

Better than the King's English

Christopher Lasch emphasizes writing modestly to communicate v

Plain Style

A Guide to Written English

By Christopher Lasch, edited and with an introduction by Stewart Weaver

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Reviewed by John H. Summers

In 1874, Harvard asked its candidates for admission to submit an essay in English as part of their application, the first such request by a U.S. university. Officials judged the exercise a disaster. Not one half of the essays met elementary standards of literacy.

Alarmed, Harvard president Charles Eliot implemented a remedial course in English composition and forced all students to pass it. Other universities quickly mimicked his innovation. Within 20 years, freshman composition commanded a universal place in higher education, comparable only to rhetoric, the chief victim of its rise.

The shift from oratory to written English gave birth to the genre of the style guide, to which the late public intellectual Christopher Lasch ("The Revolt of the Elites," "The Culture of Narcissism") makes a penetrating contribution. Lasch produced the volume for his graduate students at the University of Rochester, where he taught history until his death in 1994. Following the model of William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White's "The Elements of Style," the book rallies around a few directives, illustrated by pithy commentaries: Keep sentences as close as possible to the conversational patterns of written English; choose concrete language over lofty or abstract language and plain words



Christopher Lasch

over fancy ones. And embrace the active voice. Let verbs, not piles of nouns, establish the meaning and carry the energy of sentences.

Whatever else written English might accomplish, Lasch suggests, it must not fail to communicate ideas to readers.

Who will object? The principle seems so obvious, only careless or indifferent students may reasonably be expected to violate it. At times, "Plain Style" seems to suspect as much. In the discontented mood of Strunk, Lasch fires off terse, impatient commandments. "If you intend to communicate with readers, instead of merely making a formidable first impression, use ordinary language."

The undergraduate snaps to attention, feeling foolish. The wayward graduate student perhaps feels ridiculous. As if to reassure, Stewart Weaver's introduction

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comments that Lasch was a "wry, playful, and whimsical man with a keen sense of fun," much as White once pointed out that the forbidding Professor Strunk was really a "friendly and funny" man.

Strunk and White stressed brevity. Lasch asks writers to consider plainness as their highest value. And plain communication turns out to be a strenuous standard -- not only for inexperienced writers. Cultivating an aversion to the "ostentatious display of erudition" and avoiding the "usual spiteful attacks on the work of other authorities in the field" means practicing the virtue of modesty.

Far from an innocent measure, plainness commits the writer to a morally embattled position. The Enlightenment had barely begun when Rousseau complained that "Every artist wants to be applauded." Dazzling displays of word-

play called attention to the systemic bid for inequalities of talent.

In America, the fight was against vanity and against the social inequalities of radical social change. It was a fight against the bourgeoisie and the ordinary people.

Lasch, mixing the commonness with the vice produces a style not so much because of skill, but because of the modest character of the man.

Modesty, then, is a kind of virtue. Lasch fights the writer as vigorous and as a writer as vigor. He wants "genuine felicity" in the reflection that the writer as well as to communicate.

Fancy language is a liability. Bureaucratic Lasch writes, "The passive voice makes it hard to take an action. Precise it to bureaucratic responsibility for the action."

Bureaucratic Lasch's challenge is to oppose the institutional English.

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The King's English

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Far from an innocent measure, plainness commits the writer to a morally embattled position. The Enlightenment had barely begun when Rousseau complained that "Every artist wants to be applauded." Dazzling displays of word-

play called attention to the writer's narcissistic bid for prestige and celebrated inequalities of talent.

In America, the Puritans' own war against vanity survived in secular varieties of radical social criticism, which warred against the bourgeois tendency to view ordinary people with contempt.

Lasch, mixing these traditions, imbues commonness with moral power. His advice produces pangs of embarrassment not so much because it reveals a deficiency of skill, but because it makes bad writing the mark of a deficient personal character.

Modesty, then, might seem to encourage a kind of bloodless asceticism. But Lasch fights the self-effacement of the writer as vigorously as he opposes narcissism. He wants what Rousseau called "genuine felicity," a direct and lively engagement with everyday life, a style of reflection that tries to enhance sensibility as well as to convey knowledge.

Fancy language mocks this responsibility. Bureaucratic language avoids it. As Lasch writes, "Inert, lifeless, and evasive, the passive voice disguises the subject and makes it hard to assign responsibility for an action. Precisely its anonymity endears it to bureaucrats, who wish to avoid responsibility for their decisions."

Bureaucratic obscurity is a dogged opponent, and the student who accepts Lasch's challenge to fight it will have to oppose the institutional history of written English.

After all, the point of Charles Eliot's innovation was to train students for posts in the new industrial economy, not to enliven "genuine felicity." Released into enormous bureaucracies, college graduates disappeared into creating countless governmental reports, advertising slogans, academic discourses, technical manuals, legal briefs, scientific papers and

financial statements — what is now called "information."

Bureaucratic English grew distant from everyday language. Its highly specialized vocabularies thwarted common comprehension and starved democracy of a genuinely public prose style. Instead of spreading ideas and sensibility, it more often shunned, manipulated and bewildered the populace.

Lasch's rise to prominence in the 1960s coincided with the apotheosis of bureaucratic English in an "Orwellian monologue," as he termed the discourse of the Vietnam War. It was a time when political elites explained bombing as "pacification" and military leaders described the killing of civilians as "collateral damage." Lasch took his case against euphemism to the public essay, the sworn enemy of bureaucratic English, and won a wide and grateful readership among a generation of young intellectuals.

"Plain Style," best read as a moral tract on behalf of public reason, is a brave and inspiring volume that will probably not move many students beyond their initial discomfort. Others will likely rate it as an interesting but irrelevant tract, possessed by a strange and distant dream.

In a sense, they pierce an important truth. Lasch's strenuous vision for the life of the mind asks for political awareness and moral vigilance from a culture awash in political indifference and moral recklessness. It expects from a class-stratified society mutual trust between writers and ordinary readers. But those who regard Lasch as an exemplar of intellectual integrity will be cheered for his willingness to make such demands in the first place. ■

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