

# ACT LOCALLY, THINK GLOBALLY: TEACHING THE CONCISE STYLE

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One of the most well-known composition lessons in recent years was about conciseness. In the movie *A River Runs Through It*, the narrator, recalling his childhood in frontier Montana, describes his father's method of education. The boy would write an essay and take it to his father, who would read it in silence and return it to him, saying only, "Again. Half as long." When this had been done to his father's satisfaction, the boy was released to his other school, a nearby trout stream.

The father's emphasis should not be surprising. The concise style is one of the most ancient and enduring of rhetorical concerns. Both Aristotle (III.iii.3) and Quintilian (VIII.ii.17-22) advised against the use of unnecessary words. Today popular textbooks for first-year composition, business writing, and technical writing all promote the concise style, as do manuals of style such as Cook's *Line by Line: How to Improve Your Own Writing*, Lanham's *Revising Prose*, Strunk's *The Elements of Style*, Williams' *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, and Zinsser's *On Writing Well: An Informal Guide to Writing Nonfiction*.

When we began teaching Advanced Composition, we thought of it as a continuation of first-year composition, a chance to address elements of writing that we had previously had insufficient time to address and a chance for students to reflect on themselves as writers. At our university, Advanced Composition is a lower division elective designed to help students who feel comfortable with writing to extend their skills in the use of language for various purposes and audiences. In addition to English majors, its enrollment commonly includes students from the nursing, law

enforcement, mass communications, and military science programs. Because the concise style is expected in ordinary professional writing—not only in business and in technical writing, but in nonfiction generally—we decided to make the concise style a central focus of the course.

When we consulted the literature on the teaching of style, we found few recent articles, perhaps because style is often narrowly defined as editing. Rankin argues that style is unpopular because models of writing processes relegate style to "low-level" decisions (9), and because style has been associated with the "current-traditional paradigm" (8), that is, with correct usage and with product rather than with process. She argues that the profession needs a new theory of style, one that accounts for the "psychological operations" involved in creating a style, and one that articulates the relationships between style and the emphases of process-centered pedagogy, such as audience adaptation and invention (13-14).

To teach the concise style, we decided to use the principles and exercises in textbooks and style manuals, both because these principles and exercises were so prevalent and because we wanted to see whether they provided too limited an approach to style, as Rankin's argument suggests. These principles and exercises, described below, did prove to be mostly editing and by themselves inadequate. We decided to conduct a "frame experiment," an attempt to interpret the results of previous instruction, to decide on new goals for instruction, and to create strategies to achieve those goals (Hillocks 32-37, Schön 4-5). We resorted to the method of *A River Runs Through It*—the "Again. Half as long" assignment—for several reasons. We were simply curious about its effects. We wanted to see whether students had internalized the textbook methods we had practiced intensively in class. And we sought to create in students a radical re-understanding of the relationships between ideas and words, or in Hillocks' terms, between the deep structure of semantic units and the surface structure of verbatim units and graphemic units (92-93).

When we examined the resulting reduced essays in two sections of the course, we found the outcomes intriguing. We were so puzzled by the cuts that we decided to interview the ten students in one section. Donald Schön, arguing that a "reflective practicum" is the most effective way to teach professional competence, explains the importance of active learning: "it is when students try to act on what they have seen or heard that they are likely to reveal, to themselves and to their coaches, both the prior knowledge that they bring . . . and the understandings or misunderstandings they have constructed" (161). The interviews had exactly this result, revealing both to us and to the students the students' understanding of the components of the concise style and their understanding of larger concepts such as voice and rhetorical effect. The metacognition induced by the interviews seemed a necessary component to understanding the use of the concise style.

We have come to realize that a primary reason "style is out of style," as Rankin phrases it (8), is that style is difficult to teach and to learn. For most of our students, style presents a new and challenging way of interacting with their texts. Teachers as well as students developed an initial definition of the concise style as the elimination of various types of needless words and indirect constructions. We also came to see that the concise style may entail a sparseness in elaborating ideas as well as economy in modifying words; a concise style may be marked by skeletal claims, whose implications readers are left to work out for themselves. Finally we came to understand the larger ramifications of style. Nearly five hundred years ago, Erasmus, comparing the concise and the copious styles, explained that to employ either entailed complex rhetorical decisions (Epilogue). Teaching the concise style helped students and ourselves understand in a new way the meaning of coherence, persona, and purpose.

## Methods of Teaching the Concise Style

### Establishing a Working Vocabulary: Textbooks and Manuals of Style

Teaching style entails the time-consuming task of establishing a working vocabulary and demonstrating the effects of various sentence constructions. Composition textbooks commonly list categories of "needless words": "redundancy," "vague or obvious statements," "needless qualifiers," "wordy phrases," "empty sentence openings." Students practice editing sample sentences and then search their own essays for words and phrases of these types to delete.

In contrast to this emphasis on deleting words and phrases, Joseph Williams' *Style* and Richard Lanham's *Revising Prose* focus on modifying syntax. A writer achieves conciseness (and clarity) by using a sentence structure whose predicate expresses the main action of the sentence and whose grammatical subject is the agent of that action. Working with sample sentences, students determine the action and agent and then recast the sentences, using the action and agent as predicate and subject. Again, they follow the same procedures with their own essays.

However, anyone teaching such language-focused writing skills should be cautioned by the sentence-combining debate of the early 1980s (de Beaugrande 70-71; Elbow 233-238). When students concentrate on the technicalities of sentence construction, they can easily lose sight of the rhetorical context which should be the reason for making these choices. Also, skills practiced on specially prepared sample sentences may not readily transfer to the naturally occurring sentences in student work. Sample sentences present problems that are at once more defined (in terms of the wordiness) and less defined (in terms of rhetorical context) than students' own sentences.

In short, textbooks and manuals of style are necessary but not sufficient. Their implied pedagogy—demonstration and practice—needs elaboration and intensification for these skills to become an integral part of writers' repertoires. That is, in addition to these editing and revising skills, students need to stop "looking

through" their language to their ideas and learn instead to "see" its surface dimension. They also need to develop a felt sense of style problems, a cognitive dissonance that will lead them both to identify style problems and to think of editing as a solution to them.

### **Engaging in Intensive Practice: "Again. Half as Long"**

Since the difficulty in the above method seemed to lie in students transferring revising and editing skills to their own writing and especially in helping them develop a felt sense of style, we looked for ways to engage our students in intensive practice on their own texts. In *On Writing Well*, William Zinsser suggests an assignment very like the father's in *A River Runs Through It*: "If you give me an article that runs to eight pages and I tell you to cut it to four, you'll howl and say it can't be done. Then you'll go home and do it, and it will be infinitely better. After that comes the hard part: cutting it to three" (20). According to Zinsser, few writers recognize "how much excess and murkiness," "weak verbs," and "rickety syntax" hinder them from achieving their purpose (20-21). The imposition of an extreme numerical goal asks writers to examine and re-examine their sentences, testing each to see whether it is important to their purpose and whether it can be made more concise.

Near the end of the course, then, we asked students, as part of the process of preparing portfolios, to delete needless words in one of their essays; their goal was to cut their essays by half. We did not specify any particular essay nor did we explicitly recommend that they use any of the methods practiced in class. We wanted to see to what extent students transferred these editing skills. We also wanted to see whether the essays would in fact be "infinitely better." Finally, we wanted to learn more about teaching the concise style by analyzing their responses to the assignment.

When we analyzed their essays later, we found that about half the students edited their essays according to the recommendations of the textbooks. That is, these students worked primarily at the

intra-sentence level, deleting the kinds of wordiness we had studied in class—unnecessary intensifiers and qualifiers, wordy introductory clauses, *that/which* clauses, and redundancies. They also reduced their word count by restructuring sentences—by changing from passive to active or from negative to positive constructions, by replacing weak ("is") verbs with verbs specifying the actions buried in nouns, or by increasing parallelism between clauses. Generally, these students improved their essays by such editing. For instance, eliminating passive constructions, prepositional phrases, and weak verbs sometimes resulted in improved information flow and coherence as well as in conciseness.

Another group of students, a sizeable minority (forty percent), did not use the intra-sentence language logic that is the basis of many of the textbook recommendations, but deleted entire sentences and even paragraphs on the basis of content and tone. These students cut large sections of tangential material as well as examples that repeated or reinforced points that had been made at other places in the essay.

Again, the essays seemed to profit from the exercise. But in both groups we were dismayed to find deletions of—in our opinions—necessary or particularly interesting material. The students made cuts that jeopardized the coherence of their pieces; they cut transitions, restatements of quotations, sentences demonstrating links between an example or quotation and the point it supported, and sentences stating their opinions. And other cuts—for example, the elimination of colloquialisms, caustic remarks, chatty asides, deliberate euphemisms for humorous effect, or punchline sentences—changed the voice and, when carried out systematically, the purpose of the essay.

We could not account for these cuts. For example, in the following passage describing the experience of living in Hollywood, the writer cut details obviously calculated to engage the reader in a discovery parallel to the writer's. (The edited version is in bold; deleted sentences are in regular type.)

**"Action!" I remember sitting on my third floor apartment balcony, on the corner of Yucca and Western, relaxing on a foldout lawn chair, drinking a can of my roommate's Budweiser watching a tall skinny actress I had never seen before climb out of a second story building surrounded by lights, cameras, a director, location crew, caterers, and makeup people. They must have shot that same sequence a half dozen times, where she looks back to make sure no one is behind her to witness her getaway, carefully peeks her head out the window to make sure no one is around to catch her, steps carefully onto the fire escape, then quickly makes her way down the steel rungs and runs away into the night. My curiosity finally got the best of me and I joined the group of roped-off onlookers on the ground. I happened to hear the idle chatter of a film crew person explaining the plot to a group of onlookers. Something about a prostitute who gets lucky in L. A. Oh that's original I thought sarcastically. Someone mentioned Richard Gere was in it. I wondered who the actress was. I had never seen her before. I heard someone mention a name I wasn't familiar with. A Julia Roberts. Never heard of her. I shrugged my shoulders and made my way back to my Budweiser.**

The deletions contain the details that would allow someone who has seen *Pretty Woman* to realize what the writer is describing. The revised version is considerably less interesting to us, even though the strategy of gradually releasing information is retained. Further, this writer, like others who made puzzling deletions, could have reduced this essay significantly by editing at the intra-sentence level (e.g., "My curiosity got the best of me. I joined the onlookers on the ground, and overheard a film crew person explaining the plot").

## Reflecting on Teaching and Learning: Interviews with Students

Because we wanted to understand the significant number of deletions of what seemed to us good material—that is, to understand what Rankin would call the "psychological operations"(13) that the concise style entails—we asked the ten students in one section of the course to reflect on their practice in twenty-minute follow-up interviews. Both the students and the teacher prepared by comparing the original and the cut versions of the essays and describing and analyzing the changes. Students also answered several open-ended questions asking them to describe their methods for deleting words and to reflect on their reactions to being told "Again. Half as long."

The interviews turned out to be by far the best method of learning about style and about the teaching of style. The interviews helped students to understand the implications of the concise style for coherence, persona, and purpose and demonstrated clearly that practicing the concise style can enrich students' thinking about their writing. The interviews reinforced for all of us that editing decisions about style, far from being the simple choice between different wordings, reflect students' views of themselves as writers. The interviews also reopened the question of how conscious these decisions are.

In the interviews, almost all the students reported that they began the assignment by eliminating words and phrases. Some shifted to deleting at the sentence and the paragraph levels when they became worried about meeting the "half" requirement or when they discovered problems in their drafts. In making these larger deletions, students cited "content" grounds. Three students identified a tighter focus and therefore deleted sections that were pursuing other subtopics; others deleted repetitious examples.

The most salient deletions, however, were deletions of "personal" material. Seven students volunteered the information that this was a major focus of their editing. These deletions were made at every level: the intra-sentence, the sentence, and the paragraph. If they regretted the cuts, they said their essays had lost



their "personality," "flavor," "color," or "lightness," characterizing the edited versions as "better organized" or "more focused" but also as "dry," "boring," or "heavy." One student said he felt like the director of a movie who realized in the end that his movie was on the cutting room floor. Others said they eliminated personal details or remarks that were "sappy," "cheesy," "too sarcastic," or "my opinion."

"Personal" is an ill-defined term here. The essays that students chose to revise included arguments and expository essays as well as essays more usually described as personal or expressive. Regardless of the essay type, students used the term "personal" to apply to a broad range of features, most frequently to the persona or voice they had adopted, but also to denote isolated colloquialisms, examples from personal experience, and their analyses or statements of opinion (as opposed to quotations or information they had found in their research). All ten of the students cited a "personal" element in their essays using one of these various meanings.

Four students eliminated entirely, rather than modifying, the personal voice in their pieces. All of them were attempting to use a personal voice to add interest to an informational piece or to increase the persuasive power of an argument; all of them said that deleting the personal element in the essays entailed a change of purpose. For example, a student writing to persuade college students to exercise regularly cut chatty asides and phrases demonstrating that she knew what her audience was thinking. She felt the essay lost its motivational purpose and became the all-too-familiar informational piece on the benefits of exercise. All four students described their edited versions as straight information pieces.

While it might be tempting to say that personal voice is an altogether predictable casualty of the assignment and of an emphasis on the concise style, this would be a mistake. Certainly the concise style has been associated historically with scientific writing and more recently with technical and business writing. But a concise personal style need not be considered an oxymoron.

Four other students retained a clear personal voice while deleting half of their essays, even though one made several "personal" cuts. Another student who did cut personal material said, "If I gave myself enough time, I could probably sound personal and relaxed without wordiness."

Another explanation for students' treatment of the personal might be that those who retained a personal voice were writing essays where a personal voice is conventional (e.g., personal narratives or reflections) while those who systematically cut the personal were more likely to view their combination of persona and purpose as experimental either in terms of the genre chosen or in terms of their own previous writing experience.

In other words, when pressed to edit their essays, students deleted the parts they had least confidence in. When asked why she had deleted a sentence (which seemed to us a particularly effective, funny short sentence following a string of longer, "straight" ones), one writer said the essay was her first attempt at humor and she had not been sure that the sentence worked. Another writer, who had deleted her personal voice entirely, said that her conference group had reacted unfavorably, saying it came across as "preachy." Although she did not agree, she deleted her personal voice systematically at the intra-sentence, sentence, and paragraph levels (she was the most dissatisfied of all the students with her revised version). Another student, whose conference group had questioned the purpose of her paper, made similar deletions, saying she was not sure where she was going with the personal part; the informational part seemed more concrete. The three examples here are all female students; however, cutting what seemed weakest or most ill-defined or most "risky," particularly if it was questioned by readers, was a strategy cited equally as often by men as by women.

The emergence of the "personal" as the major topic in interviews about the concise style surprised us. But it was extremely fortunate. Students are in very different places in their efforts to write in styles appropriate to themselves and their purposes in different pieces of writing. The interview gave them

the opportunity to reflect on and articulate what constitutes style in their own writing. Not surprisingly, in discussing the "personal," they came to the same impasse scholars have noted for years—style as the different arrangement of words to say the same thing versus style as the characteristics of a speaker/writer (Gage 618-20; Milic 257-259). Concentrating on one (the arrangement of their words), they saw more clearly the other (what voice they wanted or what voice they could create in their writing).

A second recurring issue in the scholarly arguments about teaching style is whether style is a conscious decision and thus whether it can be taught (Pringle 94). Because concise style cuts were numerous, we assumed that students had deliberately made them. However, it seemed that despite extensive in-class practice and despite actual changes in sentence construction and phrasing seemed to indicate conscious and deliberate use of techniques learned in class, editing for conciseness remained a largely tacit operation. The open-ended nature of the preparatory interview questions elicited descriptions of changes students had made in their essays and the effects of that editing. Students tended to base their remarks on a general re-reading of their original and revised essays rather than on a line-by-line comparison. To engage students in discussion of intra-sentence-level editing, the teacher needed to ask specific follow-up questions.

Three of the six students who edited most extensively at the intra-sentence level did not dwell on this part of their work as they described their methods. When prompted, they said they had eliminated "wordiness," "extra words," "repetitions," or "redundancies," but did not generally employ the more specific descriptors we had used in class to describe possible sources of wordiness. "Passive voice" was the only term used consistently to name specific kinds of wording cuts.

It might be concluded that if students edit effectively using vague goals like "make it shorter," it might not be necessary to encourage or teach more elaborate and specific ones. But the interviews suggested that knowledge of and conscious use of categories can lead writers to fruitful editing as well as to new

perspectives on their writing. One student, introduced to the category of qualifiers, noticed numerous qualifiers as he edited, ranging from words to sentences (e.g., "I guess . . .," "I may be wrong but . . ."). As he recognized and looked for more qualifiers, he realized that he was a "qualifier person": "I always play both sides to keep everyone happy." He felt that excessive use of qualifiers made his writing not only more wordy but also less clear.

It seems likely to us that, without the interviews, students would simply have discarded their edited drafts. The interviews were essential if we and the students were to "make meaning" out of the editing work they had done. The interviews became their opportunity to articulate what was most essential in their pieces and to reflect in a more systematic way on their intra-sentence editing and on characteristics they had discovered to be typical of their writing.

## Conclusions

After reflecting with our students and each other about teaching the concise style, we have concluded that the three-part method is valuable with some modifications:

1. Textbooks and Manuals of Style: We will continue to call sources of wordiness to our students' attention, but we will focus on the kinds of wordiness common in their writing. The students at our regional university do not write the long sentences, full of abstractions, that often serve as examples of the corporate or bureaucratic style. Their wordiness is more likely to stem from repetition, vagueness, overuse of "be" verbs, and excessive qualifiers. And we will recommend particular editing strategies that have multiple effects, such as the elimination of "needless qualifiers" and the use of the agent/action sentence structure.

2. Intensive Practice: We will use the "Again. Half as long" assignment not because we expect that the assignment will necessarily create better essays, but because we expect that it will

help students learn; its excessive demands provoke a productive, if artificial, cognitive dissonance. Students who grasp the principles of the concise style increase their knowledge by applying these principles to their own writing. Students whose grasp is less firm have the opportunity to strengthen it. Both groups come to understand the relationship between individual phrases and more general elements of writing like coherence and voice. This is especially true for the second group of students, whose usual solution to the problem that the assignment presents them was to delete entire sentences.

3. Interviews: Above all, we will provide opportunities for extended reflection, such as interviews. The value of the "Again. Half as long" assignment is that students must act and act drastically; the assignment functions as a heuristic, a means to discover in their own editing actions how the concise style might actually play out in their essays. The interviews are the opportunity to recognize and appreciate these discoveries. When students discuss their editing processes—both in terms of their rationales and the effects they perceive—they are more likely to articulate interconnectedness among language, voice, purpose, organization, and other discursive features. Also, the assignment encourages students to evaluate the appropriateness of the concise style for their own writing and to make style considerations a component of their definitions of themselves as writers.

We cannot say that our teaching methods lead immediately to mastery of the concise style. We can say, however, that these methods involve students in protracted thinking about language and rhetorical context and that they give many students a new understanding of the interconnectedness of individual words and of coherence, voice, audience, and purpose. If students are finally to become good writers, they need such understanding.

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