

The
Economist



WRITING WITH STYLE

A new edition of *The Economist Style Guide*

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For Eva

Introduction

The purpose of The Economist is to be clear. And clarity of writing usually follows clarity of thought. So think what you want to say, then say it as simply as you can. Keep in mind George Orwell's six rules:

1. Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
2. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
3. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
4. Never use the passive where you can use the active.
5. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
6. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

These rules serve different purposes:

1. Originality. The Economist aims to give its readers analysis they will not get elsewhere. But we also hope to compete on the quality of our writing. If readers

find a familiar, overused phrase every sentence or so, their minds will wander.

But if our writers arrest their attention by novelty of imagery, analogy and phrasing, reading our pages will be pleasurable, and they will read on.

2. Clarity. Articles in The Economist should be like essays, in that they have a beginning, a middle and an end. Each should be a coherent whole, a series of paragraphs that follow logically and, ideally, will suffer if even one sentence is cut out. If the article is a report, the facts must be selected and presented as a story. If it is a leader or more analytical article, it should also have a sense of sequence, so the reader has the feeling of being carried from a beginning to a conclusion. Either way, it is up to you to provide the ideas, analysis and argument that bind the elements of the article

together. That is the hard part. Once you have them, though, you need only plain, straightforward words to express them. Short words are more than short; they are clear. The stock of short, old words in the English language has a special role in a good English sentence (about which we will hear more in Chapter 1). Use the language of everyday speech, not that of lawyers or bureaucrats. So prefer let to permit, people to persons, buy to purchase, colleague to peer, present to gift, rich to wealthy, show to demonstrate, break to violate. Pomposity and long-windedness tend to obscure meaning, or reveal the lack of it. Strip them away in favour of plain words.

3. Concision. Our readers are busy. They can be easily seduced by any other magazine or newspaper (or indeed any other app on their phones). When readers give us their time, we want to make it worthwhile, and that means making every word count.

4. Honesty. The passive has its occasional uses, but one of its chief misuses is the way in which it can conceal who did what in the sentence: remember Ronald Reagan's famous Mistakes were made. Active sentences can be elusive too. But if you turn as many passives into actives as you can, your writing will be more direct and more transparent.

5. Humility. Read through your writing several times. Edit it ruthlessly, whether by cutting or polishing or sharpening, on each occasion. Avoid repetition. Cut out anything superfluous. And resist the temptation to achieve a literary effect by making elliptical remarks or allusions to unexplained people or events. Rather, hold your reader's attention by keeping the story moving. If the tale begins to sag, or the arguments seem less than convincing, you can rescue it only by the sharpness of your mind.

Avoid scientific, foreign or jargon words. Jargon is often intended to show off, telling the reader that you know something special. Ideally you really do know something your reader doesn't, but putting those facts into everyday English makes your article read less like a lecture and more like an intelligent friend explaining something. It also means that you will have to be honest with yourself about what you aim to say. In plain words it is far harder to hide if you aren't sure what you mean.

Don't be hectoring or arrogant. Those who disagree with you are not necessarily stupid or insane. Nobody needs to be described as silly; let your analysis show that instead. When you express opinions, do not simply make assertions. The aim is not just to tell readers what you think, but to persuade them. If you use arguments, reasoning and evidence, you may succeed. Go easy on oughts and shoulds.

Don't be too pleased with yourself. Don't boast of your own cleverness by telling your readers that you correctly predicted something or that you have a scoop. You are more likely to bore or irritate them than to impress them.

6. Lucidity. Simple sentences help. Keep complicated constructions and gimmicks to a minimum, if necessary by remembering the New Yorker's comment: "Backward ran sentences until reeled the mind."

If your syntax is crisp, a longer sentence now and again will not over-tax the reader. Remember Mark Twain's advice on how a writer treats sentences: " At times he may indulge himself with a long one, but he will make sure there are no folds in it, no vaguenesses, no parenthetical interruptions of its view as a whole; when he has done with it, it won't be a sea-serpent with half of its arches under the water; it will be a torch-light procession. " A sentence without discipline is not a torch-light procession, but a torch-bearing mob.

Twain, like Orwell, was a great stylist. Of another writer, he said that he "hadn't any more invention than a horse; and I don't mean a high-class horse, either; I mean a clothes-horse." Twain's rules for writers echo Orwell's. He said that a writer should:

Say what he is proposing to say, not merely come near it. Use the right word, not its second cousin.



Eschew surplusage.



Not omit necessary details.



Avoid slovenliness of form.



Use good grammar.



Employ a simple and straightforward style.



Easily said. But what are the right words? Good grammar? Simple style?



What follows are rules like Orwell's and Twain's, discovered by good writers again and again, with a dash of what The Economist's own scribblers have discovered over 180 years and counting.

part 1

The big things

Old and short: words

The Economist's philosophy on vocabulary can be summed up in a quote from Winston Churchill: "short words are best, and old words, when short, are best of all." We used this quote to introduce a leader in 2004. It went on:

And, not for the first time, he was right: short words are best. Plain they may be, but that is their strength. They are clear, sharp and to the point. You can get your tongue round them. You can spell them. Eye, brain and mouth work as one to greet them as friends, not foes. For that is what they are. They do all that you want of them, and they do it well. On a good day, when all is right with the world, they are one more cause for cheer. On a bad day, when the head aches, you can get to grips with them, grasp their drift and take hold of what they mean. And thus they make you want to read on, not turn the page.

Sharp-eyed readers will have seen the trick: there is not a word longer than one syllable in this paragraph. And on it went like that, for the rest of the piece, 783 old, short words.

Why are old words short and best? A brief history English is capacious, with a vocabulary rich not only in synonyms but in near-synonyms that have subtle differences. The ability to choose the right one is a hallmark of a good writer.

Some insecure writers are tempted by a thesaurus when trying to vary their vocabulary. But a good rule is that if you need a thesaurus, you have no business using one. A thesaurus can tell you that help, aid, assist and support all have similar meanings. But it can't tell you which is the right one for your sentence. You need to know both words' definitions and their connotations—the shadings that differ when you choose between thin and skinny.

Sometimes words really do mean almost the exact same thing. You would need a microscope to tease apart any difference in meaning between get and obtain. They do di

er, though: in the kinds of situations in which you might use them. Try offering to obtain someone a drink at the next party you go to and see if they are there when you return. You obtain a mortgage but get a beer.

The reason get and obtain feel different has to do with the last 1,500 years or so of the English language. Understanding the origins of words is crucial to understanding their impact. Why does *kingly* have a fantasy-fiction feel, whereas *royal* implies a literal monarch, and *regal* is more figurative? Given a choice between *rough-hewn* and *refined*, which should you go for? Which of *rough-hewn* and *refined* feels *rough-hewn*, and which feels *refined*?

A skilled English-speaker would know the answer to that question even without ever having seen them before. And the reasons have to do with history. We speak English, not “British”, for reasons to do with the conquest of the island of Great Britain by successive groups, each of which left a distinctive mark on the language that still affects how we use it today.

Britons, Anglo-Saxons and Vikings

The pre-Roman inhabitants of Great Britain, called Britons, spoke Celtic languages related to modern Welsh and Irish. They were conquered by Rome, but ordinary Britons never began speaking Latin, as their neighbours in France had. If they had, today the “British” language would be a Romance cousin to French and Spanish. Instead, the Britons kept their Celtic, and spoke it still when the Roman empire retreated in the fifth century.

But the Celtic languages of Britain did not dominate for much longer. The island tempted new invaders from southern Denmark and northern Germany: the Angles, Saxons, Jutes and others today lumped together as “Anglo-Saxons”. They conquered most of Great Britain, pushing the Celtic-speakers west and north towards Wales, Cornwall and Scotland.

The Anglo-Saxon victory—in linguistic terms—was total. Today’s Britons don’t speak British because, after just a few centuries, the Celtic languages were restricted to the northern and western reaches of the island. Instead, we speak the language named after the Angles: *Anglisc*, or English, the Germanic language of the conquerors, not the Celtic of the conquered. Though conquerors and conquered usually mix their languages extensively, to this day scholars wonder why there is almost no Celtic in English. Just a few words like *dun* and *crag* are all that remain.

A few centuries later, Britain once again tempted invaders, this time the Vikings. They not only came and ransacked; many settled. Alfred the Great, the best-known of the Anglo-Saxon kings, fought them to a truce. The Vikings and Alfred divided the

island. The Vikings could settle north of their line in the Danelaw, leaving the Anglo-Saxons alone south of it. (To this day, place-names with Viking elements like -by—think of Grimsby and Derby—are far commoner in the old Danelaw.)

The Vikings, like the people they raided, spoke a Germanic language, in their case Old Norse, a cousin to Anglo-Saxon. Vikings and Anglo-Saxons could understand each other, though with *di culty*, when each spoke their own language.

Over time, Viking settlers took English wives, settled down and had English-speaking children. Naturally this led to them contributing their own words to English. These included things we might stereotypically associate with Vikings –violent words like knife and ransack. But the Vikings also contributed window, leg, husband and even they. The fact that these are everyday words shows how closely the Norse and Anglo-Saxon speakers rubbed shoulders. In some cases, Norse borrowings settled in next to Saxon words rather than displacing them, giving English quasi-synonyms like heaven (Anglo-Saxon) and sky (Norse), or hide (Anglo-Saxon) and skin (Norse).

Sometimes English imported a close cousin of a word it already had. Ship and ski are, respectively, Anglo-Saxon and Norse pronunciations of the same Germanic word; over time the two took on distinct meanings. The same is true of shirt and skirt, and shatter and scatter. In such pairs the close kinship of the languages is clear.

Conquest and renaissance

Not so with the next invaders. In 1066 William the Conqueror came from Normandy and took the English throne. Now England was run by speakers of a northern dialect of French. For centuries, the Normans were a small minority amid the large Saxon population. The kings of England hardly spoke English.

This is why the Normans gave English words with *cachet*, dealing with the law (arrest), religion (abbey), warfare (army) and style (art), just to start with. Animals and their meat have different names in English because Saxon farmers lived near their pigs, sheep and cows (all Germanic words), while Norman lords ate the pork, mutton and beef (all from French). French was the language of royalty—a word they also gave to English.

In continental Europe Latin was still the language of all serious writing. As a result, the long infiltration of Latin words into English began in earnest after the Norman conquest. Latin words were especially common in religion (diocese, scripture), law (homicide, testify) and learning (history, library).

The last significant source of new words came after the Renaissance. Scholars rediscovered Greek, and began not only borrowing words from Classical Greek (chaos,

physics) but even coining their own new words from Greek roots (utopia, zoology), just as they had been doing with Latin roots. In this era, the prestige of English was at a low ebb. If a fancy new word was needed, one constructed from classical rather than Saxon parts would sound more impressive. In many cases, a classical coinage (like conscience) pushed its Saxon predecessor (inwit) into obsolescence. But in other cases, the new bedded in with the old, giving English elegant words from Greek or Latin alongside synonyms from Anglo-Saxon.

In the early modern period, the English (who, after the union with Scotland, began calling themselves “British”) set out to conquer the world. As they did, their language was enriched by many of the languages they encountered, from Spanish (bronco) to Nahuatl (chocolate) to Hindi (juggernaut). These many words provide variety and richness to the language, and colonialism is often described as a major contributor to English. But in numerical terms, the words contributed by colonial contact are a small part of the total.

English is often called a “mixed” or even a “mongrel” language because of all these influences. But that obscures two fundamental points. Though the vocabulary is indeed mixed, the language itself remains that of the invaders of 500AD: a Germanic tongue. The Saxons made the Celts learn their language, not the other way round. Viking husbands learned their English wives’ language, not the other way round. The Normans, after a few centuries, learned their peasants’ language, not the other way round. We still speak Anglo-Saxon: not a true hybrid of Saxon, Celtic, Latin, French, Norse and Greek, but an “Englisc” enriched by these other languages.

That is why, although French and Latin sources each account for about 29% of the words in an unabridged dictionary and Greek another 6%, we don’t use those words with equal frequency. The is used about 250,000 times as often as exegete. One study has found that across writings from different genres, about 49% of the words used were of Germanic origin. Just 18% came from the modern Romance languages (including French), 7% from Latin, 0.2% from Greek and 0.2% from all other languages combined.

So Anglo-Saxon words have a special status in English. They are the oldest words in the language. They are the most common. They are the most semantically basic: the first words a child learns, or the words a foreigner would need in order to survive (help! food! water! sleep!). Concrete nouns and vivid verbs, the subject of the next section, tend to be Germanic.

Anglo-Saxon words also have a different sound and feel from French- or Latin-derived equivalents. They are shorter, even monosyllabic. When they have multiple syllables the stress falls more often on the first, giving them a distinct rhythm. All this has a profound psychological impression—in Saxon, a deep mark in the soul—on readers.

A text that relies primarily on Germanic, Anglo-Saxon vocabulary will feel more hearty than cordial. Few readers will know why. What they are sensing is that Anglo-Saxon accounts for most of the words people use when they talk. Those from French, and even more so Latin and Greek, are those that they primarily use when they read and write.

Talking is effortless for most people; writing is difficult for most. Children speak without instruction; they are fluent before they can tie their shoelaces. The world has many illiterate peoples, but none who lacks a spoken language. Writing is hard, learned formally over many years.

A truly classic style of writing, paradoxical as it may seem, is one that feels like conversation. It is that of a good friend telling a story over coffee, rather than someone trying to impress or bewilder you in a classroom or courtroom. A classic style is warm and genuine. It draws readers in and makes them feel that they and the writer are partners.

This preference for Anglo-Saxon vocabulary is not a matter of English chauvinism. (English itself, remember, is an import to England.) But if you have the choice between an Anglo-Saxon word and its Latin or French equivalent, the former will give you a grounded and genuine feel, the latter an elevated, impersonal one. Every word in “short words are best, and old words when short are best of all” is Anglo-Saxon.

No rule should be taken to extremes. Consider “Uncleftish Beholding” by Poul Anderson, which offers Anglo-Saxon fetishism as parody: what if all the words in a scientific essay, in this case an explanation of atomic theory, were Germanic?

The underlying kinds of stuff are the firsts, which link together in sundry ways to give rise to the rest. Formerly we knew of ninety-two firsts, from water, the lightest and barest, to ymir, the heaviest. Now we have made more, such as aegir and hel.

The firsts have their being as motes called unclefts. These are mighty small; one seedweight of water holds a tale of them like unto two followed by twenty-two naughts. Most unclefts link together to make what are called bulkbits. Thus, the water bulkbit bestands of two water unclefts, the sour bulkbit of two

sourstu unclefts, and so on.

Even more than our one-syllable leader, the results are odd. The modern sciences emerged in that early modern period during which Latin and Greek were at the height of their prestige. From linguistics (from Latin “lingua” , tongue) to economics (from Greek “oikos” and “nomos” , the law of running a home), even the names of the disciplines themselves are unutterable without Greek and Latin words.

The average writer is not an armchair etymologist. With a small amount of study you can begin to develop a feel for which words are Latinate and which are Germanic. But this is not the main aim of most writers. The goal is readable prose.

Fortunately, by asking yourself just a few questions about a word you can choose more of those that will give your writing a genuine, grounded feel:

Is it short?

Do I ever use it when talking to friends?

Does nearly everyone know it?

Can I recall great authors from centuries past using it?

These are signs that you have reached the bedrock of English vocabulary. You will sometimes need to use words that come from the higher, newer layers of the language. But building on a solid base that all readers know and use will mean you can do so with the greatest impact.

In each case below, for example, the rst is Germanic, and almost always your better choice. Prefer:

buy to purchase or acquire

let to permit

about to approximately

enough to sufficient

give to donate

help to aid

get to obtain

make to manufacture

set up to establish

show to demonstrate

spending to expenditure

give up to relinquish

break to violate

hand out to distribute

No rule is absolute. The general rule—to use the words that ordinary people do in conversation—should override etymology. Prefer:

present (noun) to gift (the French-derived word is more common);

people to persons (both are Latinate, but the first is much more genuine);

rich to wealthy, but to however, after to following (all Germanic, but the first of each pair is sharper).

Nouns like a rock

Nouns seem to be the most fundamental words: the first words a child learns, and the first you pick up in a new language. They are indeed basic, but they are also often misunderstood.

You may have been taught that a noun is a “person, place or thing” . That definition suits a young learner, for whom the easiest nouns to think of are things they can point to: a dog or a house. But it is far from complete. Is nothingness, for instance, a thing or the very opposite of a thing? What about destruction? That looks more like an action, and we tell children that verbs, not nouns, are for action. A comedian once mocked the “war on terrorism” by saying you couldn’t declare war on terrorism: “It isn’t even a noun!” But of course it is. What he meant is that terrorism is not one of those people-place-thing nouns that you can point at.