

## On Tightening

For most of its history literature has taken the form of epic poetry. This history is long: five thousand years, perhaps much longer. And within the genre of epic poetry – from the Egyptian Pyramid Texts to Homer to the Kalevala – every word counts. The rhythm counts. The resonance and fluidity count. No slack exists in these texts, no lazy meanderings of phrase or structure. These ancient texts are spare, clean, and tight. We could learn a great deal from these archaic authors. There are reasons for the enduring quality of their texts.

So, to be an epic poet:

- Write one sentence at a time.
- Review the sentence before moving on. Make it as perfect as you can. Spend all day on one sentence if required (but don't spend too long...)
- Make sure your sentence contains the best words for what you are trying to say.
- Examine the phrase order. Look for a tighter order, more spare or visceral or elegant.
- Speak the sentence aloud. Find its rhythm and sonority. Tweak as required. Don't rush.
- Take out all extra words and lazy phrasings, especially those that are habitual. Excise adverbs, gerunds, and verb phrases ("there is...", "I've done...", "We're going...") whenever possible.
- Shorten the sentence if you can (without diminishing its meaning).
- Take a short break, gaze out the window, return to the sentence, and review it once more.
- Leave it alone. Build your next sentence.

Good writing builds sentence upon sentence. Each new contribution adds to the structure and the framework of clarity. Why go farther (Quick Tip: "farther" refers to distance or extent; "further" denotes an action in service of) – why go farther down your creative track when the foundation is not yet established? I know, you have probably been told to just write, to get words on the page, to come back to them later and try to make sense of your scratchings. No, I am not a fan of this approach. I prefer to approach writing as a Zen-like activity, an action of the razor-sharp mind and open heart working together. Writing, for me, is not catharsis but clarity.

Let's take a practical example. Here's a possible sentence:

Down on Granville Street, where my grandfather's jewelry store used to be, there are now a bunch of old, boarded-up buildings waiting quietly to be renovated.

Alright, this is a start. I'm trying to say something in this sentence: about change, nostalgia, perhaps about renewal. It's not yet clear. So, let's start with the beginning:

Down on Granville Street

Down and on are both prepositions, only one of which is required. Therefore we can make this first phrase more succinct:

On Granville Street

Next up, the second phrase:

where my grandfather's jewelry store used to be

This phrase is the heart of the sentence; it needs to be clear and strong. Used to be is an awkward verb phrase. It tries to articulate, in three words, the nostalgia and ambivalence of the sentence. And yet, used to be is almost devoid of meaning here. It is a marker and nothing more. Let's try something more robust and imaginal:

where my grandfather's jewelry store once stood

By using once stood in this way, we're indicating the past in more resonant terms. We are also implying a fall – what once stood, then fell. Also, we're implying a steadfastness of the old place, a sense of presence that was previously lacking. So far so good. Now, onto the tricky part:

there are now a bunch of old, boarded-up buildings  
waiting quietly to be renovated

Well, this is a tidy mess. Too many things going on, too many overt indications when subtlety is called for. Not to mention the awkward phrase a bunch of. Yikes. Where to begin? How about with some editing:

...old, boarded-up buildings waiting quietly to be renovated

OK, this makes things a bit easier. Now we have the rudiments of a decent clause, something about old buildings:

boarded-up buildings waiting quietly to be renovated

We know that the gerunds and adverbs are typically (except right here!) to be avoided, so we can clean up the phrase:

boarded-up buildings wait to be renovated

Now, tumbledown is a better word than boarded-up (ramshackle would be good here, too). And wait to be renovated is awkward and anthropomorphic in a way that doesn't seem to suit the imagery of the sentence. And we might spruce up the language a bit with some alliteration (use sparingly!):

tumbledown buildings lie in lethargy

Better. But I keep thinking about ramshackle and tumbledown. Could I use both? Let's see:

ramshackle buildings lie in lethargy upon the tumbledown street.

I like this. But it will require that I abandon my theme of renewal. The sentence will be more sad without it, yet probably more authentic too. And less self-conscious. Let's try the whole thing out:

On Granville Street, where my grandfather's jewelry store once stood, ramshackle buildings lie in lethargy upon the tumbledown street.

Not bad. The sentence embodies nostalgia, sadness, personal and social loss, and something else – but we don't know what yet. It's something about what happens next, or later, the contrast between the past and the present. The sentence itself leads me on, as its writer, to the next stage. It provokes me to think about contrasts, about words such as glittering and forlorn, and about what we preserve and discard. I cannot write the next sentence without first the polished catalyst of the first.

## Practical Tips

**Use Concrete Imagery** The writer is a ruminative animal (like a cow, in fact). We chew over our lives and histories, we digest and express the stories to which we are drawn. This process requires a good deal of thought. Writers think – cogitate speculate, perambulate – and we write down our thoughts. Yet we forget, often, that the reader does not have access to our mind, does not perceive the interconnections and contexts which lead us to our conclusions. We must show the reader that context, the web of threads and images by which we derive our narratives. And this requires that we replace our inner ruminations with concrete imagery.

On its own, unaccompanied by imagery, I am sad is poor writing. The reader is offered no means by which to understand the cause or nature of the sadness. The writer must provide the path to understanding by way of imagery. Typically, the rule for this situation involves four or five concrete images for each internal rumination. Like so:

Sheets of rain strike the window. I gaze into the dark, searching for the glimmer of proud trees across the field. Too dark to see anything. The house, empty now, twists and groans in the sidelong wind. Every whisper of its movement reminds me of the long, sad night ahead.

In the above passage, sad is embedded within imagery, layered, integrated. It is not a rumination but a concrete indication of feeling. And it comes in the last of five sentences, thus proving the rule. This rule also has another name: *Show, Don't Tell*.

**Use the present tense** Even when writing about the past, the present tense is usually the best route to clarity. Other tenses and moods require more words, encourage abstraction, and introduce a barrier between the immediacy of the reader and the distance of the text. These problems are most evident when writers use the subjunctive mood (or tense), which is defined as follows:

*Subjunctive: a mood that represent an act or state (not as a fact but) as contingent or possible.*

Strictly speaking, the subjunctive mood uses words such as if, that, though, lest, unless, except, until and so on. But in a more general way, the subjunctive mood, or tense, might be described as any writing that removes the reader from the concrete and present tense:

I wish my dog were here.

If Dave were stronger, he would have been able to lift the tree stump.

If I had paid more attention to my instructor's tips about creative writing, I would be a better writer.

I requested that John be present at the wedding.

The above examples illustrate various ways in which subjunctive approaches to writing introduce extra words and awkward phrases. Replacing these with concrete phrases in the present tense improves the writing:

My dog is here.

Dave is not strong enough the lift the stump.

I listen to my creative writing instructor. My writing improves.

John comes to the wedding.

Here is a short list of words and phrases that often accompany writing that meanders away from the present tense and from concrete imagery. Avoid these words and phrases whenever possible:

there, would, could, were/was, has/had, even, those/these, that/this

**Avoid adverbs and gerunds** A gerund is a noun formed from a verb: walking, for example. Gerunds usually end in *ing*, and their erasure is one of the single most positive changes a writer can make. Gerunds are problematic for two reasons: they encourage adverbs and they drift toward abstraction (see tips one and two).

For example, a writer may describe a scene of walking as follows:

I was walking down the street, quickly, not paying too much attention to the hurtling traffic and the shop-keepers shouting stridently from their stalls.

This vignette is neither in the present tense (and is therefore less concrete than it might be) nor is it crisp and clear enough. As soon as the writer begins with the gerund walking, all the other adverbs and gerunds in the sentence follow naturally; awkwardly and naturally. Gerunds, therefore, imply adverbs and abstraction. Also, gerunds require more words and tenses: was walking requires two words to state a simple verb. Here's how to reduce the confusion:

I walk down the street. My steps are quick, my attention wanders. I do not notice the hurtling traffic, nor the shouts of strident shop-keepers as I pass their stalls.

The revised passage is more immediate, possesses an air of expectation (of suspense, almost), is constructed with precision, and contains no extra words. The revision begins with a present tense action: I walk down the street. The remainder of the passage builds naturally, preserves the original clarity. Better. Stronger.

Like gerunds, adverbs – typically words that end in *ly* – introduce abstraction and encourage awkward phrasings. An adverb qualifies a verb, limits or augments the verbal meaning. As such, an adverb serves the same function as a bank of fog laid across a shoreline. The fog obscures, mediates, filters. Almost always, adverbs may be replaced with more accurate verbs and fewer words; as in the example above, with the adverb quickly replaced by the verb quick and a concrete image of the steps of the walker.

Gerunds and adverbs are not always avoidable. They are necessary at times, and need not be shunned entirely. But often they are lazy solutions. Avoid them whenever feasible.

**Tune your vocabulary** Writing is not speech. And yet the habits of speech tend to infiltrate writing. Resist this whenever possible: look for these infiltrations, replace them with narrative structures, preserve the clarity of your vision. For example, I am not a farmer, and I do not eat broccoli is better than I'm not a farmer, and I don't eat broccoli. Apostrophes derive from speech, and are usually to be avoided in writing (except in the case of possessives, obviously). In similar fashion, it is best to limit the use, in writing, of the following common and conversational words:

really, very, it, quite, real, some, somehow, someone, something, everything, thing, anyone, maybe, little, been, your, never, always, only, just, deep, people, about, being, get, guess

The vocabulary of a writer need not be coruscating or arcane or hermetic. Small and common words will do, and in most cases should do. Small words encourage precision and clarity. The order of such words, the manner in which they are structured as narrative and not as speech, determines much of the quality of writing.

**Know your habits** In addition to the various strategies outlined above, writers also need to be aware of their individual proclivities: their habits of laziness, their favorite and over-used words, the ways in which they sacrifice clarity for muddiness. The following are the most common secondary errors:

- Awkward phrase order in compound sentences
- Awkward shifts of scene or tense
- Awkward use of vocabulary
- Lack of clear narrative direction
- Stating the obvious rather than showing through imagery

These habits and their kin – the many pitfalls and hurdles that lie along the path of writing – are avoided only through practice. Go slow, review each sentence as you write, make a list of your common errors and search for each error as you compose. Remember the primary goal: clarity.