

the sixty feet we would be descending. Not to mention the warning about the possible presence of Nurse Sharks that our Dive Master had given us in our pre-dive briefing.

Revise for clarity. Make sure that references are clear and comparisons are parallel. Consider using active verbs in place of "to be" verbs and using specific referents/references for words like "it" and "they" and so on.

I have done a great deal of research on both the Republican and Democratic Parties, and I have come to the conclusion that neither is flawless. In fact, neither is close. However, I have recently discovered much about the Democrats that troubles me, and I am stunned that it doesn't concern more people than it does. The self-proclaimed "Party of the little guy" is a hypocritical wing of government, and various recent events have indicated to me that they want anything but what is best, not to mention fair, for America. Whether it be issues such as tax cuts, oil supply, and education, or admired leaders such as John F. Kennedy and Bill Clinton, the Democratic Party exudes hypocrisy.

Rewrite to reorder sentences. Eliminate repetition to clarify, and eliminate "I" when possible.

Some people are lucky to have their first love stay with them forever and grow to a lifelong love. It remains constant and stable for as long as time will allow. Mine was no such love and as a result I had to let it go. But that isn't to say that I am not thankful everyday for what I was able to learn, grow, and experience from my relationship with Mr. Catch 22. He will still be my love, my first love. I may not feel the same as I did but I am lucky enough to say that I grew up because of him and am able to call him my friend now because of the mutual acknowledgement of what we both did wrong to each other. I knew what I wanted and didn't want in love because of him.

Rewrite to avoid the word "it." Try to match the rhythm and clarity of the opening sentence, but break down longer sentences and seek a more conversational vocabulary.

I am not a brilliant philosopher. My IQ rests at a reputable height not scorned by the mediocre population, yet it can be smiled upon with slight condescension by those who uphold the level of genius beyond my ability. Despite my unbrilliance, I let my mind wander through mysteries and puzzles and common observances that prick my awareness in their simplistic enigma. I question the genesis, the exodus, the rules and customs of numbers with fascination; however, in my own limited comprehension I strive for a higher understanding than is offered by mere experience. Some call it enlightenment, transcendence, or the wisdom of the ages. I call it a daily struggle of the learning and re-learning, of the absorption and regurgitation of information swirling its stimuli around my head in a constant buzz.

KURT VONNEGUT, JR. (b. 1922)

How to Write with Style

CONSIDER THIS:

Before reading, think about your own best advice on style. What eight pieces of advice about writing with style would you give a friend who came to you for such advice? As you read Kurt Vonnegut's essay, see if you have offered any of the same advice. Consider as you read whether he seems to follow his own advice.

Kurt Vonnegut was born in Indianapolis and earned an M.A. from the University of Chicago. He's been a newspaper editor and a journalist, and he worked in public relations for General Electric for a time. Vonnegut has also taught at the University of Iowa, Harvard University, and the City College of New York. He is widely celebrated as the iconoclastic author of 17 novels (including *Slaughter House Five* and *Breakfast of Champions*), a number of which have been made into movies.

Vonnegut's views about teaching writing have evolved over the years. Resistant for some years to the idea of writing instruction being offered in the schools, by 1999, an apparent sea change had taken place. "The primary benefit of practicing any art, whether well or badly, is that it enables one's soul to grow. So the proliferation of creative writing courses is surely a good thing," he explained. Here's Vonnegut's teaching philosophy: "When I taught at Iowa, then Harvard, then City College, here is what I tried to get away with, only in effect, not actually: I asked each student to open his or her mouth as wide as possible. I reached in with a thumb and forefinger to a point directly beneath his or her epiglottis. There is the free end of a spool of tape there. I pinched it, then pulled it out gradually, gently, so as not to make the student gag. When I got several feet of it out where we could see it, the student and I read what was written there."

Newspaper reporters and technical writers are trained to reveal almost nothing about themselves in their writings. This makes them freaks in the world of writers, since almost all of the other ink-stained wretches in that world reveal a lot about themselves to readers. We call these revelations accidental and intentional, elements of style.

These revelations tell us as readers what sort of person it is with whom we are spending time. Does the writer sound ignorant or informed, stupid or bright, crooked or honest, humorless or playful? And on and on.

Why should you examine your writing style with the idea of improving it? Do so as a mark of respect for your readers, whatever you're writing. If you scribble your thoughts any which way, your readers will surely feel that you care nothing about them. They will mark you down as an egomaniac or a chowder head—or worse, they will stop reading you.

The most damning revelation you can make about yourself is that you do not know what is interesting and what is not. Don't you yourself like or dislike writers mainly for what they choose to show you or make you think about? Did you ever admire an empty-headed writer for his or her mastery of the language? No.

1. FIND A SUBJECT YOU CARE ABOUT

Find a subject you care about and which you in your heart feel others should care about. It is this genuine caring, and not your games with language, which will be the most compelling and seductive element in your style.

I am not urging you to write a novel, by the way—although I would not be sorry if you wrote one, provided you genuinely cared about something. A petition to the mayor about a pothole in front of your house or a love letter to the girl next door will do.

2. DO NOT RAMBLE, THOUGH

I won't ramble on about that.

3. KEEP IT SIMPLE

As for your use of language: Remember that two great masters of language, William Shakespeare and James Joyce, wrote sentences which were almost childlike when their subjects were most profound. "To be or not to be?" asks Shakespeare's Hamlet. The longest word is three letters long. Joyce, when he was frisky, could put together a sentence as intricate and as glittering as a necklace for Cleopatra, but my favorite sentence in his short story "Eveline" is this one: "She was tired." At that point in the story, no other words could break the heart of a reader as those three words do.

Simplicity of language is not only reputable, but perhaps even sacred. The *Bible* opens with a sentence well within the writing skills of a lively fourteen-year-old: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth."

4. HAVE THE GUTS TO CUT

It may be that you, too, are capable of making necklaces for Cleopatra, so to speak. But your eloquence should be the servant of the ideas in your head. Your rule might be this: If a sentence, no matter how excellent, does not illuminate your subject in some new and useful way, scratch it out.

5. SOUND LIKE YOURSELF

The writing style which is most natural for you is bound to echo the speech you heard when a child. English was the novelist Joseph Conrad's third language, and much that seems piquant in his use of English was no doubt col-

ored by his first language, which was Polish. And here indeed is the writer who has grown up in Ireland, for the English spoken there is so amusing and musical. I myself grew up in Indianapolis, where common speech sounds like a band saw cutting galvanized and employees a vocabulary as unornamental as a monkey wrench.

In some of the more remote hollows of Appalachia, children grow up hearing songs and locutions of Elizabethan times. Yes, many Americans grow up hearing a language other than English, English dialect a majority of Americans cannot understand.

All these varieties of speech are beautiful, just as the varieties of butterflies are beautiful. No matter what your first language, you should sure it all your life. If it happens not to be standard English, and shows itself when you write standard English, the result is usually delightful, like a very pretty girl with one eye that is green and one that is blue.

I myself find that I trust my own writing most, and others seem to trust it most, too, when I sound most like a person from Indianapolis, which is what I am. What alternatives do I have? The style most vehemently recommended by teachers has no doubt been pressed on you as well: to write like cultivated Englishmen of a century or more ago.

6. SAY WHAT YOU MEAN TO SAY

I used to be exasperated by such teachers, but am no more. I understand now that all those antique essays and stories with which I was to compare my own work were not magnificent for their datedness or foreignness, but for saying precisely what their authors meant them to say. My teachers wished me to write accurately, always selecting the most effective words, and relating the words to one another unambiguously, rigidly, like parts of a machine. The teachers did not want to turn me into an Englishman after all. They hoped that I would become understandable—and therefore understood. And there went my dream of doing with words what Pablo Picasso did with paint or what any number of jazz idols did with music. If I broke all the rules of punctuation, had words mean whatever I wanted them to mean, and strung them together higgledy-piggledy, I would simply not be understood. So you, too, had better avoid Picasso-style or jazz-style-writing, if you have something worth saying and wish to be understood.

Readers want our pages to look very much like pages they have seen before. Why? This is because they themselves have a tough job to do, and they need all the help they can get from us.

7. PITY THE READERS

They have to identify thousands of little marks on pages and make sense of them immediately. People don't really master it even after having studied it all through grade school and high school—twelve long years.