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Writing Exercises: Clarity, Concision, and Introductory Paragraphs

In my Spring 2007 seminar, “Barbarian Kings and Kingdoms: The Franks in the Early Middle Ages,” I was thrilled to have a class of extraordinarily strong writers. Instead of working through basic exercises on style and mechanics, my students were eager to discuss the more abstract elements of good academic writing—how to keep a reader’s interest, how to express complex concepts with clarity, how to use objective language while putting forth an opinionated argument, how to employ sophisticated vocabulary without appearing pedantic.

We approached these topics by considering examples of historical writing by prominent scholars. In two writing exercises, I encouraged my students to rip these excerpts apart, to figure out what worked and what didn’t—and then explain why.

The first exercise, “Clarity and Concision,” provides two excerpts by respected scholars of early Frankish history. I chose these two passages because their prose was especially verbose and convoluted; the students who volunteered to read each selection aloud were (gratifyingly!) out of breath by the middle of most sentences. I gave everyone about ten minutes to work individually on each paragraph, asking them to underline anything they found awkward or confusing and then to rewrite the sentence that they thought needed the most revision. We discussed each example as a group, and the class did a great job of isolating particular elements that bogged each paragraph down. These included over-reliance on parenthetical and subordinate clauses; use of the passive voice; use of vague cultural and historical references; and digressions from the topic at hand. When asked to rewrite one sentence clearly and concisely, most of the class chose to break a long sentence into a series of shorter, declarative sentences. A handful of students managed to keep their sentence relatively long, however, retaining the original’s parentheses, semicolons, and subordinate clauses, but articulating the sentence’s main idea more concisely and straightforwardly than the original author had.

The second exercise, “’Twas a Dark and Stormy Night...”, listed opening sentences from six academic studies of medieval France. These works included historical surveys, literary analyses, and introductions to translations of primary sources; they were all written

between 1874 and 1991, and their titles and publication dates were not provided on the worksheet. Before we considered the passages as a class, my students took a few minutes to read the excerpts and choose what they considered the best and worst introductions. There were some interesting ideas about what worked and why: most students appreciated the clarity of straightforward introductions (like examples 1 and 5) but found their language dull; many enjoyed the passages with engaging rhetoric (like 2 and 4) but disagreed among themselves about whether these sentences provided enough of an introduction to their book's subject matter; and virtually the entire class agreed that example 3 was convoluted and included too many subordinate clauses – and they correctly identified this example as the earliest passage. Our discussion of these selections provided a jumping-off point for a broader conversation about the purpose of introductory paragraphs in academic papers, as students decided which elements of these excerpts – good “hooks,” elegant prose, clear statements of purpose – they would adapt for use in their own essays.

At the end of the semester, I introduced a final writing exercise to supplement these worksheets. I handed each student a copy of the opening paragraph of his or her own first essay for the seminar, giving the class a few minutes to re-read their earlier work and figure out what revisions they would make. Although I did not provide a worksheet for this exercise, I asked my students to consider the following questions:

- What do you think of your thesis? How might you change or revise it?
- Does your opening sentence draw you in? Is your prose engaging?
- What stylistic changes would you make in this paragraph?
- Is your tone scholarly and your language objective? Did you make any historical assertions that you would challenge after a full semester of Frankish history?

Overall, my students had made significant improvements in their writing during the course of the semester. I had hoped to initiate a fairly informal discussion about this progress, and as I had expected, there were giggles and groans around the room as the students recognized their own earlier work. Unfortunately, almost no one was willing to critique his or her own work in front of the class. I do believe that this was an eye-opening exercise, however, and I suspect that this group would have been less self-conscious about discussing their earlier writing if they had had more time to work more closely with their texts and figure out what specific elements needed attention. If I were to repeat this exercise, I would provide additional time for students to write a critique of their paragraph and identify the most important element that they would change in a revision.

Clarity and Concision, A Worksheet Concerning

The following passages are taken from scholarly studies of early medieval Francia. If you were editing these texts, how would you make them clearer and more concise? Underline or highlight sentences that you find unclear, long-winded, or difficult to understand. Then do the following in the space below:

- For two of the sentences you selected, explain what the problems are: describe why the sentence needs editing and what you would change.
- Entirely rewrite one sentence, focusing on making it more clear and concise – even if that means breaking it up into more than one sentence. Include all the information that the author has provided.

I. The Franks were by no means the first to disturb the peace of the seventeen provinces of Roman Gaul. The remoteness of her northern parts from Rome and the geographical peculiarities of her land-frontiers (her great amphitheatre of mountains does not at all points form a natural barrier) ensured that Gaul would fall a prey to invasion from the North or East, and that, when she did, her excellent road-system would prove more of a hindrance than a help. Throughout the period of the Later Empire she combined an uneasy spirit of independence with a singular inability to manage her own affairs. Her Western provinces, for example, were in a state of chronic disturbance, and it is not unlikely that the relentlessness of the *Bagaudae* (robber bands and a slave population in revolt), had much to do with the failure of the last Gallo-Roman governors to withstand external pressure. Quite apart, however, from political isolation and social chaos, Gaul also lacked racial cohesion; the distinctness, in interest and nature, of her component races (Celtic-Gaulish, with an already strong admixture of Germanic *coloni*¹ in the countryside and Graeco-Syrians in towns) was not much diminished by the victory of Latin over her other languages. That there was still a Roman, or romanised, administration in Gaul in the fourth and fifth centuries is certain, just as it is also certain that trade still flourished in her cities and that the Gallo-Roman aristocracy continued to live in comfort, to cultivate the arts of Rome in their villas, and to provide the greater part of the personnel for the administration of the *civitates*² and the bishoprics. Gaul was still rich and still belonged to *Romania*, the Mediterranean world. But she was incapable of helping herself.³

¹ Colonists [NM]. ² Provinces [NM] ³ Wallace-Hadrill, J.M. *The Barbarian West*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1997. Pp.64-65.

II. Tall, round-headed, with unusually large eyes, a short neck, a long nose and a rather protruding stomach is how Charles the Great (768-814), or Charlemagne, appeared in his later life, according to the author of the first biography of a secular ruler to be written in Europe since Late Antiquity. It may not sound very flattering, and when the added observation is made from his coinage that he had a long moustache and no beard, the description may sound better suited to be that of Obélix, the tubby friend of the cartoon character Astérix, than that of “The Father of Europe.” However, his former courtier, the lay abbot Einhard (d.836), who wrote the *Vita Karoli* or “Life of Charles” at some point in the second half of the 820s, a decade after his former master’s death, had no intention of belittling him. On the contrary, from his closely followed literary model, the “Life of Augustus” that was written by the Roman biographer Suetonius around AD 125, Einhard had learned that the physical description of the subject of such a work, however highly admired, should be as accurate and detailed as possible, not sparing bad teeth, a wizened finger, a limp and gall-stones.⁴

⁴ Collins, Roger. *Charlemagne*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998. P.1.

'Twas a dark and stormy night...

The following passages are the opening sentences of scholarly books about the Middle Ages.

- Which passages are your favorites? Which passages do you like the least? Why?
- By reading these opening sentences, can you figure out what each of these books is about? Which books would you keep reading?
- If you were going to model your own writing after one of these examples, which would you choose?
- When do you think each of these books was written? Which are the earliest and which are the most recent? How can you tell?

I. The Chronicle attributed to Fredegar occupies a vital position in the history of Frankish Gaul, and thus of France as a whole. It does so for two reasons: first, because of the intrinsic importance of the information it contains; and secondly, because it is the only source of any significance for much of the period it covers.

II. The persistence—in theological, philosophical, and scientific tracts; in literature, legend, myth, and folklore—of so many of the earliest formulations of the question of woman, from the church fathers to the nineteenth century, means that anyone wondering where to begin to understand the Western current of antifeminism must recognize that it is possible to begin just about anywhere.

III. The Chronicles of Sir John Froissart have, ever since their first publication, when they were circulated only through the medium of manuscripts, and deemed worthy presents to kings and princes, been so highly prized, as to make any apology for their reproduction in a novel, and, it is hoped, an improved form, unnecessary.

IV. To the world when it was half a thousand years younger, the outlines of all things seemed more clearly marked than to us. The contrast between suffering and joy, between adversity and happiness, appeared more striking. All experience had yet to the minds of men the directness and absoluteness of the pleasure and pain of child-life. Every event, every action, was still embodied in expressive and solemn forms, which raised them to the dignity of a ritual.

V. Universities, like cathedrals and parliaments, are a product of the Middle Ages. The Greeks and the Romans, strange as it may seem, had no universities in the sense in which the word has been used for the past seven or eight centuries. They had higher education, but the terms are not synonymous. Much of their instruction in law, rhetoric, and philosophy it would be hard to surpass, but it was not organized into the form of permanent institutions of learning.

VI. The Germanic world was perhaps the greatest and most enduring creation of the Roman political and military genius. That this offspring came in time to replace its creator should not obscure the fact that it owed its very existence to Roman initiative, to the patient efforts of centuries of Roman emperors, generals, soldiers, landlords, slave traders, and simple merchants to mold the (to Roman eyes) chaos of barbarian reality into forms of political, social, and economic activity which they could understand and, perhaps, control.

'Twas a dark and stormy night...
ANSWER KEY

- I. Wallace-Hadrill, J.M. (ed. and trans.). *The Fourth Book of the Chronicle of Fredegar, With Its Continuations*. London: Nelson, 1960. P. ix
- II. Bloch, R. Howard. *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love*. Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1991. P. 13.
- III. Johnes, Thomas (ed. and trans.). *Chronicles of England, France, Spain, and the Adjoining Countries, by Sir John Froissart*. New York: Leavitt and Allen, 1874. P. v.
- IV. Huizinga, J. *The Waning of the Middle Ages*. London: E. Arnold, 1924. P.1.
- V. Haskins, Charles Homer. *The Rise of Universities*. New York: H. Holt, 1923. P. 1.
- VI. Geary, Patrick. *Before France and Germany*. New York: Oxford UP, 1988. P. vi.