition, case, character, facilities, circumstances, nature, disposition, proposition, purposes, situation, description, issue, indication, regard, reference, respect, connection, instance, eventuality, neighborhood, satisfaction

Words like these squeeze the life out of sentences.... Escape ...from “mere intellectualism with its universals and essences two concierge particulars, the smell of human breath, the sound of voices, the stir of living.” Chase out most abstract words in favor of specific words. Sentences should [contain] bricks, beds, hoses, cars, cows, men, and women. On TripAdvisor.com, an online travel guide, I read:

Mombasa is well known among travelers as a place to buy traditional Kenyan crafts and clothing. The city is full of markets that have been operating in the same way that they do today for hundreds of years. These markets are attractions in themselves, as well as places to shop, as they give visitors a genuine taste of Mombasa.

Fair enough, but the market for specifics thrives when you go shopping with Martha Gellhorn, who arrived in Mombasa to set up house in 1964:

We shopped ourselves blind. It is never heart-lifting to concentrate on garbage cans, pillow slips, knives, forks etc. But there were compensations. Between the bath-towel store and the frying-pan emporium, one passed on the Mombasa streets a while exotic world, Sikhs with their beards in hair nets Indian ladies wearing saris, caste marks and octagonal glasses. Muslim African women enormous and coy, hidden except for their eyes in black rayon sheets tattooed tribesmen loading vegetable trucks; memsahibs driving neat cars filled with groceries and blond children; bwanas in white shirts and shorts and long white socks, hurrying to their offices....Bicycles zoomed in like flies.

The scene is alive. ...

Ration Adjectives, Raze Adverbs

In World War II Britain, posters interrogated travelers waiting for a train: *Is Your Journey Really Necessary?* Subject your sentence to the third degree: Is your adjective really, really necessary to define the subject of your sentence, or is it there for show? What exactly, precisely, does your adverb add to the potency of this or that verb or adjective?

You can see we are in trouble already. *Really, exactly, and precisely* have elbowed in. Adverbs modifying verbs and nouns and adjectives have the excuse that they tell us where, when, and how, but mostly they clutter sentences. [Eliminate] adverbs hitching a ride on verbs whether quickly, slowly, lazily, feebly, or wearily. Most *the honest joy gleaming*, adverbs don't enhance. They enfeeble. If you are inclined, judgmentally, to challenge this assertion, I will ask Stephen King to terrify you with his story of dandelions growing sinisterly in a lawn. The author of the sentence, "I believe the road to hell is paved with adverbs" feels strongly. Alternatively, you could use the Adverb Annihilator free on any laptop or mobile. Just type in *ly* and interrogate all the *ly* adverbs that pop up.

Adjectives are more seductive. As a young reporter assigned to cover a few soccer matches, I was checked in admiring my colorful writing by a stylebook chastisement: "Genesis does not begin, 'The amazingly dramatic story of how God made the world in the remarkable short time of six days.'" The best of the good sportswriters today have lean prose and narrative excitement, George Orwell's distemper with sportswriting lay in his detestation of international team sports as fomenters of nationalism, but this World Cup collation of adjectives and adverbs in a single report for the *Sunday Times* would have been a target:

Magnificent...out of this world... their glowing skills and unflinching bravery...this man of magic. The thunder of exultant...rejoicing thousands; raked *relentlessly* through a shattered defense....An athletic immortal in his own golden age flicked in a shot that was a gem, a jewel of gold—no, a Crown Jewel...the golden dread subdued and well-phrased... so gallant and *knightly*; the red-and-white-cauldron of Wembley bubbled *joyously*...the honest joy gleaming.

Relentlessly detracts from the strong verb *raked*; the pre-emptive *joyously* has no business button in on *honest joy gleaming*. And beware of superlatives. Rinse them through a sieve for accuracy. The biggest, second tallest, second fastest, and nowhere the richest.

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If something is amusing or sensational, there is no need to tell us it is amusing and sensational. Just describe the incidents that amused or shocked, and we'll do the laughing and the grimacing.