

The Way of Flesch

The Art of Writing Readable Cases

Clyde Freeman Herreid

I was browsing in the Santa Fe Public Library not long ago. I walked into the little nook where they house books donated to the library for resale. There, for a piddling amount of money, were a few gems: yet another unauthorized biography of Barbara Streisand; a copy of an old John Updike novel that mined the middle-aged psyche of Bech; Carl Sagan's last book of essays finished shortly before his death and appropriately called "Billions and Billions," something he claims he never said in his TV series *Cosmos*; and a little sleeper of a paperback on writing. The title intrigued me: *The Art of Readable Writing*. Linguist Rudolf Flesch wrote it. He had been consultant to the Associated Press, where he cajoled the news staff to throw off the straightjacket formula of writing their stories with the traditional "Who-What-Where-When-Why-and-How" approach. He asked, "How can readers absorb the main facts of the news" if this tired approach "is subordinated to the human interest treatment?"

We can ask the same question about case studies that so often are overburdened with the formal writing style we

learned in graduate school—that scientific and dreadful boring way of writing in the passive and third person voice.

This 50-year-old book is chock full of great advice about writing. I'd like to share some of its wisdom because it is useful for any kind of writing including case studies. Central to Flesch's theme is the axiom "Write as you speak." Be straightforward in your sentences. Unfortunately, some academics speak just as poorly as they write, so this advice won't always work. But the idea, "write as you speak," is sound advice for case writing. Before diving into Flesch's recipe for success, let me hasten to say that many fine cases have been written using a formal style. But I am convinced that many more fine cases will be written by following Flesch's advice than will be written by ignoring it. So consider this column a book report with my kibitzing thrown in.

Know your audience

Writing for elementary school children isn't the same as writing for insurance agents. The problems are different. So are the language and the traditions. Here's Flesch's version of Aristotle pointing out the difference between young and old:

Young men have strong desires... they are fond of victory, for youth likes to be superior... they are sanguine... they live their lives in anticipation... they have high aspirations... they are prone to pity... fond of laughter...

Elderly men... are cynical... suspicious... they aspire to nothing great or

exalted, but crave the mere necessities and comforts of existence... they live in memory rather than anticipation... they are mastered by love of gain...

Or, as Flesch puts it,

young people like romance, adventure, and daydreams, and old people like practical, down-to-earth, bread-and-butter stuff... So, when you want to convey information to the young, take a hint: make it a story—with a happy ending.

Not just the facts

You may recall the old television show *Dragnet* where Detective Joe Friday cuts off any asides that a witness tries to make with his favorite line, "The facts, ma'am, just the facts." Flesch argues that if you don't use examples, dashes of color, "and a good assortment of useless information," the reader won't remember the facts.

Point of view

For your writing to be readable, you must have a point of view. You must have a hero who undergoes trials and tribulations. You can write cases with a stooge asking questions of a hero, a Dr. Watson playing up to Sherlock Holmes. You can write the case from the vantage point of a typical member of a group faced with a problem—the generic victim. But the hero must have a name. And I argue that in cases, especially cases with a serious theme, the names should not be cute. Don't call the

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physician treating a case of lung cancer, Dr. Cough, or a forensic pathologist, Bill Crimeboy. This trivializes the case and reduces it to little more than a joke, something that teachers should try hard to avoid. Even with fictionalized cases, make them as real as possible.

The best heroes are ones that you can identify with. But they don't have to be people. They could be animals. I have had veterinarians write excellent cases from the viewpoint of a dog with a heart problem or a horse with a broken leg. I haven't yet seen a case written from the viewpoint of a paramecium or a liverwort, but there isn't any reason why they can't be written. Flesch reminds us that the U.S. Army fought malaria in World War II with a booklet about Ann the Anopheles Mosquito, and the state of Alabama produced a pamphlet about Hubert Hookworm.

Personalization can be extended to parts of the body. Years ago *Reader's Digest* published a series of articles with

titles like "I am Joe's Heart" and "I am Joe's Pancreas" written in the first person. It is even possible to personalize inanimate objects. Kipling wrote poems from the viewpoint of machines and ships. And let's not forget that there is a rich history of storytelling from unusual viewpoints—remember Aesop? Any children's book, such as *The Little Engine That Could*, or Saturday morning cartoon tells a story. Why not try it in case writing?

Human interest

Flesch has a yardstick for measuring the human interest in your writing. Count up all the personal names in a piece you have written. Then count the personal pronouns, skipping any *it* or *they* that refers to things not people. Count all of the nouns like *aunt*, *widower*, or *guy* where the gender is clear. Skip words like *students* or *teacher* where the gender isn't obvious. Then count the number of times you used the words *people*

or *folks*. The total of these words calculated, as a percentage of the total number of words in your text, will give you a good measure of how strong the human interest element is. In a dull scientific piece, the percentage will be zero. In a fast-paced novel where characters' names abound, it will be around 20. In readable nonfiction magazines, such as *Time* or *Newsweek*, it ranges between six and eight.

Use dialogue

Virtually any writing can be turned into dialogue. People will choose to read dialogue over almost any other writing style. Flesch argues that "a seasoned popular nonfiction writer knows that to interest his readers he must not only turn most of his material into narrative, but he must go one step further and turn a large part of that narrative into dialogue." The percentage of dialogue varies enormously in different kinds of writing. In technical papers the percent-

Figure 1. Reading ease formula

Reading ease is calculated by combining the length of words and the length of sentences:

Average length of sentences multiplied by 1.015	_____
Number of syllables in a 100 words multiplied by 0.846	_____
Sum	_____
Subtract from 206.835	_____
Reading ease score	

age will be zero while in popular magazine articles it will be between 12 and 15 percent and can reach 50 percent. Which would you rather read?

Use conversational writing

If you were to write the way you speak, you would use a lot of contractions. You'd write you'd, can't, shouldn't, I've, we'll, don't, didn't, and let's instead of their more formal counterparts. You would write "who" instead of "whom." You would write, "Can I go?" instead of "May I go?" You would use "like" whenever you'd like. You wouldn't give a fig if you split an infinitive or dangled a participle. And you'd say, "It's me!" when it is you.

If you were writing real dialogue, you wouldn't worry if you used the same word twice in a sentence and repeated yourself, because that's the way real people speak. Here are Hillary Clinton's comments at a press conference disclaiming any involvement in her husband's presidential pardons. "You know, it came as a complete surprise to me. . . . You know, I did not have any involvement, you know, and I'm just very disappointed. . . . Oh, you know, as I have said in the past, there were many, many people who spoke to me or, you know, asked me to pass on information. . . ." But use some sense here. If we really put in all of the "duhs" and "ahhs" and gibberish that we mouth, it wouldn't be readable.

Sentence length

Professor L.A. Sherman from the University of Nebraska discovered back in 1893 that there has been a

striking decrease in the length of sentences over time. In Elizabethan times written sentences averaged about 45 words. They may have been elegant, but surely, no one ever spoke that way—certainly Shakespeare didn't. Victorian sentences were down to 29 words, and in the 1890s, they were 20. Today, popular writing averages 17 or 18 words per sentence.

Short sentences are easy to read and easy to comprehend. However, too many of them in a row gives a jerky staccato flavor, which is fine if you wish to give your writing a breathless quality, but it can get irritating if it goes on too long. Use complex sentences now and again, but punctuate them well to avoid finding yourself in a James Joycean syntactic sinkhole.

Great beginnings and strong endings

"Call me Ishmael" is the famous opening line of *Moby Dick*. It is memorable and personable. It immediately captures your interest. You wonder who this guy with the exotic name is. Another brilliant opening is Tolstoy's beginning for *Anna Karenina*: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." They are grabbers. You want to read more. So you do. The author has your attention.

Mystery writer Edward D. Hoch

says that the ideal opening will do three things: grab the reader, introduce a character, and establish a setting. Here is Graham Greene doing all three in his first sentence of *Brighton Rock*: "Hale knew, before he had been in Brighton three hours, that they meant to kill him."

You don't even have to wait until the first sentence. Capture the readers with a catchy title or a quotation right off the bat even before they get to the opening words. No matter how you do it, you have to get their attention right away. That's where the hook should be.

So you have a great beginning, now what? The answer: just carry on. It's best to continue the story in chronological order. Soon you will be in the middle; that's where the meat of the case is, and I'll leave that to you.

But I do have something to say about the ending. Cases may not really have a distinct ending where everything is wrapped up with the hero and heroine walking happily into the sunset. This is especially true of dilemma or decision cases where you are asking the students to create the end of the drama. However, you shouldn't just let the story peter out. Bring the problem to a head. Try to make the end of the case interesting and worth thinking about, if not dramatic. Otherwise, who cares?

Avoid heavy sounding words

There are simple ways of saying things and there are convoluted ways. Choose simple. Flesch gives a list of some of his favorite "too heavy" prepositions and conjunctions along with their

Figure 2. Human interest formula

The human interest is calculated by taking the sum of the following factors:

Multiply the number of "personal words" per 100 words by 3.635	_____
Multiply the number of "personal sentences" per 100 sentences by 0.314	_____
The sum is the human interest score	_____

simple alternatives. Here are a few:

- ♦ Along the lines of = like
- ♦ For the purposes of = for
- ♦ For the reason that = since, because
- ♦ From the point of view that = for
- ♦ Inasmuch as = for, because
- ♦ In case of = if
- ♦ In the neighborhood of = about
- ♦ With the result that = so that

Here are a few “too heavy connectives” that we ought to avoid: *accordingly*, *consequently*, *hence*, and *thus*. All of these can be replaced by the tiny word *so*. Instead of *in addition*; use *also*. Don’t write *moreover* or *nevertheless* write *now* and *but*. These changes will lighten up your writing and make it more enjoyable. Remember, “write like you speak.” Don’t be ponderous.

Flesch winds up by showing how a piece of writing can be evaluated by two scores, a “reading ease score” and a “human interest score.” The reading ease score will fall between 0 and 100 with 0 meaning “practically unreadable” and 100 meaning “easy for any literate person” (fig. 1). It shouldn’t surprise you to learn that Flesch found that comics rank 92, *Reader’s Digest* 65, *Newsweek* 50, *New York Times* 39, and a standard auto insurance policy 10.

The human-interest score is calculated using the number of “personal words” (which I mentioned earlier) and the number of “personal sentences” (fig. 2). Such sentences include dialogue; questions, commands, requests directly addressed to the reader (e.g.,

“This is a point you must remember.”); exclamations (e.g., “That’s ridiculous!”); and incomplete sentences whose meaning has to be inferred from the context (e.g., “an absolute genius,” “Well, certainly he would.”).

The human interest scale ranges between 0 (no human interest) and 100 (full of human interest). Scientific journals score numbers suggesting that they are downright “dull.” There’s no surprise here, is there? The *Reader’s Digest* ranks about 40 or “interesting,” at 60, the *New Yorker* is “very interesting,” and novels can approach 100 and be “dramatic.”

Back to case studies. Don’t we want case studies to be both readable and have human interest? Sure we do! The case studies that the students like best are those that rank high on both scales. Of course, there are other factors involved in making great cases: the content we want to cover; the type of subject we have chosen (sex and scandal work here just like in the rest of the world); and is the basic story good? We can take any case, topic, or story and write it—readable or unreadable—interesting or uninteresting. Which would you choose?

If you want to have some fun, try calculating the readability and human interest scores for articles in this journal or for some of your own writings. It’s scary, I know. It might interest you to know that this case column that you are reading now ranks high on both scales. I don’t want to tell you how high, but thank goodness! Otherwise, I’d have to go back and do some quick rewriting!

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