

Buy the Book: Review of *The Sense of Style* by Steven Pinker

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Last year, Steven Pinker made me cry. Again. The previous time was in 1994 when I read his first popular book, *The Language Instinct*. I had dreamed of writing a book about reasoning for a broad audience, but Pinker's book was so rich and beautiful that I knew I could never write something as worthy of our field.

The provocation for crying in 2014 was Pinker's newest book, *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Persons Guide to Writing in the 21st Century*. The reason for crying this time, however, was quite different. Since I became editor in 2010, every article published in *Perspectives on Psychological Science* has gone through two types of review: a scientific review and a writing review. The latter task, performed by my editorial team and me, has not always been either easy or pleasant—not for the authors and not for us. In a fantasy, I imagine that rather than sending authors pages of comments about the writing, I could have simply told them to buy, read, and use Pinker's book.

When people submit papers to *Perspectives*, I often wonder about their goals. Is it only to publish a paper or is it to publish a paper that someone else might read and understand? Is it to get a line onto a vita or an idea into the world? The majority of papers submitted here contain good ideas. But *Perspectives* is a general journal with an ambition of bringing the field together; for the editors that means that everyone with a Ph.D. in psychology who wants to read the paper should be able to understand the paper. I hate the *Psych-Review*-ification of our writing. Why should only 4 people be qualified to review a paper and only 10 people be able to comprehend it? (Yes, I'm looking at you, incoming *PR*-editor Keith Holyoak.)

Pinker attacks the question of why we don't understand each others' writing in Chapter 3: The Curse of Knowledge; a succinct version of his answer appears in the lengthy subtitle of the chapter: "The main cause of incomprehensible prose is the difficulty of imagining what it's like for someone else not to know something that you know" (p. 57). There you have it: The answer comes from psychology. To write better psychology (or

anything else for that matter), think psychologically. And that is one of the beautiful things about this book for nearly everyone reading this review: Pinker uses what we know as psychological scientists to explain what we should do as writers.

So, if you are, or want to be, a psychological scientist and if you are, or want to be, someone who writes papers or memos or books that others besides your lab group will understand (and maybe even appreciate)—put down your pen or tablet or computer and pick up Chapter 3 of Pinker's book. Now. Chapter 3 is worth the price of admission.

That's the review from me while wearing a particular hat—that of an editor of a general theory/review journal. Of course, there is much to learn from and enjoy in the rest of the book as well; which particular part you will find most interesting and valuable will depend on which particular hat you are wearing at the time: reader, writer, editor, amateur grammarian, member of the gotcha gang, or psychological scientist.

I think that a couple of other chapters would be especially useful for people trying to improve their own writing. In Chapter 1, Pinker instructs readers as he dissects some examples of good writing. Don't miss the obituaries (no kidding), but for more relevant examples you might try reading an anthology of best science writing. A good example is the volume Pinker edited: *The Best American Science and Nature Writing 2004*.

Chapter 2, especially the second half, explains and demonstrates how to make prose more engaging. You know how your wonderful conference or paper abstract is always 10 words over the limit? Page 105 (not in Chapter 2) provides handy dieting tips for "morbidly obese phrases," but Chapter 2 reminds us that it's not only the wording of abstracts that may be improved by slimming down. I sometimes worry that short empirical

Perspectives on Psychological Science
2015, Vol. 10(3) 357–358
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sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1745691615581490
pps.sagepub.com



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papers, their sentences snugly fitting into the required array of sections, have contributed to the decline of fluidity in longer papers and book chapters. I am rooting for Chapter 5: Arcs of Coherence to help counteract that nasty trend. (Of course, it contains tips applicable to short empirical papers as well.)

The second half of the book is mostly about grammar. Wait, don't fall asleep! Yes, most authors who submit to *Perspectives* have a good grasp of grammar. But you know how you groan when supercilious reviewers criticize your passive sentences or your (intentionally) split infinitives and how you sigh when copy editors contort your graceful prose? Pinker debunks some of the prescriptive rules that impede rather than facilitate good writing. You will feel liberated and armed to do battle with those who attempt to ruin your writing. Just remember, when it comes to judging the clarity of your own writing, sometimes you'll be wrong. (If you've forgotten that, go back to Chapter 3.)

Pinker's writing is, as always, a delight. And, as always, there are sentences that continue to tickle my brain long after the book has been shelved. I'm still smiling over an analogy intended to help explain conventions in language: "In the United Kingdom, everyone drives on the left, and there is nothing inherently wrong with that convention; it is in no way sinister, gauche, or socialist." (p. 193).

Do I love everything Pinker says? For the most part, we pet the same peeves but there are a few places where he gets my goat. Here are two examples from the editorial hat-wearing me. On p. 50, he takes a bloated description of an experiment's method and edits it down to: "We presented participants with a sentence, followed by the word TRUE or FALSE." Oh dear. "We presented participants..." is a common enough phrase and, in my opinion, too common. I have asked more than one generous *Perspectives* author, "Was it the participants' birthday?" But the main problem isn't that the participants are

passive recipients of the experimenters' gift, it's that the reader can't tell what the gift was. Was it visual? Verbal? Be specific; inquiring minds want to know.

And on p. 75, Pinker writes, "Many academic articles contain bewildering non sequiturs and digressions that the authors stuck in at the insistence of an anonymous reviewer who had the power to reject it from the journal if they didn't comply." False! I mean true! Many articles do contain such things. But false! Reviewers do not have the power to reject articles—that is another one of an editor's dismal tasks.

However, it is no longer my dismal task—my editorship is over. Now you get to send your best work to Robert Sternberg, the next editor of *Perspectives*. But before you do so, read Pinker's book and heed his advice: Overcoming the curse of knowledge "may not make you a better person in all spheres of life, but it will be a source of continuing kindness to your readers" (p. 76). And, I would add, to your reviewers and editors and, consequently, to yourselves.

Author Note

Barbara A. Spellman is currently the outgoing Editor of *Perspectives on Psychological Science*. She took over from Ed Diener, the founding editor, in 2010; Robert Sternberg has begun handling new submissions as of January 2015. From 1985-87 Spellman worked as an editor at a publishing company. That full-time job was easier than being Editor of *Perspectives*.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship or the publication of this article.

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