



Theo Cobb

Call attention to yourself and you risk breaking the reader's fictional dream

## Don't be a By William G. Tapply SHOWOFF

**A**t the beginning of every writing class and workshop I teach, I ask my students to state their goals. Their responses are usually variations on similar themes:

"I want to develop a distinctive style."

"I want to be a great writer."

"I want to entertain my audience."

They want, in other words, to be noticed and admired.

Readers, I remind them, do not pick up a novel or a short story hoping to applaud the author. They don't think of themselves as your audience; they don't want to watch you perform. Readers, in fact, don't want to be aware of the author at all. They want to be

engrossed in a good story.

It's not about you, I tell my students. It's about your readers and your story. Don't think about style. Style is self-conscious and attention getting. The concept of style has unfortunately become confused with flowery language, elaborate figures of speech, convoluted sentences and fancy vocabulary words.

Focus instead on writing clear, crisp sentences that create pictures your readers can see and emotions they can feel. William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White, authors of the indispensable handbook *The Elements of Style*, used the word "style" to mean concise, precise, uncluttered writing that is devoted entirely to unambiguous communication between author and reader.

That's the kind of style worth developing.

Forget about becoming a great writer. Work instead on writing great stories. Think about your reader, not yourself. When you write well, your readers suspend their disbelief and immerse themselves in the characters and the conflicts and the worlds you have created in your story. They are unaware of you. You are invisible.

Here are six steps to help you become invisible.

**1 Stay away from fancy words.** "When I was twenty," wrote Wallace Stegner, "I was in love with words, a wordsmith. I didn't know enough to know when people were letting words

## Watch out for convoluted sentences

### Problem

This long, complicated sentence with excessive use of descriptive passages makes the reader painfully aware of the writer.

Numerous black birds were flying around a towering deciduous tree, looking like the pages of a black newspaper being blown around by the wind and sounding like feeding time in the zoo, and Henry was scrutinizing their airborne peregrinations, yearning to deduce their bailiwick.

### Solution

These straightforward, short sentences are clearer and get the point across more quickly. The reader focuses on the story rather than the writing.

Henry watched a flock of noisy crows flapping around a big oak tree. He hoped to locate their nest.

—William G. Tapply

get in their way. Now I like the words to disappear like a transparent curtain.”

Readers should not be stopped by a word, whether it’s because they don’t know it, or because it’s flowery and attention getting ... or because it’s just not quite the right word. Whenever that happens, you’ve yanked them out of the story and forced them to think about you and your intentions.

“The difference between the right word and the almost right word,” said Mark Twain, “is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug.” In most cases, the right word is the most straightforward and familiar one. Write “thin,” not “pellucid” or “transpicuous.”

Go for simple, down-to-earth, active verbs. If you’re tempted to make your character “insert” a key into a lock, consider having him “stick” or “shove” it in. Instead of surrounding a bland verb with descriptive adverbs, find a strong, vivid verb. “She went slowly and painfully down the aisle” is dull, vague and wordy, and those adverbs call the reader’s attention to the lazy and/or incompetent writer. “She hobbled [or limped, or shuffled, or shambled] down the aisle” creates a sharp picture.

Precise nouns work better than general nouns that need to be propped up by adjectives. Name things specifically. “Hemlock” com-

municates more clearly and concisely and is less attention getting than “towering verdant evergreen tree.” Instead of “diminutive grayish songbird,” call it a chickadee.

Focus your reader’s attention on the story’s action with specific nouns and verbs. Don’t let your character “eat breakfast” when she

“jubilation,” “gusto,” “complacence,” “bliss,” “rapture” or “mirth.” But none of those words—or conditions—means precisely the same thing as any of the others.

Sometimes the right word *will* be fancier than the almost-right one. You’ve got to trust your ear. It depends on the context of

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can “slurp her oatmeal,” “gulp a glass of prune juice,” or “crunch a toasted bagel.”

Consult your thesaurus or synonym-finder at your own risk. If you’re looking for a fancy, showoffy word to replace the plain, serviceable one that first occurred to you ... don’t.

The thesaurus can help you find the right word to replace your almost-right word—provided you recognize the difference.

There are very few exact synonyms in English. “Happiness,” for example, can mean “joy,” “elation,”

your story, your characters and your narrative voice. If “speak” doesn’t sound right, try “speechify” or “sermonize” or “proclaim.” Sadly, you may never find a good opportunity to write “confabulate” or “colloquize.”

**2 Use figures of speech, but sparingly.** Similes and metaphors ask readers to compare something in your story to something else. They require your readers to pause and ponder the comparison you’re suggesting. Any time readers do this, their attention

## If you learned this in school, forget it

To make your writing invisible, you'll probably have to unlearn many precepts about writing that you were taught in school and that were (and still are) emphasized on the SATs. Here are a few you should forget:

**“Good writers flaunt their vocabularies,”** your teachers preached. So they required you to memorize lists of vocabulary words, and they quizzed you on them every Friday, and they rewarded you for using them in your stories and essays.

**Good writers use showy similes, metaphors and symbols.** So you hunted for them in the literature you studied, you copied them into your notebook, and you analyzed them and admired them and envied the writers who created them. Then you were urged to invent your own, the more eye-popping, the better.

**Good writers use alliteration and allusion and other literary maneuvers.** So you looked for these writerly tricks in the stories you read, and you were encouraged to weave them abundantly into your own writing.

**Good writers write long complicated sentences.** The 19th-century novelists you studied wrote long, convoluted sentences with plenty of subordinate clauses and participle phrases, so you should, too.

**Good writers fill up lots of pages.** You were evaluated according to the length of the story or composition you submitted; long papers were worth more than short ones. So you practiced piling on the adjectives and adverbs. Wordiness, padding and repetitiveness were rewarded. Long, detailed, descriptive passages earned you that A.

Your teachers, I'm afraid, had it all backward. Big words, figures of speech, literary devices and long, dense sentences are never admirable for their own sake. Unless used sparsely, and always in the service of the story, they just call attention to themselves—and to the writer.

But wait, you say. There are plenty of contemporary authors who are read and admired for their wordplay, for the richness of their language, for their use of allusions and symbols and metaphors. They send us running for the dictionary, and we love them for it. What about the so-called literary and experimental writers who tell their stories backward, write in the present tense or use second-person narrators? Their in-your-face “styles” are praised by reviewers and studied in literature classes.

Well, in the first place, there aren't “plenty” of these writers. There are relatively few. Some of them are genuinely brilliant, and they can carry it off. Few of them are widely read, though, because most modern readers, editors and agents (unlike professors of English literature) want good stories, not show-offy writers.

Most writers who flaunt their brilliance fall flat on their faces.

Strive to be a visible writer, if you insist. “But just remember,” warns John Dufresne, author of *The Lie That Tells a Truth: A Guide to Fiction Writing*, “if you do decide to be unconventional, then you are calling attention to yourself and to your cleverness, and you have to then be better than everyone else. You're saying, I don't need to limp along on the crutch of plot the way that Faulkner did or Tolstoy did. Watch me dance, you're saying—and indeed we will. We'll be watching for the slip.”

—W.G.T.

shifts, however briefly, from the story to the creator of the comparison. It's risky. “[When] a simile or metaphor doesn't work,” warns Stephen King in *On Writing*, “the results are funny and sometimes embarrassing.”

Constructed carefully and used sparingly, though, figures of speech create vivid images and convey complicated emotions. “The use of simile and other figurative language,” King says, “is one of the chief delights of fiction—reading it and writing it, as well. When it's on target, a simile delights us.” Raymond Chandler was known and admired for peppering his stories with on-target similes (“I felt like an amputated leg”) and original metaphors (“She gave me a smile I could feel in my hip pocket”). Chandler's figures of speech gave his stories life and made them fun to read.

If creative figures of speech risk distracting readers, old hackneyed ones will surely bore them. Cliches (“as clean as a whistle”) and trite expressions (“when it rains, it pours”) call unwanted attention to the lazy, uncreative writer. Banish them from your writing.

Similes and metaphors, by their nature, can stop readers in their tracks, shift attention to their creator, and spoil an entire story. On the other hand, crisp, clean writing requires no figures of speech at all. Readers won't miss them—won't even notice—if you never use them.

**3 Keep your prose lean.** Long, convoluted sentences, flowery descriptive passages and meandering dialogue divert the reader's attention away from the story and onto the writer.

Short is good. Sure, for the sake of your story's rhythm you'll need to vary the length and structure of your sentences. But you can't go wrong building your stories on declarative sentences made up of active verbs and specific nouns. The most useful sentence structure

is subject-verb-object.

Cut, cut, and then cut some more. Sydney Smith, the 19th-century English essayist, advised: "In composing, as a general rule, run your pen through every other word you have written; you have no idea what vigour it will give your style." Prune those long descriptive passages that cause your reader's attention to wander.

The sections that need the most drastic cutting are often those you admire the most, because they're the ones you wrote to show off rather than to advance the story. "Read over your compositions," advised Samuel Johnson, "and when you meet a passage which you think is particularly fine, strike it out."

**4 Avoid exclaiming.** Banish that exclamation mark from your keyboard. An exclamation mark is the author jumping up and down and waving his arms. It's a poor substitute for words. When you use one, consider yourself a failure. It shouts to your reader: "This is really important [startling, surprising, scary, loud, dramatic, whatever], but I don't know how to convey it with words ... or I'm too lazy to try."

**5 Be accurate.** Inaccurate facts, figures, names and dates yank knowledgeable readers out of your story, remind them that there's an (ignorant) author at work, and destroy the fictional reality you've tried so hard to create.

Get it right. Shotguns do not shoot bullets. Belize is not in South America. Spell real names and places properly. Double-check everything. Assume that every one of your readers knows the difference.

Master your tools. Correct punctuation, grammar and spelling produce clear sentences. Sloppy mechanics produce murky sentences that confuse readers and call attention to the writer.

## WorkOut

**DESIGNATE EACH COLOR** in a set of marking pens for a specific "visible writing" issue (such as those listed below). Go through several pages of your writing with each pen in turn (first with red, then with green, and so on), circling the instances of visible writing problems. When you're done, you'll have a visual picture of your own writing habits that will help you to edit and revise for clarity and invisibility. For example, if your pages are covered with red circles, you know you are overusing adverbs.

Here's how I do it:

**RED:** adverbs (minimize adverbs by finding active verbs)

**GREEN:** adjectives (minimize adjectives, substitute specific nouns)

**BLUE:** the verb "to be," such as "was," "is," "were" and "are" (convert such weak verbs into strong ones and convert passive into active sentences)

**PINK:** fancy vocabulary words (substitute clear, simple language)

**ORANGE:** commas (identify long compound sentences that can be changed into two or more shorter, punchier sentences)

**BLACK:** metaphors and similes (do they work? Are they attention getting? Can they be eliminated?)

**BROWN:** clichés and trite expressions (delete all of them to eliminate lazy writing)

—W.G.T.

**6 Write smart but don't show off.** Perhaps you're an expert wine taster, or fly fisherman, or gladiolus breeder. Maybe you've devoted months to researching liver disease or boat building for your story. The urge to share all your fascinating knowledge with your readers, either in long expository passages or by creating a character as expert as you, can be irresistible.

Don't do it. Spewing information for its own sake is another form of showing off that will shift attention from your story to that long-winded bore, the author.

"A fiction writer," John Dufresne says, "should not worry about linguistic brilliance of the showy and obvious kind, but instead worry about telling her story."

Strunk and White put it this way: "Young writers often suppose that style is a garnish for the meat of prose, a sauce by which a dull dish is made palatable. Style has no such separate entity; it is nondetachable, unfilterable. The beginner should approach style warily, realizing that it is himself he is approaching, no other; and he should begin by turning resolutely away from all devices that are popularly believed to indicate style—all mannerisms, tricks, adornments. The approach to style is by way of plainness, simplicity, orderliness, sincerity."

The writer, in other words, should remain invisible. #

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## Resources

- **The Elements of Style** by William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White
- **The Truth That Tells a Lie: A Guide to Fiction Writing** by John Dufresne
- **The First Five Pages** by Noah Lukeman



