

Elegant Writing – Report

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The pen is sometimes flightier than the words

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If you missed my first report,^{*} I should explain to you that I have been designated Chief Word Watcher, Western Hemisphere Division, and have been instructed to submit reports from time to time on outstanding examples of elegant writing in what is best known as the Clandestine Service. It has been some months since my first report, and I must say that I have been impressed by the response. Elegant writing has definitely begun to attract the attention of our officers.

There are some areas which still need improvement, nevertheless. Too many of our writers are still utilizing the word "use" where they could just as well use "utilize" and get the same meaning out of it. The mitigate/militate ratio is merely holding its own, when in fact we ought to be expanding our use of "mitigate against." As to the flout/flaunt ratio, we may even be losing ground, and I urge you all to be especially watchful for instances of contempt for the law so that we can 'be sure that it gets flaunted rather than flouted.

There is also one point which I failed to make in my first report, because quite frankly I didn't think we were having any trouble with it, but I now find that that is not the case. The problem is in the modern and forceful use of the words *target*, *aim*, *fault*, and *blame*. It is oldfashioned to aim at

a target. One targets at an aim these days. The same can be said for blaming people for being at fault. Today we fault them for being to blame. This is a process of shaping meanings which delights us veteran word watchers, and I can even see possibilities in these words for an entire reversal of meaning, as happened with our old friend sanction. Think of the linguistic genius it required to give one word two diametrically opposed meanings! "The U.N. today sanctioned sanctions against Israel." It is an aim we should target at.

Here are a few samples of elegant writing, selected at random from my collection of the past six months:

"The actions must be completed in as quickly a time as possible."

"Transmitted hereto for your retention and information. ..."

"We regret that reference cable was ambivalent and apparently misleading."

"They described him as a friendly type who loves entertaining people."

"He has been out visiting the grass roots."

As you read, it will become evident to you that our best work during this period has been in our descriptions of people and the things they do. One of the most impressive of these is the following: "Although sleeping at the time of the officer's contact, the American Consul talked to Mr. Doe on 25 September, and was lucid and alert." You can't tell whether that is a dangling participle or a *non sequitur*, and therein lies its charm.

"The reference, made in a letter, by Doe's wife to Doe having gotten himself involved in espionage, though, might be indicative of something, albeit enigmatic."

"He believes the risk will be minimal* if students and instructors utilize reasonable jurisprudence in the course of the exercise."

"He incurred the intense displeasure of the war ministry and general officers close to the president recently by pubically advocating abolition of the congressional authority."

I showed that last one to my friend, the Senior Officer, who pronounced it a typographical error and therefore not really deserving of high marks. I would agree if it were only the absence of the "l" between the "b" and the "i", but the addition of the "al" as the penultimate syllable can hardly be a typographical error, and the author of that sentence therefore gets top grades from me for his effort, especially since he had the great good sense to avoid any actual description of the gestures a man makes when he publically advocates something.

"This announcement by the two officials should put an end to specific rumors of one firing the other, or vice versa."

"At that time they were in the first stages of a broken marriage."

"Even the carrot and stick approach of offering a higher income did not produce results."

"The old man, although infirm, obviously is not on his dying bed."

The following three quotations demonstrate what I have come to call the Puderbaugh Principle of Traumatic Terseness. We all know what a great impact one can achieve by making portentous statements in few words. "Lafayette, we are here." "I cannot spare this general. He fights." Now observe how much greater an impact can be achieved when the short statement describes the totally unexpected — not to say unbelievable:

"Doe and his wife had a daughter of four. When he last saw her she was pregnant."

"Fulano's wife is in her late twenties and their daughter, Mary, is aged about four. The latter is rather pale and sickly. She doesn't like Graustark very much. She smokes."

"Mengano was one of seven children, and was raised without a father who was killed by a log in a forest."

Given the rather consistent distortion of our work by the news media,

the public might be pardoned for supposing that people in our profession live in a James Bond kind of world. If the truth were to be told (and it can certainly be deduced from the foregoing demonstrations of Puderbaugh's Principle) ours is much more of a Tolkien world than a Bond world. The people we deal with are surrounded by dangers Bond never dreamed of, and that may explain why they feel impelled to begin enjoying life, and reproducing it, at a very early age.

While we are on the subject of descriptions of persons and their doings, I must announce with some sadness that a writer from another agency has won this year's Grand Prize for Baroque Bloviation. CIA has done some fine things, but nothing to compare with the following analysis which a Defense Department officer wrote about the wife of a government official in his country of assignment:

"She has a presentable personality with a modern posture, who is well versed in world affairs, where by modern standards she is considered to be a whole person."

Another non-CIA writer has been granted an honorable mention for excellence in Freudian Implications. He is a senior foreign service officer at one of our embassies, who informed his Washington office:

"The editor of a respected weekly called on me today to discuss the current political situation which he predicted would come to an end very soon."

It must be the golden dream, the cherished Nirvana, of our harried friends in the State Department — that moment when a political situation comes to an end.*

In no other instance did I find our writers to have been bested by those of other agencies, although I do have an item of special interest from USAID which I shall present to you later in this report. Our writers are especially good in those constructions which separate vital sentence parts from one another and place high-class words between them, selected and arranged so as to give the reader many minutes of

enchantment as he searches for the meaning. The first of these sentences also evokes folk-feelings of the ancient past, echoing the syntax of the Germanic Mother Tongue.

"He helped his daughter, with whom he is quite close, out financially."

"We feel that the university, while still an important target, is less so than it once was. Even if it were, the situation on campus makes the operation impossible."

The beauty of that last quotation at first seemed to me to lie in its antecedent anarchy, but upon closer examination I discovered that the anarchy is much more pervasive than a mere indiscipline of pronouns and their antecedents. Here it is entire thoughts which are launched from their pads and enter orbit without ever achieving rendezvous with sister components.

Closely related to the foregoing examples of skillful disarticulation of sentence parts is the practice of redundancy. It is not difficult to be redundant, of course, and no special merit attaches to the mere repetition of a thought twice in several dozen words, but when you can express the same idea three times in five words you are in a class by yourself:

"That would make his estimated ETA on or about 5 July."

For technical excellence in tautology, that sentence is the best of the season, but for a symmetry which closely approaches poetry I think we would have to give the prize to this one:

"If Doe were arrested as soon as feasibly possible ... "

There are some sentences which mirror a truly and innately elegant soul — a writer who not only puts down elegant sentences, but whose

thoughts are elegantly arranged. Here is a sentence which comes from the mind of just such an aristocrat, a writer who is modern enough to have no compunction about ending a sentence with a preposition, but who at the same time steadfastly avoids any ellipsis of relative pronouns:

"In order to return, he had to be guaranteed work and a house which to move into."

I shall now list a number of items which do not fall into any special Wordwatcher classification, but which deserve our respectful attention all the same:

"The SDNT, the largest and only exile group in Graustark. . . ."

"He was determined not to defend red tape for its own sake."

"Misnomering of ammunition is illegal."

"We apologize for the readability of the copies."*

"Parallelly, we plan to start work on another project."

"We opted not to reopen the question to avoid the risk of needlessly beating a dead horse." **

"That would be opening the magic Pandora's box."

"We would be foolhearty if we were to dismiss it lightly."

"They threw Molotov cocktails against five downtown stores during daylight hours in lightening demonstrations."

A word is in order here about *lightening demonstrations*. I have had many discussions about this with associates in headquarters who have never been to the field, and who think the reference is really to *lightning demonstrations*. It is surprising that this kind of objection can come from people who live in Washington, D. C., for they have witnessed the real thing right in their own city. Briefly, any demonstration which reduces a downtown store's inventory by several tons, or sets fire to its premises,

can without hesitation be classed as a *lightening demonstration*. Demonstrations which include the use of Molotov cocktails are, by definition, *lightening* ones.

I was especially pleased during this period to see that one writer had extended the use of the word *majority* beyond anything our people had ever dared before. There had been a serious flood in his area of assignment, and in due course he reported that "the majority of the water had receded," and thereby implied that there was a minority of the water still around. From sad experience, however, I have learned not to trust such statements about the majority of, say, the money, or the weather, or the pollution, because I have found that many of our writers don't really know the definition of *majority*, and may in fact be talking about a plurality of these things. So I recommend great care with this usage.

In conclusion I want to report to you about a writer who works for USAID, who recently came to my attention. I know we must not proselyte, but if there is any way to get this man to transfer to our agency we should try our best to do it. He is clearly of managerial stature. He writes:

"We must steer a careful course between doing nothing about future plans and doing the irrelevant."

That statement comes close to the beauty of Ring Lardner's masterpiece, "Although he was not a good outfielder, he was not a good hitter, either." It is a question of keeping one part of a sentence from ever knowing what the other part is doing, and it is this kind of perfection toward which we must continue to strive. Few of us can hope to attain such high levels of elegance, but we must not let the seeming unattainability of the goal keep us from doing our best at all times. You can rest assured that any activity you engage in to equal or better the foregoing examples of elegant writing will be sanctioned by the highest authority.

Footnotes

* *Studies in Intelligence*, XVI/1.

* "Minimal" is a very OK word this year.

* The moment when a political situation reaches its zenith, on the other hand, has never been better described than by a State cable from North Africa in the mid-50's which may antedate Mr. Puderbaugh's research: "The seething cauldron is approaching the crossroad, and it is beyond the power of the French to get it back on the tracks." One sighs that these cables had no visual aids. [Editor.]

* An apology which might well be made for much of our official correspondence.

** Analogies have a way of losing their relevance as years pass. The writer of this sentence was wise enough to perceive that dead horses are not what they used to be. One must be careful to distinguish between those dead horses which it is bootless to beat, and those which can be turned into a profitable enterprise only by the application of the bastinado.

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