

Do I make myself clear? Why writing well matters (a review)

Original work by Harold Evans published by Little Brown 2017

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Published in Training, Language and Culture Vol 1 Issue 4 (2017) pp. 103-106 doi: [10.29366/2017tlc.1.4.8](https://doi.org/10.29366/2017tlc.1.4.8)

Recommended citation format: Tomalin, B. (2017). Do I make myself clear? Why writing well matters (a review). *Training, Language and Culture*, 1(4), 103-106. doi: [10.29366/2017tlc.1.4.8](https://doi.org/10.29366/2017tlc.1.4.8)



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Former editor of the *Times*, *Sunday Times* and President of *Random House Publishers* in New York, Harold Evans is one of the most prestigious of international newspaper editors. I had the honour and privilege of interviewing him for the BBC while he was still at the Sunday Times and admired his simplicity and clarity of explanation while sharing his liking for George Orwell's essay on style in *Politics and the English Language*. Orwell indeed appears in the introduction, praised for 'indicting bad English for corrupting thought and slovenly thought for corrupting language.' However, as Evans goes on to say, 'For all its benefits the digital era Orwell never glimpsed has had unfortunate effects, not least making it easier to obliterate the English language by carpet-bombing us with extravaganzas of marketing mumbo-jumbo.'

This is a book about style, how to write simply and

clearly but also using words and images that are memorable. It will be of great value to teachers and students at CEFR B2+ and C1 levels and also to near fluent non-native speakers and to native speakers interested in improving their writing skills. It uses up to date references from international politics and business and shows how to edit them for great simplicity and great effect. Therefore, it is also useful as authentic material for CLIL classes in global politics, business and for teaching academic writing and journalistic skills.

Harold Evans has divided the book into three sections. The first part, *Tools of the Trade*, focuses on techniques. The second part, *Finishing the Job*, focuses on narrative and the final section, *Consequences*, examines some of the results of poor use of words and misleading language. The nub of the book for teachers and learners are the chapters on sentence structure and organisation

and on techniques for making yourself clear with an analysis of good and bad style. In the *Sentence Clinic* chapter Evans analyses a number of long political tracts and shows how to edit them rewriting the text so that it becomes shorter and clearer. For example, he reduces a 165-word text by the British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald to 29 words and makes the meaning absolutely clear. Writing shorter sentences is the first and one of the most important pieces of advice.

Evans describes long introductory phrases as 'predatory phrases'. These are subordinate clauses placed before the main point and intended to introduce it. All these clauses do however is to distract the reader and make it more difficult to grasp the main point. Punctuation can also be confusing. The overuse of dashes and misuse of brackets to add explanations can also take away from the all-important central message. Another problem is cramming too many ideas into one sentence so that the reader is confused and the central message is lost. Among several ideas for improving sentence structure is making sure the message is clear. Look at your text. Are your sentences too long? Do you sandwich together too many ideas?

Can you break sentences up? Make them shorter? If you can, you will be a better writer and your readers will understand better and appreciate what

you have to say. In the chapter *Ten shortcuts to make yourself clear* Evans offers tips which writers can put into action immediately.

Use active rather than passive voice to ensure your writing is clear, vigorous and concise.

Be specific. Use simple concrete terms.

Avoid abstract nouns or if you can't avoid them, use them sparingly.

Ration adjectives, he advises. Raze adverbs.

Cut the fat. Review your work and cut out repetition.

Organise your work for clarity, be positive and put people first.

Don't be a bore. Be prepared to vary the types of sentences you write in order to maintain the reader's interest.

However, says Evans, don't be afraid to repeat a word when it is necessary and makes an impact. All these points and many others are illustrated by texts by well-known journalists, authors, reporters and, where necessary, edited to make them shorter and more effective. They provide really useful examples for classwork. Study the text with the students and then get them to edit it to make the

message clearer and stated in fewer words. Then show how Harold Evans has done it and compare. The result? A wonderful lesson in writing and editing skills which can help students improve their style and approach the texts they read with greater critical awareness.

Zombie nouns, flesh-eaters and pleonasms are three Evans bugbears. *Zombies* are nouns that have *devoured* verbs. For example, using *implementation* when it would be easier to use the verb *implement*. Zombie nouns have the effect of creating abstractions that reduce the impact of the message. If you use a verb the sentence has much more impact, is shorter and more concise. For example, *the problem is of a considerable extent* is much more actively expressed as *It's a big problem*. Instead of *car parking facilities*, why not simply say *car parks*?

Flesh eaters describes phrases used instead of simply words. Evans lists 1100 of these, such as *at this point in time* instead of *now*. Pleonasms are similar to *flesh eaters* but they are redundant phrases often used for emphasis. For example, the phrase *free, gratis and for nothing* simply means *free* but the pleonasm *free, gratis and for nothing* emphasises the fact that the product or service referred to is free of charge.

In case you are wondering, yes, there is a list of over 200 pleonasms with the redundant words in

italics – another useful exercise.

The second part of the book is concerned with narrative and has a very useful section of words that are frequently confused. For example, *further and farther*. Use *farther* for distances Harold Evans advises and gives the example, *Thus far and no farther*. Use *further* for additions as in *furthermore*.

The final part of the book comes back to the opening comments about Orwell. The speed and nature of modern electronic communication has introduced new words and new styles of writing into language.

It has also immensely increased the number of times language is used to hide wrongdoing and to confuse customers about their commercial and even legal rights. Evans takes a number of stories and articles describing commercial fraud, political manipulation and world events such as reports on terrorist attacks, prints them out and in an appendix and shows how their message can be made clearer in an edited and shorter version.

These texts offer wonderful authentic material for teachers and self-study material for journalists, publicists and people involved in legal drafting and explanation. Students can study the text and understand the background context they intend to explain. Then, in groups they can edit them and then compare their efforts with Harold Evans's

edited versions.

Finally, let us be clear. This is not a language teacher's manual. This is an enormously interesting and entertaining review of how English language style has deteriorated and how it can be revived. In this sense, it recalls Mark Thompson's analysis

of the decline of public speech in his *Enough Said* (See the review in TLC 3). Its aim is to show how laziness and manipulation have diminished the impact of the printed word and how careful editing and style can ensure writing with impact. For Evans, writing well matters. Does he make himself clear? Absolutely.