

## Chapter 9: Language

### Grammar as Rhetoric and Style

#### Concise Diction

At the start of her essay “Mother Tongue,” Amy Tan criticizes herself for writing that is “burdened . . . with nominalized forms, past perfect tenses, conditional phrases.” Similarly, George Orwell (p. 529) lambasts “the *-ize* and *de-* formations,” preferring direct verbs. He also cautions against complex or unusual words that “dress up simple statements,” preferring economy of language. Both writers argue for clear, authentic writing using the most straightforward language possible.

#### Nominalization

Nominalization is the process that changes a verb into its noun form. The verb *discuss* becomes *discussion*, for instance; the verb *depend* becomes *dependence*; *recognize* becomes *recognition*. The noun forms often result in wordiness, stiffness, or awkward constructions, as the following examples (with added italics) show.

Rodriguez could have said:

*I had the knowledge that my speech in English was poor.*

Instead, he puts the emphasis on verbs and writes:

*I knew very well that I spoke English poorly.*

#### Showy Vocabulary

Having a large and diverse vocabulary gives a writer many choices and usually results in more precise writing. Inexperienced writers, however, often believe that fancier is better and try to show off words they know. In “Mother Tongue,” Amy Tan looks back on a first draft of a story containing this line:

That was my mental *quandary* in its *nascent* state.

With a sense of humor about herself, she tells us that when she first wrote the questionable sentence she believed that a sentence with such elevated vocabulary “would finally prove I had mastery over the English language,” but she realized it was “a terrible line” that needed revision. One such revision might read:

That was my *dilemma* in its *earliest* state.

The key to figuring out if a word is too showy is to ask yourself if the fancy word — for example, *pernicious* — is more precise than the more ordinary word — for example, *fatal* — or if you think the former is simply more impressive than the latter. *Pernicious* seems appropriate when Daniel Okrent says:

Hijacking the language proves especially *pernicious* when government officials deodorize their programs with near-Orwellian euphemism.

On the other hand, *pernicious* is inappropriate in a sentence such as:

We all heard the *pernicious* gunshots.

The only reason you might laugh when someone says to you, “Felicitations on your natal day!” is that that expression is so much more pompous than “Happy birthday!” — and much less authentic. Like Tan, you must make your own decisions because these choices are not a matter of hard-and-fast rules but rather of how you assess your audience’s expectations and the effect your language will have.

## Rhetorical and Stylistic Strategy

Writers who use nominalizations, *de-* and *-ize* verbs, and overly complex or unusual words may think these choices add elegance or complexity to their prose and the ideas they express. However, the opposite is true. A writer who relies on expressions that fall into these categories gives the impression of insecurity and perhaps even insincerity. Whenever possible, follow the aphorism “Less is more”: less complexity, less length, and less obscurity will lead you toward clear and readable prose with an authentic voice.

### Exercise 1

Identify awkward or pretentious diction in the following sentences, and revise each sentence as necessary to improve clarity.

1. A person who has a dependence on constant approval from others is usually insecure.
2. Let’s have a discussion of the essay you read for homework.

3. Khaya finally came to the realization that she preferred research to teaching.
4. A key step toward losing weight is to make a reduction in the amount of food you consume.
5. A supercilious manager rarely contributes to a felicitous workplace.
6. Recommendations are being made by the faculty for the honor society.
7. Colin filled out his application to work part-time during the holidays.
8. We should give serious consideration to the possibility of traveling to China this summer.
9. The president has every intention of hearing both viewpoints.
10. Before finalizing the meeting, the chair of the group offered a plethora of ideas.
11. Before Derrell made a serious purchase, such as a car, he made a study of the competition.
12. Many benefits accrue from residing in a heterogeneous community.
13. The press release gave an explanation for the senator's stance on homeland security.
14. A recalcitrant attitude has resulted from too many of our colleagues becoming mired in quotidian concerns.
15. Maya has a lot of sympathy for students who experience test anxiety.

## Exercise 2

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In "Politics and the English Language," George Orwell cites the following paragraph as an example of "bad writing." Revise the paragraph by eliminating pretentious diction and improving clarity.

On the one side we have the free personality: by definition it is not neurotic, for it has neither conflict nor dream. Its desires, such as they are, are transparent, for they are just what institutional approval keeps in the forefront of consciousness; another institutional pattern would alter their number and intensity; there is little in them that is natural, irreducible, or culturally dangerous. But *on the other side*, the social bond itself is nothing but the mutual reflection of these self-secure integrities. Recall the definition of love. Is not this the very picture of a small academic? Where is there a place in this hall of mirrors for either personality or fraternity?

## Exercise 3

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Find an article in a newspaper, a memo from an organization, or a speech that contains examples of pretentious and awkward diction. Identify the examples, and explain their effect. Suggest ways to revise that would make the writing clearer. Do you think the writer is intentionally keeping the language obscure?