

Controlling your language: making English clear

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Introduction

Traditionally, "good English" has meant a style which employs long complicated sentences, rich in synonyms and subordinate clauses, and which carefully avoids repetition. But this manner of writing does not communicate practical information efficiently. It may be stirring but it is not clear.

To communicate about technical matters, you need to use language in a much more controlled way. Sometimes, the product is called "simple". But that term refers only to the elementary structure of the language which results. It does not describe the ease with which the material is composed: nor necessarily, the complexity of the ideas conveyed. For authors long used to following the style of scientific textbooks and journals, "simple" English (which we prefer to call "controlled", or even just "clear") is far from "simple" to write. And the attempt to do so often exposes unsuspected confusion in the thinking of the writer. But with practice, most people can learn to write simply; and it is perfectly possible, too, to avoid the unnatural kind of simplicity that offends the sophisticated, and which brings the style into disrepute.

So far, the main use for simplified English is to improve technical communication to workers to whom it is a foreign language, and especially to those who also have a limited education. Non-native speakers, and inexperienced readers, even if they are socially fluent in the language, often have

much more difficulty with reading than we realize. Modern readability texts have shown how simplifying a text can make it very much easier to read. Also, a simplified text is easier to translate and, if recorded on tape, it is easier to listen to.

Technical material accessible to the non-native English speaker is valuable, because so little has been satisfactorily translated. But the gain in clarity particularly the improved organization of the ideas behind the words, also helps communication between fellow Anglophones.

Making English clear

Here are the main rules for writing "controlled" language which educationalists have worked out, and for which there is some sound experimental evidence^{1,2,3}. Our concern is to increase the usefulness of manuals and other teaching materials for health workers in developing countries.

"To communicate about technical matters, you need to use language in a much more controlled way."

Most of the quotations come from the script of a slide tape set which is distrib-

uted through TALC. A group of non-native English-speaking nursing students who studied the "simplified" version commented favourably on the greater ease with which they could understand it. These same students found non-simplified scripts much more difficult to follow.

1. Use short sentences: Each sentence should contain not more than 20 words (and, if possible, less than 16). Sentences like this, with 51 words, are too long:

"To help mothers with malnourished children, in some areas a special supplement has been prepared, which they can feed to the child and which will make good the lack in the child's diet and start him on recovery while he gets used to the diet that is taught to the mother".

Many readers can understand all the words, or even all the phrases, but they get lost on the connections (italicised) and miss the meaning as a whole.

2. Use only one or two clauses in each sentence: To make this point: keep each idea in one simple sentence. The above

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example contains seven clauses, connected by the words in italic letters. A simplified version might read like this:

"We must teach mothers of malnourished children to feed their children a better diet. In some areas a special food supplement is made to help these mothers. While they are learning about the new diet, the mothers can give their children the food supplement. The supplement improves the child's diet, and he starts to recover."

You could break down these sentences even further: *"malnourished children need a better diet. We must teach their mothers to feed them a better diet."* But there come a point at which not only is the result longer, but it starts to get more difficult to connect up the ideas again.

3. Use simple familiar words: Use "try" not "endeavour"; "everywhere" not "ubiquitous"; "between" not "interspersed"; "needs" not "requires".

If an unfamiliar word is essential, define it the first time it is used, and use it in context several times, so that it becomes familiar. Some of the words that we have had to use this way are: "Rosary" (string of beads); "Pigeon" (a bird); "transitory" (passing in time); "contaminate" (make impure).

For healthworkers, obscure general vocabulary often gives more difficulty than medical words.

4. Use the same word each time: Many words have synonyms. Choose one, preferably the most commonly used, and use it every time.

"Legume" (vegetable that can be eaten) or "pulse" in nutrition, both mean the same thing. "Deficiency" or "lack", "fat" or "lipid", "regular" or "control".

5. Use precise words: Precise words are easier than words with several meanings, or those with idiomatic uses, even if they are a little less familiar to a native speaker.

Instead of "get" try to use *catch, obtain, become, fetch, etc.* Use "expensive" instead of "dear" or "beyond the means of"; and "previous" instead of "last". "Next" may be clearer than "then", when you give instructions like, "Next, examine the child's mouth". "After", may be clearer than "when", on occasions such as "After you have examined the child wash your hands".

6. Make positive sentences: You can't completely avoid negatives, but many are not necessary, and positive sentences are more easily understood. For a native English speaker "Do not give skimmed milk to babies under six months old", may be unambiguous. For the non-active speaker it may be better to say: "Give skimmed milk only to babies over six months old". For the same reason, instead of "You cannot feel a normal thyroid gland", say "If you can feel a thyroid gland, then it is probably enlarged".

In particular, **avoid double negatives**, as in "Rickets is not uncommon in Indian children". The subtleties of "not un-" are likely, at best, to be lost. Why not say, "Rickets is common in Indian children"? If that is not accurate, perhaps it is better either to give precise figures, or to leave out the references to frequency altogether, or to say (simply), "Many children in India have rickets".

It is specially important to avoid a negative conditional, like "Unless he eats protein, the child will not recover". This means "To recover, the child must eat protein". But people easily read "unless" to mean "if", which completely reverses the message.

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7. Make active sentences: They are clearer than passive sentences. This is one of the most difficult rules to follow in practice, because the passive voice is so fundamental to conventional scientific style, than it can be hard to find a suitable subject. Be careful if you want to say: "It is good if children are given fish", because someone might not be clear that your meaning is different from "It is good if children are given to fish," and from "It is good if children are giving fish (away)". It is safer to say "It is good if mothers give fish to children".

To take another example, "Her attention will soon be directed towards another baby" in the active voice becomes, "She will soon direct her attention towards another baby". (But perhaps "Another baby will soon take all her attention" recaptures better what the passive suggested - that the baby is the dominant subject).

You cannot follow these rules slavishly. Often a negative is unavoidable, or a simple passive less clumsy than a difficult active form. For instance, how do you avoid babies being born?

8. Use the personal and imperative form: This is especially useful when you give instructions about how to do things. To say "Advise mothers to give children more food" is

clearer than *"Mothers should be advised..."*, and *"You can see wasting of his arms"* is better than *"Wasting can be seen in his arms."* Do not say *"the pregnant woman is asked if she remembers the date of her last menstrual period"*. Say *"Ask the woman about the date of her last menstrual period"*.

Notice how adopting this personal form also involves changing from the passive to the active - and may incidentally provide you with the "missing" subject.

9. Use few pronouns: Readers may not be able to work out to what subjects a pronoun such as *"they"* *"it"* or *"he"* refers. Try to avoid, *"Tell her to give it to him three times a day"*, and instead say: *"Tell the mother to give this medicine to her child three times a day."* On many occasions the pronoun problem is less obvious, as in the first example below.

10. Repeat words if necessary: Repetition is forgivable if it makes things clear, and if you are careful with the over-all construction, it need not sound unduly repetitive. There are several tricks we have to avoid reusing a word, and they can all confuse a non-native speaker.

- We use a pronoun to refer to a noun in the previous sentence or before. *"Often the conditions of paid work make it difficult for mothers to breastfeed their children. So we should try to change them."* (change what? The mothers, the children, the conditions, or all three?) You have to say, *"... so we should try to change those conditions"*.
- We use a new word to refer to something said before. *"Hyderabad mix consists of wheat, groundnut, Bengal gram, skimmed milk and sugar. The first three ingredients are roasted..."* Not everyone realizes what *"the first three ingredients"* are. It is much safer to repeat and say: *"The wheat, groundnut and gram are roasted..."*
- We use the word *"so"* (meaning *"also"*) to refer back to something said earlier. Again, it can be difficult for people to identify what is referred to. *"The cod stores Vitamin D in the liver, and so can the human."* *"Mothers become anaemic, and also children become anaemic"*. The phrases *"like this"* and *"in this way"* can cause similar confusion.

11. Keep comparatives simple: Avoid comparatives which imply degree. *"Distinctly better"* means *"better"* *"Somewhat similar"* means *"similar"*. The cod liver oil must be *"reasonably fresh"* (just *"fresh"*!).

Whenever possible, specify exactly what you mean. For example, how do you know if cod liver oil is fresh? Say how long it keeps. And instead of *"rather younger"* (if *"younger"* is not enough) say *"(about) two years younger"*.

12. Put in the connecting words "who", "which" and "that": Often these words are omitted and their sense is just implied. But they are precise and always refer to something in the same sentence, and for non-native speakers they are very helpful.

In the following sentence, four connecting words are left out: *"This is a form of anaemia found in babies born to mothers living on a vegetarian diet deficient in Vitamin B12."*

If you put the connecting words all back, it becomes: *"This is a form of anaemia which is found in babies who are born to mothers who are living on a vegetarian diet that is deficient in Vitamin B12"*

But sometimes for a native English speaker, it can be difficult even to see where the connections have been left out.

- 13. Avoid difficult constructions:**
- Try not to use the word *"by"* in *"by doing"* something, such as *"Prevent rickets by giving cod liver oil"*.
 - *"As"* is another word often used in a confusing way. *"Give children oil, as this is a good source of energy"*, becomes clearer if you substitute *"because"*.

14. Use simple tenses: Where possible, use the simple present or past. Other languages do not all have such a complex system of tenses as English, and the future perfect in particular causes difficulty. The future is used mostly from habit as in *"The child with measles will have a rash"*. *"The child with TB will have been losing weight,"* is only saying that *"A child with TB loses weight."* and *"Mary had been eating poorly for three months before her illness"*, means simply that *"Mary ate poorly for three months before her illness"*.

15. Explain things in a clear, logical order, and in time sequence: Think about students' problems in ordering information. In this sentence, which is 34 words long, the ideas are backwards:

"The model of the pelvis on the left suggests the severe obstetric difficulties that a woman may run into whose pelvis has been softened and become contracted as the result of rickets in childhood."

We do not learn about rickets in childhood, (which it is all about) until the last three words. The order of ideas is really:

"Child-ricket-pelvis softened-pelvis contracted-adult woman (pregnant)-obstetric difficulty – we made a model to show you."

However, the model must be mentioned early, because this text is describing a picture of one. A simplified version might read:

"On the left is a model of a woman's pelvis. This woman had rickets in childhood. Her pelvis became softened and contracted. In adult life, the contracted pelvis caused severe obstetric difficulties."

Surely this is better than the original for all levels of communication, and it is not offensively simple. It is two words shorter. The only individual words that might need defining are "contracted" and "obstetric" which it is reasonable to teach in this context. Even the original sentence did not contain many difficult words (apart from the necessary idiom "may run into") – it is the way in which it was strung together that is confusing.

16. Write in "situational" terms: Try to make statements about things that happen to people in real situations - rather than abstract or generalized statements about processes. Although we put it last, this is probably one of the most important rules. In conventional style you might say: *"The skin grows to cover over gaps made by cuts. But dirt in wounds prevents healing."*

However, it is more real to readers if you say: *"Your skin can grow to close a cut. This is healing. But if you get dirt in a cut, the cut will not heal well."*

People often have difficulty relating abstract or generalized statements to real life. But if you write in these situational

terms, people can more easily see it related to their life and practice.

17. Break up the text by any means you can think of: All the points so far have referred to the language itself. But for readers, it is important to remember the visual form of a page. And however linguistically simple, a solid grey page of prose can be very hard to read. Putting things in lists, and a new paragraph, and varied script, and pictures, helps to emphasize and clarify, and to reinforce by conveying information in a different way. An organized page helps the reader to organize the information.

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Conclusion

We hope that this paper will help people who are teaching technical subjects in non-English speaking countries

to write more understandably. Medicine and nutrition have been the subjects of our endeavours but the ideas should also be useful in other fields.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Ken Cripwell, of the Department of English as a Foreign Language, Institute of Education, University of London. Thanks also to Professor David Morley for encouragement and support in preparing this paper.

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