

Writing with Style by John R. Trimble

Chapter 6: Diction

Prologue: In the first of Trimble's chapters on developing a smooth, readable style, he focuses on the importance of word choice in writing. Building from the assumption that "good writing starts with a profound respect for words," Trimble describes three traits that are essential for clear communication: conciseness, vigorous verbs, and freshness.

1. Consider Trimble's principle that "less is more" in writing. Look up the word "concise" in the dictionary and review the chapter's advice on how to pack more meaning into fewer words. In what ways is the sample student's revised 7 word sentence better than the original 14 words? Try this method out on one of your own recent sentences. Is it possible to communicate your meaning more gracefully and with greater power by eliminating redundancy?
2. If it's true that verbs are "the power center of most sentences," then it follows that sentences with active, fresh, and definite verbs will communicate your meaning with greater efficiency than passive verb choices, which tend to be roundabout and vague. Can you tell the difference between active and passive verbs in your own writing? Find a recent sentence of yours that uses a passive verb construction. What improvements can you make by taking Trimble's advice?
3. Examine the sample sentences in the middle of page 52. Notice how a habit of using weak verbs (constructions of *is* and *are*) pale when compared to the power and precision of a simple active verb. At the end of this section, Trimble recommends that on your next paper, you take time to examine every single verb choice (why not go through and highlight all your verbs?), transposing as many weak verbs as you can into the direct and definite variety. Do this, and watch how quickly your style comes alive!
4. When a novice writer sits down to write, he falls back on his old habit of cutting and pasting together familiar phrases that his reader is already tired of hearing. This tendency towards platitude and cliché is the opposite of freshness, which Trimble describes as the art of keeping your reader "in a state of near perpetual surprise." Cultivating metaphors is one solution to defeat drabness. On page 56, examine John Updike's careful description of the bookshelves in his house for elegant use of extended metaphor.
5. Consider the prose style of old-time sportswriter Paul Gallico (excerpt on page 57) for conciseness, vigorous verbs, and freshness. What can you learn from him?

Epilogue: Take a paragraph from a recent piece of your own writing. Recast it, aiming for greater **concision** (say more with fewer words), **vigorous verbs** (transpose to active voice, eliminate *is* and *are* constructions when possible) and **freshness** (cultivate a provocative and insightful metaphor when needed).