

Phludge

Whenever I see a lovely clump of stinkweed, I know what lies hidden beneath it. Stinkweed cannot live in healthy soil. To sprout, the seed must land in filth¹ – and the plant thrives only when it feeds on something rotten beneath the surface.

It's the same with writing style. Your style has its roots in your thinking, and infernal style cannot thrive unless it feeds on corrupted thought. Each time you write, you tap into a complex mass of assumptions and attitudes – about the nature of communication, about the role of text in a business setting, about the extent of the reader's responsibility, and about the part you play as the writer. These notions may be hidden from you, but they engender your style and dictate its final shape. Let me warn you: if you bring healthy assumptions and sensible attitudes to the act of writing, your style will be practical. That's not what I want; and if you have your sights set on a happy afterlife in Hell, it's not what you want either.

The good news is that once your thinking is thoroughly rotten, your style will automatically be; guided by rotten thinking, you'll never be in danger of writing anything simple. You'll never write, for example, "We use this method to calculate your benefits." Instead, and it will seem as natural as breathing, you'll write the delightfully hateful *Said methodology is utilized in benefits determination calculation*. That's what I want. It's what you want, too. You know you do. It just sounds better.

To corrupt your thinking, you need to rationalize with *phludge*.² Loosely speaking, phludge is a collection of cockeyed ideas that serve to explain, excuse, and justify even the most absurd behavior. Phludge can be spread on the topsoil of the mind in precisely the same way cow manure is spread; it can be worked into that soil, and become that soil, just like manure does in dirt. This is the essential point: your thinking must *become* phludge.

In this section I acquaint you with numerous phludgisms. Read them. Trust in them. Work them into the soil of your thinking, and hellish style will bloom.

¹ The stinkweed seed can sprout when it is fortunate enough to land on a putrefying dead animal, but commonly it sprouts because it lands in some species of manure. Stinkweed is rare these days, but even in the last century could be had by the ton, if one were so disposed. For country folk all over the world – for anyone who lacked indoor plumbing and used an outhouse – it served as a reminder of where previous outhouse holes had been, and thus it provided helpful guidance on where not to dig a new one.

² *Phludge* (pronounced as in "flood" and "fudge") is to clear thinking what thick mud is to fresh running water. In modern Hellish, phludge is the layman's word for the technical term *vlugshungastux*, used (unnecessarily, I think) by Hell's behavioral psychologists. The precise term denotes the state of affairs where, after years and years of trusting flimsy or self-serving ideas, you have ruined your judgment – and now you naturally (if unconsciously) act from twisted motives. The concept was originally developed to explain particularly mysterious behavior in sexual relationships, but fits perfectly in a discussion of writing style.

1. This is how professionals write. Marinate in this idea! Professionals are not supposed to write like nonprofessionals. Professionals, because they are professionals, should employ difficult words, phrases, and terms of art that only true professionals know. If you write so that everyone can understand you, what's the point of being a professional? Regardless of your audience, if you're a professional at the Department of the Interior, you should use the phrase *charismatic megafauna* to refer to cougars, mountain goats, and buffalo. The right attitude is "the reader be damned," because only if you feel that way could you conceivably refer to boots as *leather personnel carriers* and to an ordinary pencil as a *manually mobile encrypting tool*.

Writing like a professional means more than simply using ridiculous jargon. It also means that you use the biggest word you know. Anyone can write "many," but only a professional could write *a veritable plethora of*. Any boob could write the phrase "testing method," but only a seasoned professional could call it *evaluative methodology*. In the hot hands of a professional, a telephone is never a telephone, but a *telephonic communications instrument*.

Here's a prime example of what "writing like a professional" can lead to:

Your constituent's flexible screw may have utility in the dexterous robotic end effector in design option 2 of Space Station Freedom.

This sentence would not be genuinely hellish if it were addressed to an aerospace engineer who knew what a *dexterous robotic end effector* is. But it becomes wonderfully hellish when you realize that it was written to a United States Senator who didn't know a *dexterous robotic end effector* from a *kinetic energy chunky fragment*.³ And when you consider that the writer could have written "We may be able to use your constituent's flexible screw in the space station's robotic arm," you begin to appreciate the writer's deft employment of infernal style. Simmering in his subconscious was the thought, *This is how professionals write*. If you wish to warp your style, always keep this notion within fondling distance.

2. That's the way we do it here. This idea helps justify the worst writing imaginable. When you carry it in your bag of excuses, you will never be bushwhacked by a moment of clarity.

Let us say, for example, that you've just written the exquisitely wretched sentence *The Ukrainian strategic bomber elimination effort initiative will be supported under the aforementioned program*. If you are now victimized by an epiphany – a sudden

³ Certain individuals in the U.S. Department of Defense do my bidding by writing "kinetic energy chunky fragments" when they mean "shrapnel."

revelation of how absurd such writing is – you might guiltily realize that you could have made this idea much easier to understand. You might be tempted to change it to *This program funds the destruction of Ukraine’s strategic bombers*. Do not do so! The angel of clarity must never be heeded. Just remember that the former sentence, sparkling with superficial profundity, is “the way it is done” in your organization. Rationalize like this: “If I wrote the clear sentence, the reader wouldn’t understand it, because the unclear sentence is what the reader is used to.” That’s the way to think.

Let me entertain you with an actual instance of how “that’s the way we do it here” helps ensure the writing I want. This happened at one of my favorite organizations, the United States Patent and Trademark Office. Someone – I won’t name names, but it was one of those infinitely pesky Plain Language rabble-rousers – suggested changing the following text from “Spewed” to “Crafted”:

Spewed Thought

Sydansk ‘390 discloses a system for preventing upward migration of contaminants in soil having capillary pores defined therein, the system comprising a treatment region located between the top soil and an underlying subterranean strata and a hydrophobic substance applied to the soil by injection, the substance being attracted to enter the capillary pores so that a barrier is formed which, under unsaturated conditions, prevents the upward migration of contaminants carried by water through the capillaries of the soil, wherein the hydrophobic substance is an inorganic foamed polymer.

Crafted Thought

Sydansk discloses a system for preventing contaminants from rising in soil that has capillary pores.

In Sydansk’s system, a hydrophobic substance (an inorganic foamed polymer) is injected into a “treatment region” located between the topsoil and a substratum. The substance is attracted to enter the capillary pores so that a barrier is formed. Under unsaturated conditions, this barrier prevents water-borne contaminants from rising through the capillaries in the soil.

The response this suggestion received from management – and this is verbatim from the memo – was as follows: “What is presented as Spewed Thought is more in line with Office practice than what is provided as Crafted Thought. It should be expected that this example will cause confusion.” *Yes!* This is exactly the kind of thinking I want. Simplicity causes confusion and complexity is in line with absurd tradition.

“That’s the way we do it here” can be used to justify more than crazed phrasing, the sloppy choice of words, and 100-word sentences. It can also excuse the perpetuation of confusing formats, upside-down organization of ideas, unhelpful headings, minuscule pitch, and dozens of other bedeviling quirks of style. It is an essential phludgism; you cannot write hellishly without it.

3. Latinate words are better than Anglo-Saxon words. Well, they certainly are for our purposes. They sound better. They’re impressive. Not all readers are familiar with

them. And even for readers who are familiar with them, they require more effort to understand than their simpler counterparts do.

As children, you learned Anglo-Saxon words. You learned simple words like “walk,” “chew,” and “kiss.” Later on, you learned that there are more complex words for simple things. Instead of “walk,” “chew,” and “kiss,” which any child could write, the hellward-bound writer uses the Latinate synonyms *perambulate*, *masticate*, and *occulate*. Clearly the Latinate words are more professional. Because not everyone knows them, they sound more intelligent; because they are difficult to grasp, they lend to your writing a certain nice gauziness.

Why say “start” when you can say *initialize*? Why write “outline” when you can sound like a genius with *delineate*? The Anglo-Saxon words are simpler, and thus clearer, and so they should be shunned in favor of their Latinate counterparts. Never say “light.” Say *illumination*. Never say “stop.” Say *termination*. Avoid “fight.” Call it *altercation*.

You should do this with phrases, too, of course. Rather than “get the plant ready,” you should *initiate facilitization of contractor facilities*. Never “use the screwdriver” when you can *utilize the hand-held screw insertion and extraction instrument*.

Nearly every Anglo-Saxon word has a Latinate equivalent; finding the fancy equivalent takes very little time, and the longer words work wonders in complicating your text. In your writing, make sure that every “before” is a *prior to*, every “thus” a *consequently*,⁴ every “use” a *utilize*, every “talk” a *negotiation*, and every “shut down” a *deactivation*.

4. Rare words indicate a powerful intellect. Make love with this phludgism! You should be as liberal as possible with strange and difficult words. Unfamiliar words are the jewels of hellish style – sprinkle them throughout your text, where they will sparkle like diamonds.

Several beauties result from your using strange words. First of all, readers are not impressed when you write “funnel-shaped,” but they are awestruck when you write *infundibuliform*. The mere fact that you used it proves that you have a massive vocabulary and a profound mind. Your using it makes you look good. Second, when you use a word no one else understands, your readers are arrested by it and lose the train of thought (and we wish to derail this train as often as possible). Third, you force your readers to waste additional time by consulting a dictionary. Finally – and this is the cherry on top – you have sown the seed for further complication, because once your readers understand what an odd word means, they too will show off by using it, forcing their readers to look it up. And those readers, in their turn, will start using it, and so on.

⁴ The truly inspired writer uses “consequently” not only when he means “thus,” but also when he means “later.”

You should spend at least 20 minutes each day poring over an unabridged dictionary and collecting bizarre words. Learn and treasure such gape-provoking words as *lambent*, *nocent*, *quondam*, and *solatium*. Find ways to insinuate them into your writing at work. Never forget: Little people use little words; big people use big words.

5. Smart people invent words. Someone has to, right? No word is begotten by immaculate conception. Someone has to create them, and that person might as well be you. You'll gain a reputation for creativity, which can only enhance your career.

There are many ways to invent words. Probably the least subtle (and the easiest) is to create a strange verb by clapping an *ize* or an *ate* onto the rear end of a noun. You could write the clear sentence, "The police suspect arson," but if you know the clap-the-suffix-on-the-rear-end technique, you could write *The police currently suspicionate that the building was arsonized*, which is much better.⁵ Try to create a needless word at least once in every paragraph. Instead of planting trees, for example, you could *forestate* the hill. Instead of simply amending a contract, you could *amendicize* it.

Another way to create unnecessary words is to extrapolate from possible derivation. What that means is that you play with prefixes. I have a place warm and ready for the writer who could have written "Next week's meeting has been moved forward to this Friday," but who instead wrote *Next week's meeting has been preponed to Friday*. He reasoned that if "postpone" means to delay or move back, then "pone" would be the root, and since *post* means "after," and *pre* is the opposite of *post*, the word he wanted would be *prepone*. Extraordinary thinking. A wonderfully complicating decision! He will be amply rewarded. He could, however, have gone a step further and made his "prepone" into a noun. The result would have been even more delightful to me: *The meeting has undergone preponation to Friday*.

Idiocy with prefixes has given us *proactive*, a word that sounds as though it might mean something, but whose definition is very much up in the air (and I love all such words). Consider the following sentence, rendered in pure devilish style:

Career development within the division can be supported by the proactive involvement of department directors and section managers.

This is pop music masquerading as thought, which is exactly what we want. The vague verb "supported" (which could mean *encouraged*, *fostered*, *streamlined*, *simplified*, *expedited*, or *improved*) is a very nice touch. But the slippery phrase *proactive involvement* is the footprint of the truly accomplished fogmaster. What does the writer mean? Who knows? So try to use this word at least three times in each document.

⁵ Another suffix you can use to invent boneheaded verbs is *-ify*. Rather than writing the too-clear *illuminate*, you should write *illumify*; rather than writing the mundane *create a policy*, you should *polify*, and so on. *We must formally polify the issue* or *The issue must be formally polified*.

Learn from such examples as *proactive* and *prepone*. Instead of saying that someone “suddenly remembered,” say that he *instantaneously unforgot*. Instead of saying simply that someone “forgot,” say that she *disreclected*. And of course from now on, never “cancel” a meeting. *Unpone* it.

6. I should be creative. This attitude is crucial. In addition to cobbling together Frankenstein words from odd parts, you should pretend you are a novelist and lard your sentences with description.⁶

In writing a trip report, for example, the honest writer would be content with the concise sentence, “We toured Complex 14, where solid-fuel boosters are assembled.” Infernal style requires you to embellish; we want the reader to experience the idea as though it were a Movie of the Week. Here is what you could do: *At 2300 Zulu, on 31 October, 2038, the team took a tour of the dark, forbidding, multi-storey structure known as Complex 14; it was vast and brilliantly illumified inside, and this writer observed a veritable plethora of white-jacketed and stern-faced technicians laboring diligently to assemble gleaming boosters of the solid-fuel mode.* (Of course you would omit all the hyphens.) I admit that you must be well versed in infernal technique to write such a sentence, but if you study this book, and practice, you will learn how.

7. My reader can figure out what I mean. Always assume that the reader can read your mind. If you assume this, you will relax about (for example) picking words. Just tell yourself that it is the reader’s job to “make sense” of your writing. Go ahead and write the perfectly correct *Changes in the value of the dollar have affected our overseas profits*. If the reader understands “affected” to mean *decreased* and you intended it to mean *increased*, that is hardly your fault. It’s the reader’s. After all, you have written a perfectly correct sentence. If the reader can’t infer your intent, you are certainly not to blame.

Forget all those persnickety instructors who whine that words have to be in perfect order. If you write *The annual AARP membership fee is \$10.00, which includes a spouse at no extra charge*, the reader is perfectly able to understand that you don’t intend to toss in a spouse for the \$10.00 fee. Go ahead and write *We saw our headquarters flying over Georgetown in a helicopter*. Readers aren’t imbeciles. They know what you mean. Go ahead and write *Applicants must demonstrate their ability to solder pipe joints to a Pepco inspector*. Readers use common sense; none would picture an inspector shrieking in agony. When you write *One victim was stabbed in the hand and another was shot in the basement*, you have written an excellent sentence. Parallelism was invented by editors,

⁶ Everyone has a novel inside, waiting for expression. Because the only writing most people do is at work, it will be at work that this novel must be born. I say “must” be born because the pressure to express the novel is precisely the same as the pressure to express yesterday’s supper. The metabolics are metaphysical but nonetheless real.

who otherwise would be out of work. Besides, whoever said that readers don't enjoy making sense of things?

"My reader can figure out what I mean" also frees you to be as disorganized and incoherent as you like, to include cockeyed irrelevancies, to exclude essential ideas, to follow your bliss when punctuating, and to flummox the reader with your format. These issues are covered in more detail in later sections.

8. The meanings of words are in the dictionary. You'd better believe it. Where else would they be? In the reader's mind? You must ignore anyone who tells you that the meanings of words lie in the reader's mind. If you believe that readers determine meaning, you will tend to use words whose definitions are largely agreed-upon. The result will be clear writing. That is not what we want.

This does not mean that you have to agree with what the dictionary says. The dictionary is not God.⁷ By grace of the sloppiness of your predecessors, many words have come to have both a "dictionary" meaning and a "popular" (or "wrong, but commonly thought to be true") meaning. When you use such a word, you get to decide what it means. So if you use *bimonthly* to mean "every two weeks," you are hardly shaking the foundations of the universe. If you want *subsequently* to mean "before" or "as a result of" (as many people do), that is your right; if you want *imminent* to mean "highly respected" and *allow* to mean "enable," that is your right. People use *allow* all the time when they mean "enable," so why shouldn't you? Is it your fault if the dictionary hasn't defined the word in the way it's frequently misused?

The meanings of words lie in the dictionary, but you do not need to agree with what the dictionary says – are you most certainly aren't obligated to use any word in its commonly understood sense. You should use words in their little-known (and unknown) senses.

A wonderful example of the hellishness you can create by this practice is provided by the word *encumbered*. Readers expect to see "encumbered" used to mean "burdened," "hindered," or "weighed down." They are used to seeing the word in such sentences as *The company is encumbered by long-term debt* and *The heavy backpacks encumbered the climbers*. But – and this is a but worth shaking – the word has many other meanings, one of which, from centuries-old English law, is "a claim on property." *No one knows that*, and so you should use the word in that sense in a vacancy announcement. When you mean "This is a temporary position," you should write, in the vacancy announcement, *This position is encumbered by a qualified systems analyst*.⁸ What does this mean to the reader? It means that a dastardly systems analyst is somehow burdening the position. What it doesn't mean is that the position is temporary.

⁷ Even if it were, you would not have to agree with it. You have free will.

⁸ The phrasing "this position is encumbered by" is boilerplate and is used by at least three agencies of the United States Federal Government.

In the examples below, note how the hellish writer uses “vacation” and “instant”⁹ in wickedly surprising ways:

Beautiful:	Site shall undergo mandatory remediation prior to vacation.
Ugly:	Before you leave the site, you must restore it to its original condition.
Gorgeous:	Readers may struggle with instant text comprehension.
Hideous:	This report is difficult to understand.

To summarize, honor what the dictionary says when what it says can lead to confusion, as with *peruse* (look it up), *bimonthly*, *instant*, and *encumber* – and contradict the dictionary entirely when using words whose definitions have become flexible.

9. I must always vary my words. Your English teachers told you to do this because they wanted you to develop a store of innocent synonyms. I’m here to tell you that varying your words is essential if you are to leave the reader gasping for meaning. Besides, if you use the same word twice, readers will think you are a dolt with an impoverished vocabulary. It’s much better to vary your terms, and infernal style is best served when the substitutes are understood to refer to something different; we always wish to suggest distinctions where no distinctions exist.

For example, if you are writing about a policy, first refer to it as a “policy,” but never refer to it as a policy after that. The next time you refer to it, call it a *practice*; the time after that, let it be a *protocol*. If you mention it again, call it a *procedure*, a *management decision*, a *corporate standard*, or an *agency directive*. Readers will experience a mind-freeze trying to figure out whether you’re using all of these terms to mean one thing, or whether you’re referring to different things.

If you’re writing about bananas, call them “bananas” at first, but never call them bananas after that. Here’s an example of the style I want:

The recent drought in Honduras has increased the price of bananas. Officials estimate that Americans will soon be paying twice as much for the curvy yellow fruit. Citizens of the United States are fond of the edible crescents, annually downing approximately 20 pounds of the golden sickle-shapes per capita. Consumption of the Central American commodity is expected to drop precipitously if the cost of the tropical Freudian symbol doubles.

Vary your verbs too. Your writing becomes wonderfully murky when you first say “reduce,” but then vary it. Do not vary by using “decrease,” “lower,” or “diminish,” for these are too close in meaning. Instead, use *change*, *modify*, *amend*, or *adjust*, which can mean either increase or decrease, and which therefore are properly infernal.

⁹ One unfamiliar meaning of “instant” (one primarily used by lawyers and lawyer wannabees) is *this, the current, the one before us, the one under discussion*. That’s how the word is being used in the gorgeous sentence.

I am exceedingly fond of the writer at NASA who wrote, in *The NASA Headquarters Style Guide*, the following preposterous idea:

“Shall” is the imperative and will be used.

Ladies and gentlemen, such expressions make me caper! Here we have a rule that devours itself as it is being born. And the only thing that could ever enable the writer to let such a mooncalf out of the barn is the attitude *I must vary my words*. After all, if “shall” is the imperative, then it “shall” be used, shan’t it? But having already used “shall” once in the sentence, and terrified of “must” (a horrible word that commits people to things) he is forced to use “will” – which results in a magnificent idiocy.

I also congratulate this writer on selecting “shall,” a notoriously ambiguous word that can mean “should” (when people want it to), “will” (when people want it to), “must” (when people want it to), or “is” (when people want it to). Thus it is perfectly suited to provoking bitter misunderstandings and unnecessary disputes, which keep our friends the attorneys in Mercedes Benzes and imported chocolate.¹⁰

In English, the only word that is indisputably imperative is *must*. I commend the writer for avoiding it and saying something useful like *Use “must” as the imperative*. I intend to pin a medal on his chest and parade him through the streets of Hell as soon as he arrives. If you would appreciate similar treatment, then follow his example – always vary your words.

10. Foreign phrases are impressive. Drink deeply from the cup of this heady muck. Always look for opportunities to insert scraps and tatters of strange languages into your business writing. If the words and phrases are from dead languages, so much the better.

Why would you write “occasionally” when you can write *de temps en temps*? Really, why would you write “retroactively” when you could write *nunc pro tunc*? Don’t write that an employee is suffering from depression – instead say that he is suffering from *ennui* or from *Weltschmerz*. On the cafeteria menu, “green beans” should always be called *fasoli*, which has much more *je ne sais quoi* than the pedestrian “green beans.” If you write in plain English, everyone effortlessly understands you, but when you beautify your writing with alien words and phrases, few do – and that is what we want.

Adding to the fun is the falling of the dominoes of hell: readers who encounter a *res ipsa loquitur*, *inter alia*, or *de minimus* are impressed by your vocabulary, bewildered by the phrase, needlessly occupied in looking it up, and certain to use it in their own writing, to the ongoing bewilderment of their readers.

What point is there in your knowing a smattering of foreign language if you don’t use it?

¹⁰ “Shall” is a very useful word in Hellish style, and I have more to say about it in the section on Kakkitage.

Never write that something is “essential” or “crucial.” Those are unimpressive. Say instead that it is a *sine qua non*. If something was invented for a particular purpose, call it *ad hoc*. If something is temporary, say it’s *pro tempore*.

This technique leads ultimately to magnificent rigmarole – *The party of the first part’s Schadenfreude vis a vis our ad hoc decision is the sine qua non of our modus operandi*.

11. Good writers flaunt their erudition. Of course they do. Include allusions to history, art, music, literature, and science in whatever you write at work. Arcane allusions are best, because they make your reader feel that you are far more intelligent, educated, and worldly than he is – and when people regard you that way, they are less likely to argue with you.

In a letter to a major shareholder, for example, when you’re defending your outrageous salary and benefits, you might write, “I honestly don’t care what you think” – or you could write *As Dante put it, Vostra miseria non mi tange*. The former sentence is painfully clear; the latter will make the reader’s jaw drop and force him to spend time finding someone who can tell him what you have said in Medieval Italian.

Instead of writing the sophomorically simple sentence, “Managers in the Marketing Department remain guilty of wishful thinking,” it’s much better to write *Managers in the Marketing Department continue their Panglossian jeremiad*. By alluding to Voltaire’s *Candide* and to *The Bible*¹¹ in a two-word phrase, you are not merely obstructing understanding, but you are reminding readers of how painfully uneducated they are. Such writing always comes to the attention of executives, and it can only enhance your career.

This proposal has as much chance of success as Fartov’s defense of Puschino is far more infernal than the concise “This proposal is doomed to fail.” When you toss in a reference to the heroic defense of a town few people have ever heard of by a historic figure no one has ever heard of,¹² you rupture coherence, because the human mind cannot resist chewing on images. The reader’s attention instantly leaves the proposal as the imagination chows down on burning buildings, flashing swords, the roars of cannon, thunderous hoofbeats – all the shouts and cries and tumult of desperate battle waged under smoky skies. The proposal is perfectly forgotten. This is what we want.

12. Outdated words and phrases are splendid things. Archaic words and phrases are the zombies of my army, lurching and jerking across the graveyard of the page and

¹¹ I have absolutely no objections to your alluding to *The Bible*. Why should I? So long as the allusions interfere with simplicity, they can come from any source.

¹² No one has ever heard of Fartov because I just invented the name. You could (and should) invent distracting names like *Burpov*, *Belchov*, *Krapoff*, *Pissof*, and so on.

striking terror into the minds of readers, who gasp and wonder, “Is this a real word? Should I be using it?”

Instead of saying “this” or “the” to refer to something, use *heretoforeabovementioned*. Any rube could write, “the analysis,” but only a writer who has thoroughly soaked in bad faith could possibly write *the heretoforeabovementioned analytical document*.

Write *on one occasion* when you mean “once,” and write *on two separate and distinct occasions* when you mean “twice,” but when you mean “three times,” be concise with *thrice*. Make the reader wonder what century you were born in.¹³ Always use *wherein* when you mean “where,” and be redundant with *therein*, as in *The application contains several errors therein*. Never “ask” or “request.” It is more marvelous by far to *beseech*, as in *This Department beseeches the United States Congress for an additional \$25 million*. Use *behoove* a lot, too. Instead of writing “We would benefit by preparing for a recession,” write *It would behoove us to assume a proactive stance relative to recession preparation*. Never write “why.” Use *wherefore* instead. Rather than “We don’t understand why the shipment has been delayed,” write *It is unclear to this division wherefore shipment delay has occurred*. Why let lawyers have all the fun with these beautiful words? You can misuse them too, and you are strongly encouraged to begin doing so now.

13. Things may change, so I must always say “currently.” This is excellent phludgical thinking. In our effort to mislead, one of our sneakiest techniques is to draw distinctions where no distinctions exist. One good way to do so is to overuse *currently* and its cousins (*now*, *presently*, *at the present time*, etc.).

When you use a word, your readers believe that you use it for a reason. This childlike gullibility opens the door to great mischief. If you write *We have no current plans to increase funding*, the reader must assume – because of “current” – that you are drawing some distinction (either you used to have such plans or you believe that you may one day have such plans). So use the word when you never had such plans and never intend to have such plans. How can the reader possibly know he’s being misled? He can’t! That’s the beauty of it.

When you write *The task force now believes that the explosion was the result of terrorism*, you vigorously imply that the task force had drawn a different conclusion earlier. Why else would “now” be in the sentence? The reader wonders what the earlier conclusion was and expects you to address it. Since there was no earlier conclusion, you do not address it – how could you? – but instead careen off into another topic. This

¹³ If you’re so important to your organization that you cannot be fired, trying getting away with “thee” and “thou” and the inflections of King James English. Experiment with such expressions as *I say to thee that the proposal faileth to clearly explain our indirect costs* and *Thou wilt be met upon thine arrival at the facility*.

results in the reader's wondering what he has missed, and he goes back and re-reads, possibly several times, before he feels stupid and gives up. This is what we want.

14. Euphemisms are noble things. They are. Remember, adult readers are spooked by their own shadows. They tremble when they pick up any document, fearing that it may contain bad news. Therefore they deserve what they get when you present bad news in the camouflage of euphemism.

Don't write that the jetliner "crashed." Say instead that it *experienced an unintended impact with the ground*. Tell grieving parents whose son was accidentally killed by a fellow Marine that their son *suffered friendly fire*. The word "toilet" is especially frightening to most readers, so use *human output receptacle* instead.

If you give your reader a heart attack, he will no longer be around to be confounded by your writing. Therefore, never use the terrifying phrase "tax increase," but call it *revenue enhancement*. And certainly avoid any clear phrasing when it comes to people losing their jobs. Instead, call it *layoffs, downsizing, or Reduction in Force*.¹⁴

Up to now, euphemisms have been used to camouflage unpleasant facts and events. Beginning today, I want them used to disguise neutral and pleasant news too. Assume that every change to the status quo makes readers fall to their knees and beg for mercy. When sane and emotionally balanced readers encounter *Next month, we will implement a telecommuting policy*, they either quit reading because they're uninterested in telecommuting or they read more because they're curious. But you must pretend otherwise. Besides, it's possible that somewhere out there is a reader whom this news will cause to have a seizure. Think like that. When the news is neutral, disguise it anyway. Conjure a euphemism for "telecommuting." Call it an *optional employee commuting strategy (OECS)* or a *discretionary attendance benefit (DAB)*.

And start disguising good news. Instead of writing "All employees will receive a 15 percent bonus on salary," write *It has been decided that all qualified representatives of this organization shall be liable for a salary amendment amount not to exceed fifteen percent (15%) of their annual salary*. This makes it sound as though they have to pay it!

15. Long sentences are better than short ones. They are. Any moron can write a short sentence. You have to be intelligent to write a long one; and the longer it is, the more

¹⁴ As these words and phrases become understood, you must continue inventing new ones. What's the point of a disguise if people see through it? Try *involuntary separation from employment* or *necessary staff reduction*. These boil down to *ISE* and *NSR*, respectively, and you can further conceal what you are talking about by saying things like *Five percent of the workforce may be subject to ISE* and *The timely NSR will enable us to salvage some annual profit*. These are not terrifying. To achieve pure infernal style, use the abbreviations as verbs: *The merger compels us to ISE 2000 employees*.

intelligence has been required to write it. Think that way. Short sentences are anathema to hellish style because they emphasize things and take little effort to process; long sentences dilute emphasis and require more effort to understand. This is what we want. Consider the following example.

The Secretary of the Interior may, in specific cases or in specific geographic areas, adopt or make applicable to off-reservation Indian lands all or any part of such laws, ordinances, codes, resolutions, rules or other regulations of the State and political subdivisions in which the land is located as the Secretary shall determine to be in the best interest of the Indian owner or owners in achieving the highest and best use of such property.

This is properly hellish writing. I have my eye on this writer, for I intend to reward him; he could not possibly have created this masterpiece of devilish style if he cared a whit about conveying an idea. You begin to see the skill involved in writing such a sentence when you consider what he could have written instead. He could have written this:

We may apply state or local laws to off-reservation lands. We will do this only if it will help the Indian owners make the best use of their lands.

Those two short sentences make his meaning crystal clear (a horrible state of affairs). But by combining both ideas in one sentence, qualifying at every conceivable juncture, and delaying the main verb, he presents his meaning in such a way that no one can possibly understand it on the first, second, or third reading. This is what we want.

16. My secretary (or editor) will attend to the details. Try your best to believe this even when it isn't true. If you succeed in believing it, you can easily create advanced hogwash and cause unnecessary delays in even the most time-sensitive document.

Don't bother with spelling, punctuation, or capitalization. Don't bother with boring things like facts and consistency. Let others take care of minor details like word-order. You have to give secretaries and editors something to do, don't you? The fact that they cannot know which of two meanings you intend with *The contractor has been asking us to delay the launch for two weeks* is hardly your fault. If they spot the ambiguity, they will have to call you and ask you what you meant, and then you can insult them by saying, "It's obvious from the context."

"My secretary will attend to details" enables you to write *We asked for their commitment to extradite the terrorists by noon on Tuesday* – and the secretary will leave it alone! It looks like a perfectly clear sentence, and no one can suspect that what you want on Tuesday is the commitment, not the extradition. When confusion erupts, you can point a finger at your secretary, who is supposed to attend to such details.

17. The reader can always call. Tell yourself this, and you'll never be bothered by those occasional honest impulses to make your meaning plain. Is it your fault if you are too busy to pick up the phone, out to lunch, on retreat, on vacation, in the mental hospital, or visiting another regional office when the reader calls?

18. Lawyers may read this, so I must hedge. Always have this idea in mind when you revise your work. If you find a clear declarative sentence, toss in a *may*, a *might*, or a *could*. Rather than say the painfully lucid "The new policy will stifle productivity," say that it *may stifle* or *might stifle*. After all, you cannot see into the future, and you cannot be sure of the outcome. Words like *possible* and *potential* work well in this regard too. Rather than write the mundane "A will enhance B," you should write nicely tortuous *A could have the potential outcome of causing a positive effect on B* or the infernal *It is possible that A could potentially produce the effect of having a positive impact on B*.

19. What I really mean is no one's business but my own. You are entitled to your privacy; your thoughts are personal secrets. Unless you choose to do so – and why should you? – you do not have to share them with readers.

Infernal style is best served when you live by this attitude. Let your ideas be clear to you but to no one else. Below is a gorgeous example of what such thinking can lead to. This is another real-world sentence, and its author will enjoy air conditioning in hell.

Purification of unliquidated obligations is essential for the early identification and correction of invalid obligation amounts to ensure full and effective fund utilization.

The writer's unshakeable belief in "What I really mean is no one's business but my own" is evidenced superbly by such writing. His use of bad faith is commendable – and to recognize that, just consider how he would have written the idea if he'd written it in good faith:

We have to determine how much money is left in our budget so that we can spend it all before the end of this fiscal year.

20. Qualifications reveal a subtle mind. They do, especially when they're unnecessary. I love them and the people who spew them. Never say "including." but always *including, but not limited to*. Instead of telling a customer, as an idiot angel would, *We will visit your residence on May 9 to read the meter*, the hellish writer qualifies, and puts it like this: *A representative or duly registered agent of this organization shall, schedule permitting, endeavor to make a visitation to addressee's residence, or, if the addressee is not domiciled at the above residence, to the residence indicated as addressee's residence above, for the primary purpose of taking a reading*

from the meter that indicates, but does not conclusively prove, the amount of electricity used by individuals including, but not necessarily limited to, those abiding at the residence. Anyone who can write this way consistently will be amply rewarded.

21. My reader is an aggravating slob. Instead of picturing your reader as some innocent person you might actually like, picture him as someone you detest. If you've never detested anyone, then imagine someone you'd instantly detest. Create in your mind a greasy, unwashed, crude, abrasive pedant. Visualize him sticking his pinky in his nose and digging for snots. Hear him belch. Imagine him saying, with an air of infinite condescension, *Obviously, it is an error to split the infinitive.* Imagining these things will extinguish any embers of empathy glowing in your soul. Your reader is your enemy, not your friend, and you do not want any obnoxious empathy simplifying your style.

22. The Golden Rule is for losers. According to the Golden Rule, you should write the kind of sentence you'd find easy to read. What a joke! Take it from me, only pathetic losers follow this rule. If you have your sights set on the good life in hell, you had better ignore it, and instead write the kind of sentence that makes me proud. Instead of the revolting *Tomorrow's meeting has been cancelled*, write the hellish *Due to circumstances that were unforeseeable and therefore unforeseen, it has been decided that the section convocation event calendared for tomorrow shall undergo temporal replacement.* If you've been paying attention, you'll understand that you could also say it like this: *Due to circumstances that were unforeseeable and therefore unforeseen, it has been decided that the section convocation event calendared for tomorrow shall undergo temporal unponation.* Reverse the Golden Rule; write sentences you'd hate to read.

23. Negative feelings should always be vented. You should conceal your meaning, but never conceal your temporary anger, disgust, frustration, or any other negative emotion.¹⁵ Give them free rein!

Medical science has proven conclusively that if humans fail to express anger, and instead keep it bottled up inside, serious depression results. Why should you be depressed? It makes much more sense to depress the reader. Remember, the reader is your enemy. You owe him nothing. Thus, if he angers you, or if you even think he may have angered you, let him have it with both barrels! Rather than the sedate, "Your report is difficult to understand," it is healthier to write *My Siberian husky's yodelings make more sense than your reports, you dunderheaded cow!* Rather than write, "In my opinion, the plan needs more thought," write what you really feel with *This is the stupidest, boneheadedest plan I've ever seen!*

¹⁵ It should go without saying that you should conceal any positive emotion such as gratitude or delight.

If a customer has the chutzpah to complain about shoddy service, always react as though you've been personally insulted. Instead of pussyfooting around with "We deeply regret that you were kept on hold for 35 minutes," go ahead and write what you feel: *Being kept on hold for 35 minutes – is that the end of the world? If we hired more operators, we'd have to raise our rates, and you wouldn't want to pay a higher rate, would you? I didn't think so. As to your having a problem getting the "childproof" cap off the bottle, I suggest you try turning the cap counter-clockwise while pressing down. Most adults manage this without difficulty.*

24. I should push the envelope. Take risks! See how much you can get away with. Find places to toss in *succulent assonance*, for example, a phrase innocent in meaning only if readers know both words – and most readers don't. Most readers will instantly get a nasty image, which is what we want, and you then get to point out that it was their ignorance that led them to a false conclusion. Use the word *niggardly*. Write *We were outraged by the contractor's niggardly effort*, and the resultant hostility will make your skin crawl. Then you get to explain what the word means and make everyone else feel stupid! Remember, political correctness is our friend. If there were no taboos, we couldn't goose them, could we? Look for places to use words with erotic overtones like *cock*, *prick*, and *suck* in your sentences. For example, *The vice president's cocky remark pricked the balloon of illusion and sucked the wind from the sails of the meeting. Only boobs remained optimistic, probably because of his succulent assonance.* This is what I call good writing! The reader's mind mires down in Kama Sutra possibilities and he can't possibly attend to whatever point you're pretending to make.

25. There's nothing wrong with clichés. A cliché is a figure of speech that was once fresh and fitting but with overuse has become stale: *state of the art*, *tried and true*, *train of thought*. Clichés live in shallow dens in the topsoil of your vocabulary and usually need little encouragement to flock to any writing occasion. They have very good noses, and at the least whiff of a fresh idea they emerge from their dens and throng to you, clamoring for employment.

This is somewhat subtle, but here's an example of how it happens. Suppose that someone has solved a difficult problem and that you are recommending this individual for an award. Your first impulse might be to write, "Ms. Medea came up with a brilliant solution." Now the clichés smell an opportunity and race to your forebrain, where they argue that any halfwit could put it that way, but that you are a professional, that you must consistently remind everyone of it, and that at any rate it is sexier and far more hip to write, *Ms. Medea thought outside the box and gave birth to a bleeding-edge solution.* And so that's what you write instead. As you should!

I like clichés, and hellish style requires them, because they disguise your intent and contribute to the reader's boredom. Never say that someone works diligently. Say

instead that he *keeps his nose to the grindstone and burns the midnight oil*. And consider how deftly the use of clichés can enable you to say nothing with the utmost formal perfection: *Hindsight is 20-20, but what goes around comes around and time will tell*. That is a formally perfect philosophical observation without content. The reader encounters it and has no choice but to pause and reflect.

When you revise your writing, examine all of your phrases; if you find one that actually means something, try to substitute a cliché. For example, you may have written “The subcontractor may believe his work is essential, but we will fire him if he misses the next milestone.” That is earnest writing and must never survive the draft; revise it into *The subcontractor may think he’s an 800-pound gorilla, but he’ll eat his own dog food if he doesn’t get his ducks in a row and start firing on all cylinders*. That’s much better. Rather than “We must be vigilant,” write *We must keep our eyes peeled with a fine-toothed comb*. That’s what I want.

Finally, you can have great fun, at the reader’s expense, by getting your clichés wrong: by using them in the wrong context or by mixing their terms. You get more mileage out of the latter. *The candidate does not look like a long dark horse anymore* is good, as is *This project is the sacred cow of his eye* and *You can lead sleeping dogs to water, but you should let them lie*.

26. Consistency is highly overrated. I really shouldn’t have to explain how readers are irked by inconsistencies. When you read, you’re annoyed by inconsistencies in format, word choice, point of view, tone, and all aspects of mechanics; your readers react exactly the same way. Elsewhere I discuss the importance of being inconsistent in format and word choice. Here let me simply show you what I want you to do with point of view and tone.

We are very sorry to hear about the death of your wife. Said spouse death benefits including but not limited to funeral expenses are deemed unrecoverable and shall not be recovered under subject policy due to co-insured’s failure to provide insurer with demise notification within the thirty-day period of time required by the policy. Again, we offer our sincerest condolences.

Here the first sentence has a second-person point of view; the expression is personal; it could be spoken in conversation. Your reader has every reason to believe that you’ll maintain this point of view and its sympathetic tone. In other words, you’ve set him up – and now you slap him upside the head with the second sentence! In the second sentence, point of view is third-person (and impersonal) – and you would never hear anything so hellishly callous spoken in conversation. And now that he’s trembling, fearing another sharp slap, you stroke him again in the third sentence – shift back to the conversational second-person point of view and, like a dangerous schizophrenic, say something gentle and kind. I offer only these three sentences as an example; of course you would maintain this pattern.

27. What I'm writing about is highly complex, so my style must be complex too.

Absolutely! Who is his right mind would argue with this? And if you think about it for a moment, everything is complex – that pencil behind your ear has a complicated molecular structure, and not only that, but it used to be part of a tree, which before that was a seed, which before that was sunlight and rain and various minerals in the dirt. And minerals, do you understand how complicated minerals are? Don't get me started. Take my word for it, nothing is simple. And because nothing is simple, nothing can be written about simply. A complex thing like a pencil deserves a grander name, a name that reflects its complexity, don't you agree? The best writers do, calling it *a hand-held inscribing device* and *a manually mobile encrypting tool*.

If a humble pencil is as complicated as I've just shown it to be, what might we say of medical research, accounting, intelligence work, regulatory practices, and so forth? With these we move into the land of abstraction, where complication is never as obvious as it is with concrete things. I mean, if you call a dog a *quadripedal mammal of canine status*, I appreciate it, but you may be challenged – even mocked! – by those smug, self-righteous do-gooders of the Plain Language cult. They may laugh at you, and call you a moron, arguing the by-no-means-certain fact that the word for “dog” is *dog*. Pay them no heed; they are the morons, not you. They are morons for refusing to acknowledge how complicated things truly are. But when you write about subjects they aren't experts in, they do not challenge you, because they fear losing face.¹⁶

So when you write about specialized and deeply abstract subject matter, you have free rein to complicate; the only limits now are the limits of your ingenuity. You are now free to warp “This research seeks to clarify, at the molecular level, the causes of heart attacks” into its properly difficult form: *The objective of this initiative is to elucidate the molecular mechanisms involved in the etiology of left ventricular infarction*. That's how I want it done.

28. I must make the universe aware of my gender politics. This really should go without saying. If you don't, who will?

If you're a woman, you are right to be outraged by such a sentence as *Each researcher must submit his findings by September 30*. Since many researchers are female, that little “his” – certainly chosen carefully by the oppressive male writer – is a bitter reminder of thousands of years of political repression! It's payback time. So always use “she,” “her,” and “hers.” Your sentence becomes *Each researcher must submit her findings by September 30*. Do this consistently. You can distract your reader with such expressions

¹⁶ Very few members of the Plain Language cult are specialists in anything remotely useful. Two or three have degrees in law and find it (for reasons unfathomable) more rewarding to try to simplify legal writing than to use the traditions of legal writing to bedevil, confound, and aggravate. Most are generalists, which means they simply won't know the important difference between *this apparatus* and *said apparatus*.

as *The mailman ate her lunch in the shade* and *The foreman refused to put out her cigar*. These are good, but not hellish; your politics are merely peeking through. Insisting on feminine pronouns becomes truly hellish only when you use them in referring to people who are clearly masculine. Try, for example, *A middle linebacker uses her upper-body strength to shed blockers*, or *That man needs her head examined*. Your politics now scream. That's what I want.

If you're a man, you are right to be infuriated by any of the examples above. You should retaliate in kind. First, you should insist on using "he," "him," and "his" in all expressions where the gender could be masculine or feminine: *Each bus driver must have his blood pressure checked monthly*. But don't stop there! Like your female counterpart, you should use a masculine pronoun to refer to a person who is clearly feminine. *The ballerina had to have his tutu mended during intermission*, *The actress labored for hours on his acceptance speech*, and *When a smart housewife goes shopping, he takes advantage of sales*. These are excellent because they also shriek your politics. And they put each lousy female feminist in his place, don't they?

To those suffering from political apathy on this issue, I will say I also like (and encourage you to employ) namby-pamby coinages, wimpisms like *mailperson*, *infantryperson*, and *policeperson*. Such limp-wristed terms annoy many readers, as do the doublings, which give us sentences like *The visitor must park his or her car on the third level of the garage*. The problem with the doublings is that they're becoming familiar, and when something is familiar, it can no longer distract. Let's get back to the bizarre! Try this: *After the applicant has a physical examination, s/he will be scheduled for a polygraph*. (You could also use *(s)he* there.) And possibly you will be edified to know that an MVD¹⁷ is waiting for the individual who created *(s)h/it*.

29. Grammar is no more than a suggestion. It's true. The grammar of any language should be seen as a general framework, not as hard-and-fast rule. In practical terms, what this means is that you are free (and strongly encouraged) to butcher it.

For example, instead of *You must respond in writing*, be hellish with *Your response must be presented writtenly*. So what if the reader has never encountered "writtenly"? Whose fault is that? Not yours. The grammar of English clearly enables us to clap an *ly* onto the backside of nearly any word and transform that word into an adverb. Do it! Don't write "often," write *numerously*, as in *The curators have numerously attempted to determine whether forgeries are hanging in the gallery*. Rather than write "The shareholders muttered in an ugly way," try *The shareholders muttered uglily*.

English grammar also lets us change any word into a verb. Rather than "The policy made the employees happy," you could write *The policy happied the employees*.¹⁸ If "sad" has

¹⁷ Metaphysical Viewing Device! Didn't you read the Introduction?

¹⁸ Again, you would not be content with this revision. I let my examples illustrate one technique at a time, so that you can learn one technique at a time. What you would ultimately do with this idea is present it

the verb form “sadden,” why shouldn’t “happy” have a verb form? Fair is fair. Speaking of the word “fair,” why not *fair* something? If something is unfair, and you wish to make it fair, why not say you need to *fair* it? You can then explode the idea with *fairification*, and write *Fairification is mandatory and required*. It’s easy.

That brings us to our next little treasure, which is the art of making verbs into nouns. You should do this in every sentence. Rather than say that something “applies,” you should say that it *has an application to*. Rather than say that someone “decided,” you should say that he *made the decision to*. And so on like that.¹⁹

You should also liberate pronouns from the shackles of rule. Rather than “Send it to me,” write *It should be sent to myself*. Why bother wondering whether “who” or “whom” is correct? The reader most certainly doesn’t know, so just pick one, and write *Whom authorized this expenditure?* No one understands the difference between *its* and *it’s*, either, so just use whichever one you feel like using, though if you are really on your toes, you should use *its’*, a logically impossible construction that will paralyze reading.

30. Every English teacher I’ve ever had was right about everything. There’s phludge – and then there’s PHLUDGE. This is PHLUDGE. Just reason like this: English teachers wouldn’t be English teachers unless they knew their stuff. Besides, what would they gain by lying to you? So when an English teacher tells you that “a” precedes a consonant and “an” precedes a vowel, believe it. Write *an European office, an unique opportunity, a FBI agent, a MX silo*. If someone has the audacity to suggest that such constructions are wrong, just look amazed and say, “That’s what I was taught.”

When an English teacher tells you “inanimate objects can’t act,” believe it. A sentence such as “Appendix B further discusses this issue” is actually very good writing – so avoid it! What your English teacher said is perfectly true: readers take everything literally and wouldn’t know an idiomatic expression if one bit them on the ass. In the case of Appendix B discussing, readers would actually believe you’re claiming that the appendix will carry on a conversation with them. That’s the way to think. Instead of a simple expression, you’ll write the wordy one I want: *A further amplification of this issue is presented in Appendix B.*²⁰

Your English teacher repeatedly told you it’s wrong to start a sentence with “because.” Believe it. Don’t ask why this might be wrong. It’s enough that your English teacher

thus: *The heretoforeabovementioned policy directive announcement effectified an engendering of happification among the employees currently employed.*

¹⁹ This technique is one of the paving stones of the highway to hellified style. For more on how to smother your verb, dig around in the section entitled “The Blasquasmic Sentence.”

²⁰ When you do use the idiom, make sure you use it in a way that paralyzes reading. *The corporate dress code disembowels our rights* screams for attention. I keep that one in a glass case. Other examples of a devilish use of idiom are *We were Moby Dicked by the takeover* and *The new policy poleaxes efficiency*.

said it was wrong.²¹ Instead, use a wordy phrase. *Given the fact that, In consideration of the fact that, In light of the fact that,* and *In view of the fact that* all mean “because,” so use one of those instead.

I’m sure that somewhere along the line, an English teacher told you never to end a sentence with a preposition. Follow this rule! Instead of writing, “This is a situation we can’t put up with,” write *This is a situation up with which we cannot put*. Instead of “She is the only candidate we haven’t heard from,” write *She is the only candidate in whom we are interested from whom we have not heard*. Yes, you’d feel like an alien if you said that aloud, but that’s the kind of sentence I want. It follows the rule. It’s what you should write.²²

In a fit of ultra-excitement, your English teacher advised you to put in a comma where you’d take a breath.²³ This is outstanding advice, from my point of view. I want you to sometimes hold your breath and sometimes pant, and punctuate accordingly. If there was only one pilot in the aircraft, then I want you to hold your breath when you write *The pilot who bailed out over Turkey has been rescued*. That sentence implies there were two or more pilots in the aircraft, so the hold-your-breath technique results in a nicely misleading expression. On the other hand, if there were actually two or more pilots in the aircraft, and you’re writing specifically about the one who bailed out over Turkey, then I want you to pant and gasp for air, and write *The pilot, who bailed out over Turkey, has been rescued*. That sentence implies there was only one pilot in the aircraft – so again, the punctuate-where-you-pant technique results in deception. This is what I want.

Your English teacher also told you never to split an infinitive.²⁴ This rule is holy among English teachers, none of whom ever bothers to explain it. The reason they don’t explain it is that they can’t, and the reason they can’t is that they themselves don’t understand it – but it’s what their English teachers told them. And of course they, like you, have absolute faith in the goodness and rightness of English-teacher utterances. But of all the shenanigans of hell, “never split an infinitive” is among my favorite. Very few people actually know what an infinitive is, and everyone else is paranoid about what an infinitive might be, and rather than risk splitting one, they avoid every construction that could conceivably be one – and this takes time. How delicious, the wasting of time!

Let’s reason this through. To get disgustingly plain, clear English, you put words exactly where they go, and “where they go” isn’t mysterious at all. Because, in English, meaning depends on the order of words, related words go side-by-side. If you write *My manager*

²¹ The truth is, starting a sentence with “because” is perfectly fine, so long as you write a complete sentence: *Because his brain was damaged, he wrote “predict in advance.”* But hellish style requires that you pretend this is wrong.

²² In the first case, you could have used “tolerate” as the verb. In the second case, you could have used “responded” as your verb, and written “She is the only candidate who has not responded.” But you should know by now that you never use one word when you can use two or more.

²³ I have yet to hear of an English teacher who said, “Use parentheses if you’d yawn” or “Use a semicolon if you’d burp,” but these would also be excellent bits of advice for hellish punctuation. English teachers reading this book are encouraged to relate punctuation to the writer’s metabolism.

²⁴ An infinitive is a “to” with a verb after it, as in “to stab,” to bite,” and “to pinch.”

thanked me for being wordy warmly, we would say that “warmly” is in the wrong place. How can you be wordy warmly? No, “warmly” should go beside “thanked”: *My manager warmly thanked me for being wordy*. English teachers are missing an excellent opportunity here, because they could overgeneralize about such a sentence as *The judge scolded her for embezzling loudly* and say, “Never end a sentence with an adverb!”²⁵

“Never split an infinitive” is just that – an overgeneralization – but let’s keep that filthy secret between us. If you write *To realistically assess the problem, we must visit the site*, you have put “realistically” where it belongs, between “to” and “assess” – and that’s good writing, which is not what I want.

If you wish to achieve hellish style, trust the wisdom of the English teacher, and refuse to put it there. Instead, write something unnatural like *To assess realistically the problem, on-site visitation must be undertaken*. That’s what I want. If anyone has the gall to call that awkward, say that you had to write it that way because you didn’t want to split the infinitive.

31. I won’t be hypnotized by convention. Convention is a pen for the sheep. Just because all readers expect the orthodox phrase “my manager and I,” it hardly follows that you can’t write *I and my manager*. Just because readers expect two alternatives when you use “either,” it hardly follows that you can’t write *either A, B, or C*.

Infernal style is best served when we frustrate expectations, and conventional phrasings are sitting ducks for this purpose. For example, instead of writing the perfectly idiomatic “The Introduction explains this issue,” it is better to write *The Introduction fixes this issue like a deer in the headlights of an Edsel*, or *The Introduction nails this issue like a butterfly on a specimen sheet*. If you are poetically challenged, then you should keep in mind your English teacher’s instruction that “inanimate objects cannot act,” and be wordy with *An explanation of this issue is presented in the Introduction*.

Rather than write the instantly clear “Figure 3 illustrates the trend,” remember the English teacher’s wisdom – the illustration is inanimate, and can’t really do anything, can it? – and write *An illustration of the abovementioned trend is presented in Figure 3*. If you want your style to grab the reader by the throat, and shake him roughly, you could be poetic with *Figure 3 bitch-slaps this trend*, or distracting with *Figure 3 illumifies the abovementioned trend*.

Because “Dear” is the conventional salutation in a business letter, never use it. Frustrate this smug expectation! Use something else. Any descriptive word will do. Instead of “Dear Mr. Mephistopheles,” you could write *Incorrigible Mr. Mephistopheles* or

²⁵ Note to all English teachers: The more ridiculous “rules” you spew, the better I like it. The more complicating nonsense you foist on impressionable young minds, the better you’ll have it in hell. Remember, your job is to burden writers with a million “don’ts” and “nevers,” so that they feel as though they’re walking through a minefield when they try to write even the simplest idea.

Irredeemable Mr. Mephistopheles. I encourage you to experiment with *Stinky*, *Hateful*, *Ugly*, and *Filthy* as salutations.

Similarly, because “Sincerely” is the expected closure in a business letter, you should never use it. Instead, devise something clever, like *Obviously* or *Unrepentently*. Anything you can do to make the reader wonder what the hell you could possibly have been thinking or where the hell you learned how to write – that’s what you should do.

32. All lawyers are brilliant, and I want my writing to sound like theirs. Now this is a truly handy attitude. It persuades you to use archaic words, to double and triple your terms, to toss qualifications around like confetti, and write 100-word sentences. Of course you should also try to incorporate as much legal-sounding jargon as possible into your writing, and don’t worry for an instant whether you are using the jargon accurately. Misuse *pursuant to* a lot, and throw in lots of unnecessary *whereins*, *thereins*, *hereins*, and so on. The first sentence of your response to a customer’s complaint could look like this: *Pursuant to your letter, wherein you claim, maintain, and contend that you were treated and dealt with like a “disposable diaper” [direct citation from said letter] when you visited the branch premises on or about the 15th instant, this writer hereby makes the following observation herein.*

33. My manager (or reviewer) needs something to do, so I’ll make a few mistakes. Most of you make mistakes instinctively; I am telling you that you had better begin making them with malice aforethought. I don’t want any accidentally error-free documents moving up the reviewing chain. Misspell a few words, make some punctuation mistakes, use a technical term or two incorrectly. Give the reviewer something to do.

Error-free writing can be horribly easy to understand. I want difficulty, and errors help create it. When your reviewer spots an error, he gets distracted and begins looking for more. He is, in other words, no longer reading for content – he’s now proofreading! And oh, the beauties that follow!

Let me catalog them. First, you’re wasting your reviewer’s time. By itself, this is excellent. In addition, however, your content is now more likely to be unexamined. What this means is that you can write something that contradicts policy, technical accuracy, or legal validity, and it will go unchallenged! Serious misunderstandings result; the outcome is often a lawsuit (you get one point for every lawsuit you provoke in this manner).

34. I must never use personal pronouns. You should heed the dogma of those who do not know what formality is and who insist that *you, we, I*, and so forth make your writing “informal.” Listen to these experts, and strive for formality without having any clear idea of what formality is.

Rather than write “They hope,” be infernal with *It is hoped that*. Scorn the plain “We believe” and write the hellish *It is the belief of the committee that*. Dump the sophomoric “Please send the analysis to me” and be formally brilliant with *It is requested that the abovementioned be transmitted to the undersigned*.

And of course you must never, ever use “I.” That pronoun indicates great egotism on your part, so you should call yourself *this desk, this attorney, this employee, this reporter, this individual*, and so on. In hellish style, it is incomparably better to write *This engineer is in agreement with that engineer* than “I agree with him.” Avoiding “I” is especially important in cases where the reader’s first language is not English. In a letter confirming the visit of a foreign dignitary to your office, don’t write “I look forward to meeting you.” Instead, write *The correspondent is anxious to make the acquaintance of the correspondee*.²⁶ Doing so properly punishes the reader for not having English as his first language.

35. I should be brief. I’d better take a minute to explain what I want done here. I’m talking about *scope* – the ideas you end up including and excluding from the document. You know by now that I want you to be as wordy as possible when it comes to phrasing the ideas you choose to include – but I want you to be brief when it comes to including the ideas that the reader needs. In fact, I want you to exclude them. Another way of saying this is that I want your scope to leave the reader with a thousand questions.

Don’t explain things that require explanation. Don’t explain the unfamiliar abbreviation. Don’t explain the meaning of the queer technical term. And don’t answer the reader’s annoying questions. *The pay-and-benefits structure for non-exempt employees will be eliminated on the first of next year* provokes a number of questions.

- Will my pay be decreased?
- What about my benefits? Are you eliminating those? Are you reducing them?
- What’s going to replace the current structure?
- What about exempt employees? Aren’t you going to ruin their lives too?
- What do you mean by “pay-and-benefits structure,” anyway?

For good writers, these questions are easy to foresee – but hey, but you are not one of those crazy witches in Greek mythology who could see into the future. You are neither clairvoyant nor the possessor of a crystal ball. And neglecting to answer most (if not all) of these questions enables you to be brief, doesn’t it?

²⁶ The alert reader will note the use of “anxious” in this sentence. In hellish style, we never write “eager.”

36. Conciseness and brevity are the same thing. This idea is a non-ending fountain of hellishness – so believe it. Tell yourself that you should always use the fewest words possible to express an idea. This attitude persuades you that calling someone a *mentally ill advocate* (three words) is more succinct than saying the person “advocates for the mentally ill” (five words). It encourages you to write, in a Subject line, the three-word phrase *initial cost analysis*²⁷ – and so what if this is ambiguous? If it might mean the four-word “analysis of initial cost” or the four-word “initial analysis of cost,” so what? You can’t have it both ways! You can’t be both brief and clear; you have to pick sides, and I’m telling you that I want brevity – at least when it comes to eliminating the “little” words (*of, for, with,* and so on) that show your reader how the big words relate.

Shun the helpful little words, and be concise with *outdated check redemption procedures* when you mean either “outdated procedures for redeeming checks” or “procedures for redeeming outdated checks.” This is what I want. And each of these is worth 1/1000th of a point.

37. I must avoid the passive voice. When everyone agrees on something, it must be true, right? To my great delight, 99 percent of language experts insist that even the most innocent passive should be shot on sight. These experts would glance at the passive *Illegally parked cars will be towed* and declare it to be terrible writing for a host of reasons, but chiefly because it doesn’t say who will do the towing – and that’s something that all readers are starving to know. The experts would have you write *Buck’s Towing and Wrecking Service will tow all illegally parked cars*. After all, that’s the active voice. So it must be better. It must be better because everyone says it is.

If it sounds to you as though such reasoning is circular, that’s because it is. When we begin with the premise that the active voice is the tool of diligence, of course all passives become loitering hoodlums intent on no good. That’s how I want you to think

Now there are two kinds of passives. The first kind includes an actor but de-emphasizes it, as in *He was eaten by a crocodile*. The other kind, which omits any mention of the actor (for example, *Seatbelts must be fastened during take-off*), is called the “imperfect passive.”²⁸

Consider the passive sentence *Professor Squeam was abducted by foul-mouthed aliens*. What you’re doing, when you write such a sentence, is signaling your reader that you’re making a point about Professor Squeam. If you cast this idea in the active voice, you have *Foul-mouthed aliens abducted Professor Squeam*. Now you’re signaling the reader

²⁷ Read more on this construction, the “noun clump,” in Kakkitage.

²⁸ The imperfect passive is used abundantly in ordinary discourse when the actor is understood or irrelevant. Everyday examples of it are *The lights were left on all night*, *The dog hasn’t been walked yet*, and *The gas station was closed*.

that you're making a point about – intending to emphasize – the foul-mouthed aliens. This is where things get a bit tricky, because from the reader's point of view both expressions are perfect. But remember – the gullible, helpless reader reads only what you write, so you have a tremendous advantage. Leverage this advantage: use the active voice to write something that is formally perfect and perfectly irrelevant.²⁹

Let me show you how this works. Let's say that you wish to convey *Lydia was arrested for indecent behavior*. In such a case, the point is what happened to Lydia; "Lydia" should be the subject of the sentence. Exactly who arrested her is beside the point; the police officer is understood and irrelevant. But *Lydia was arrested for indecent behavior* is an imperfect passive – which everyone says is taboo. So you must train yourself to ignore common sense, cast the idea in the active voice, and write *A District of Columbia police officer named Joachim Smuck arrested Lydia for indecent behavior*. This is hellish. Artificially imposing the active voice lets you achieve it.

Consider the imperfect passive *Smoking is prohibited*. Tell yourself that this expression is woefully inadequate because it sneakily conceals who's doing the prohibiting. Phrase it in the active voice, like this: *Policy directive 4.3, part 2, subpart 6, section 29, paragraph 1 prohibits smoking in this building*. That's much better.

Finally, consider the imperfect passive *He was breastfed as an infant*. As in the previous examples, this expression audaciously neglects to mention the actor. Exactly who breastfed him? Readers need to know! Use the active voice to wreck emphasis and state the obvious: *His mother breastfed him during his tenure in infant status*. You may suspect that the reader can figure out who breastfeeds, but you should heed the wisdom of the experts. They wouldn't be experts if they didn't know their stuff, would they?

38. Subtle distinctions are the footprints of anal-retentives. So go ahead and write *simplistic* instead of "simple." The words mean entirely different things, but pretend they don't. And only pedants respect the distinction between *method* and *methodology*, so always use the latter. You're not a pedant, and you want to sound like a professional, don't you? If you mean "decrease," write *minimize*. Do the same thing with "increase" and *maximize* – and vice versa, of course.³⁰ *Utilize* the pencil. *Initiate* the car. Don't write that the telephone line is "non-secure" – say it's *insecure*. Use *ambiguous* to characterize anything vague or unclear; avoid using it in its precise sense (to describe an expression that has more than one clear logical interpretation).

Disregard the distinctions between *if* and *whether*, *among* and *between*, *fewer* and *less*, *amount* and *number*. If you're energized, write that you're *energated*. And you can really have fun by ignoring the difference between *that* and *which*. Write *Six soldiers in*

²⁹ In this phludgism I concentrate on the imperfect passive. More advice on how to wreck your writing by abusing active and passive voice can be found in the section on Kakkitage.

³⁰ A style guide for one federal agency actually instructs its writers to use *increase* and *maximize* as synonyms. And style guides can't be wrong.

the unit are accused of torture which is inhumane, and leave some of your readers wondering about what kinds of torture are considered humane, while others wonder whether the accusation itself is inhumane – neither of which is what you meant. You meant that all torture is inhumane; you simply omitted the comma required by “which.”

39. I’m writing to a mob. What you write gets read by one person at a time, but you should always imagine your audience as a crowd. This mental picture assists you in writing *When coming in from the field, always check your necks for ticks*. Readers have been known to be transfixed by such a sentence for ten minutes. Imagine the mob, and write *Your cars will be screened when you arrive*. You can be inconsistent here too, and the result is hellish. Write to the individual in the first half of your sentence and write to the mob in the second half. The result could be *After you have passed the written exam, you will be scheduled for your polygraphs*. Another example of delicious inconsistency is *After you have signed your name, you will receive Temporary Visitor badges and be escorted to the briefing room*.

40. It’s not my fault. If you sometimes marvel at how badly you’re writing, don’t do the right thing and try to improve the expression. Instead, tell yourself that you can’t help it, and that in any case you’re not to blame. It’s best to believe that you’ve repressed the memories of being abused as a child.³¹ That’s a handy one in these “enlightened” days. Whether you were actually abused as a child is something no one can disprove – but it could certainly account for your godawful writing, couldn’t it?

Moreover, it’s not your fault that your English teachers didn’t succeed in teaching you anything; it’s not your fault that they were so inconsistent that you grew more and more confused each year. This explains why you hate to write. It’s hardly your fault that your college professors insisted on bloated sentences and pretentious words and demanded their 10-page papers without saying “and make every word count.” This explains why you can no longer say anything concisely. And it’s not your fault that your manager insists on absurd style. You must give your manager what he wants; he writes your performance review, and you need your annual raise to keep pace with the rising cost of alcohol.

So now you have plenty of phludge to ruin your thinking. The soil has been corrupted – the time has come to plant the crop. The rest of this book supplies you with the seeds of bad faith. Plant them in the phludge; manure them often; let them take root and fester.

³¹ You could use an extremely loose definition of “abuse” for this purpose. If one day your father frowned at you, that could be considered abuse. If one day your mother corrected your “can I” to “may I,” that could easily be considered abuse. Furthermore it would not be cause for wonder that a sensitive child might repress the memory of such traumatic events.