

Class and Clarity

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At an MLA convention in the future, I would like to present a paper on the conversion narrative in academic life. In the schematic form of this narrative, the central character--we could call this character Saul, or possibly Frank or Jane--is setting off for battle when he or she is struck by a lightning bolt on the road to Damascus, or possibly Durham or Chicago. Recognizing the error of his or her ways, our hero repents and sins no more, instead devoting the remainder of his or her life to preaching the true gospel to the unconverted at gatherings such as this convention.

While the conversion narrative is a subject for another presentation, I want to mention one conversion experience to begin my presentation today. Cast in the central role of the story is E. D. Hirsch, whose work I first read when I was a graduate student up the road at L.S.U. in 1980. The text that served as my introduction to Hirsch was The Philosophy of Composition, which was published by the University of Chicago Press in 1977. In it Hirsch preaches the gospel of "relative readability." Lamenting academe's insufficient attention to the linguistics of literacy, Hirsch proclaimed that "there are universal stylistic features in all good prose of every kind and . . . these features of good style are all reducible to a single principle: One prose style is better than another when it

communicates the same meanings as the other does but requires less effort from the reader" (9). When, as a student of linguistics and rhetoric, I read these words in 1980, little did I know that in less than three years Hirsch would be preaching a new gospel, the gospel of cultural literacy, announcing that knowledge of a system of culture-specific references is a more important force than any stylistic feature in making prose readable.

I take Hirsch's conversion as the starting point for my presentation today because I see it as one of the forces contributing to waning interest in a question that interests me: the question of what makes writing clear. Two decades ago, when I was just beginning my career in academe, this question was sufficiently important to attract attention from scholars and researchers in linguistics, rhetoric, and psychology. Today the question seems relegated to the dustbin of academe--or perhaps I should say that it survives in the classroom, a site that some of my colleagues view as the dustbin of academe. In the classes that I teach most frequently--technical writing, grammar and style, first-year composition--the question still occupies a pride of place that it no longer commands in the scholarship of my discipline. Yet, even in the classroom I can see evidence that questions of clarity no longer seem as important as they once did. In my presentation today, I would like to offer a few thoughts concerning what happened to research on clarity in writing and what could have happened instead.

I'm not sure whether you will take on faith my assertion that interest in plain English has waned in the past decade. As evidence I could point to the results I obtained when I used the term "clarity" in an online search of the MLA International Bibliography. The search produced 114 entries, the majority of which date from the 1980s. I could also point to the paucity of textbooks available to those of us who teach courses devoted to

style. In my own Grammar and Style classes I usually use Joseph Williams's Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace, a text about which I will have more to say later. In fact, at Salem State College, where I currently teach, four of the five faculty members who teach Grammar and Style are using the Williams's text. At my previous institution two used Williams while one used Strunk and White's The Elements of Style. Another frequently used text is Claire Kehrwald Cook's Line by Line: How to Improve Your Own Writing, published by MLA in 1985. And, of course, most composition textbooks and grammar handbooks include at least a perfunctory chapter on the topic of style. But I think it's significant that two of the three most commonly used texts--Williams's and Cook's--were first published in the 1980s. In fact, the 1980s now appears to be the period during which interest in studying clarity peaked and then plummeted.

So what happened to the study of clarity? To me it seems that several factors contributed to its decline. One of these factors was the changing political climate--and with it a dwindling of economic support--for research on plain English. I suspect that it is not coincidental that interest in plain English increased after President Carter issued an executive order in 1978 requiring plain English in government documents. In 1981 Daniel Felker, under the auspices of the Center for Document Design, produced a text titled Guidelines for Document Designers, perhaps the most useful artifact of the Plain English movement. But governmental support for the Center would wane throughout the Reagan administration, and with it would wane scholarly interest in clarity.

Also significant were the culture wars of the 1980s. I've already mentioned Hirsch. While I don't want to overestimate the importance of his conversion, I do consider it important. To a significant extent Hirsch set the terms for one of the most

important scholarly debates of the 1980s. The stakes in that debate were high, insofar as Hirsch sought to influence the curriculum of public education in America. But the question of "relative readability" was nothing more than a point of departure in Hirsch's American Scholar article that launched the culture wars in 1983, and it was seldom raised in the arguments that followed. I would argue that the concept of "relative readability" was never really discredited but instead abandoned. Even those of us who remained interested in clarity quickly found our attention diverted to more pressing issues.

If Hirsch and his colleagues on the political Right helped create a climate in which the study of plain English became a trivial pursuit, forces on the Left were no more hospitable to the study of plain English, at least as it had developed during the 1980s. In fact, as numerous academic disciplines took a social turn in the 1980s, that turn became a turn away from the types of research that were the foundation of style studies.

I think it's accurate to say that studies of clarity have always been influenced by the larger intellectual climate in which they took place and by developments in related disciplines. After World War II, studies of plain English were shaped by the principles of behaviorist psychology, but by the 1970s a leading force in shaping the study of style was generative linguistics. Perhaps the most important assumption of Noam Chomsky's revolution was that there existed a universal cognitive capacity underlying the structure of all languages and, by extension, underlying language use. But by 1987 the climate in literary studies, in composition studies, and in many of the social sciences was hostile to any foundationalist philosophies. In such a climate Hirsch's claim about "universal stylistic features" was suspect, as were the claims of any scholar who dared to offer "the one true style."

I'm tempted now to elide some differences, to take the risky step of dubbing Hirsch a proto-social constructionist, a scholar who came to recognize the important of culture as a factor influencing cognition. Such a description is too simple, of course, since it elides the differences between Hirsch and scholars who vehemently oppose his educational agenda. But, regardless of whether the study of culture was part of a progressive social agenda or a conservative one, it was in some fundamental ways hostile to the study of any notion of linguistic style grounded in universal principles.

I want to return for a minute to the question of relative readability, since it's a question that I still find myself pondering frequently. Although Hirsch abandoned the concept when he set forth to fight the culture wars, relative readability remains the underlying concept behind Williams's Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace, the style text that I consider the most useful of those currently in print. In fact, Williams's text develops through comparisons of passages: he'll produce two versions of a passage, trusting that his readers will perceive one version as clearer than the other, then he describes the differences between the two. When I've presented Williams's passages to my students, I've found that the majority always shares Williams's perception concerning which sentence is clearer. I see no significant variations along class or ethnic lines when students declare their preferences.

What I do see, on occasion, is that a minority of students can see no difference in clarity between the examples that Williams considers unclear and those he considers clear. When students react this way, they usually are responding to Williams's most technical examples, those in which the terminology is alien to them. Consider, for example, a sentence that Williams offers as an example of unclear prose:

A determination of involvement of lipid-linked saccarides in the assembly of oligasaccaride chains of ovalbumin in vivo was the principle aim of this study. (134-35)

And consider also a revision that Williams considers much clearer:

The principle aim of this study was to determine how lipid-linked saccarides are involved in the assembly of the oligasaccaride chains of ovalbumin in vivo. (135).

From experience I can say that a majority of students in my classes share Williams's judgment concerning the relative clarity of these two sentences. However, a minority of my students consider the two versions equally incomprehensible. The students who see no difference between the two versions are the students who are most stymied by the vocabulary of the passages.

The point, of course, is a simple one: stylistic options matter little if one knows nothing about the basic concepts being discussed. This happens to be the small good idea behind Hirsch's cultural literacy; and I consider it unfortunate that this idea would become lost in the fury of the culture wars, even as I blame Hirsch for using this idea to pursue an educational agenda that I consider contrary to the best interests of our students. But the fact that most of my students do see a difference between the passages suggests to me that maybe Hirsch had it right the first time: one passage may be more readable than another passage that expresses the same idea. But, here again, Hirsch probably muddied the waters, this time by framing his argument in terms of 'universal features.' To me it seems that Hirsch's claim of universality was premature: such a claim could be justified only by research that compares the preferences of readers trained in diverse professional

fields and raised in diverse cultures. Hirsch's claim may or may not be testable, but it was--and is--untested.

The question I'm left with is this: is it possible to meld Hirsch's two concepts, to put aside the question of whether stylistic rules are universal but to recognize that particular audiences may find one style clearer than another, provided that the audience has the specialized background needed to understand either of the passages? Or, to phrase the issue in different terms, is it possible to study style in a manner that balances linguistic concerns with rhetorical concerns, recognizing that questions of clarity require us to study not only texts but also the audiences that use them?

My question, of course, is a rhetorical one: I hope it's clear that I believe the answer is yes. When I look back at the debates of the 1980s, I sometimes imagine an alternative history, one in which the terms of debate were set not by Hirsch but by Wayne Booth, a scholar whom I consider a voice of moderation. In an essay titled "The Scholar in Society," originally published in 1981 and then reprinted in The Vocation of a Teacher in 1988, Booth observed, "Every genuine scholar who ventures into domains other than bibliography and editing knows a sense of failure in th[e] effort to find a style that shares, that considers, that joins a subject to a proper reader" (72). Despite the difficulty, perhaps the impossibility, of matching style to material and audience, Booth asserts, "The inherent drive of scholarship itself is . . . toward a considerate style that assists other people as much as possible in a joint endeavor . . ." (72). Booth notes that "We may find this claim a bit hard to believe in these days when mystifying opacities fill our books and journals. But we should remember that some subjects *are* in fact difficult, even

mystifying, and that no reader can determine simply from a difficult or easy surface whether the author is showing proper consideration" (72).

Perhaps it's significant that Booth does not speak of a clear style or a plain style but rather a considerate style, one that meets the demands of the subject under discussion and the abilities of the audience to understand that subject. As we might expect from Booth, he places the study of style into a rhetorical context, one in which the demands of audience and purpose would govern the study of the best ways to structure a sentence, a paragraph, or an essay. In doing so he balances the linguistic concerns that dominated style studies until the mid-1980s and the social concerns that supplanted style studies during the culture wars.

I sometimes still wonder what would have happened if researchers of plain English had taken a different tack in the 1980s and produced a body of work exploring issues of clarity in specific disciplines. I still harbor the suspicion that some of this research would have shown that judgments concerning a clear style remain fairly constant across disciplines. And, in fact, some research on discipline-specific writing was produced, most notably by scholars such as Debra Journet and Dorothy Winsor, who explored writing practices in science and industry. But seldom was the issue of clarity foregrounded in this research, and the volume of research in this vein never equaled the earlier research that proposed (or assumed) universal standards.

And, as I conclude, I should acknowledge that perhaps it would not have mattered if researchers had taken a different tack. I want to mention one final factor that has figured into the declining interest in studying clarity. Here I'm presenting little more than a hunch--I can't prove the idea that I'm about to offer. But I suspect that the digital

revolution pounded the final nail into the coffin of style studies. While I'm skeptical about arguments that the internet has made our students worse writers, that e-mail has led to a decline in formality in the writing that students produce in other venues, I do think that the internet has had a profound influence in two other regards. First, it has become the focus of research for many scholars who earlier had devoted considerable attention to studying prose style, and it has occupied the attention of a new generation of scholars in English departments. Just as significantly, it has transformed the study of text into the study of visual design, with the linguistic component functioning as one small part of a larger document. Indeed, I can see the change in my own technical writing classes. Over the past two decades, my assignments have evolved to include more graphics, less text. While I still devote considerable attention to the language of technical documents, I devote less attention than I did in earlier years. But as my attention has shifted, and as I read instructional manuals on Web design, I'm struck by how much they remind me of the writing-style manuals that I read during the 1980s. I'm left wondering whether I'm witnessing the beginning of another cycle of debate, and also whether the debaters could learn anything from a detailed study of the events I've discussed today.

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