



Cornell University

John S. Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines

Document Title: **Avoiding Hyperbole and Purple Prose**

Author: **Alexander Phillips**

Course: **German Studies 1130**

Course Title: **Metropolis, Modernity, and Mass Culture**

Year of Award: **Fall 2011**

Copyright Statement:

This material is copyrighted by the author and made available through the Cornell University eCommons Digital Repository under a Creative Commons Attribution, Non-Commercial License.

This document is part of the John S. Knight Writing in the Disciplines First-year Writing Seminar Program collection in Cornell's eCommons Digital Repository.

<http://ecommons.library.cornell.edu/handle/1813/10813>.

Winner

Fall 2011 Knight Award for Writing Exercises and Handouts

The Knight Award for Writing Exercises recognizes excellence in short exercises and/or handouts designed to improve student writing. Appropriate topics may be drawn from the whole range of writing issues, large scale to small scale, such as development of theses, use of secondary sources, organization of evidence, awareness of audience, attention to sentence patterns (e.g., passive/active voice; coordination/ subordination), attention to diction, uses of punctuation, attention to mechanics (e.g., manuscript formats, apostrophes). Exercises and handouts may be developed for use in and/or out of class.

Submissions should comprise three parts: (1) A copy of the handouts or instructions that go to students. (2) An explanation of the exercise/ handout and of the principles behind it, addressed to future instructors who may use the material. (3) If possible, an example of a student response.

Submissions may range in length from one to four or five pages.

Winning Writing Exercises and Handouts will be deposited in a web accessible archive and made available to other instructors under a creative commons attribution, non-commercial license. (See creativecommons.org for more information about cc licensing.)

The two winning entries will receive \$350; honorable mentions (if any) will receive \$125.

Submissions are due in 101 McGraw Hall by Friday, December 16. No exceptions can be made.

Fall 2011 Knight Award for Writing Exercises

~Please Print Clearly~

Instructor's name Alexander Phillips
Department German Course # and title 1130: Metropolis, Modernity, and Mass Culture

Should I win a prize, I give the John S. Knight Institute permission to publish, quote from, and/or distribute copies of the writing exercises, and to distribute publicity to newspapers and other publications, local and/or national, about my winning the prize. I also grant the Knight Institute permission to deposit the writing exercises in a web accessible archive and make them available under a creative commons attribution, non-commercial license. I am prepared to send electronic versions of my text to Donna O'Hara (dlo1@cornell.edu) in the Knight Institute. I understand that I will receive the award for my prize-winning essay upon submission of the electronic text.

Avoiding Hyperbole and Purple Prose
Title of Writing Exercises

Instructor's signature Alexander Phillips Date 12/16/2011

Description and Rationale: Avoiding Hyperbole and Purple Prose

I developed this handout in the fall of 2011 for the freshman writing seminar German Studies 1130: Metropolis, Modernity, and Mass Culture. One of the biggest challenges I was in trying to help the students recognize and work with nuance and ambiguity, rather than simply bulldozing over such things in their essays. The problem was perhaps compounded by the fact that the texts on the syllabus all had high political stakes and spoke to issues that are still very much present in contemporary political discourse. The students recognized this immediately, and I noticed in many essays that some of them were deploying a rather dramatic writing style that they perhaps felt imparted on the reader a sense of the high stakes of the issues involved. This frequently manifested itself in statements that were often hyperbolic in style and content, and fed into a rather cliché mode of writing. While hyperbole and purple prose are not the same phenomena, they seemed to be closely related in my students' writing. The result was a kind of violence to the object of study in which some of the problems that the texts presented and that could have made for very interesting essays simply fell by the wayside.

The goal of the handout "Avoiding Hyperbole and Purple Prose" was to equip them new revision strategies. Not only would their style be improved, but in writing in a way that allows for nuance, they would also move towards the seminar's stated goal of developing a set of good critical practices. It was meant to be, furthermore, a fun and creative exercise in which the students felt free to encounter some silly writing and be a little silly themselves. The goal of part one was simply to help them recognize the problem in a piece of writing. Here they encounter a highly ekphrastic passage from a philosophical text that tries to be vivid, but is actually somewhat embarrassing for its quasi-erotic detail. I selected this text to demonstrate to them that, as with many problems that we addressed over the semester, hyperbole and purple prose were not

features unique to student writing. The goal of part two, where they produce their own purple prose, was to get them to not only recognize this problem in their own writing, but notice when they were writing in a hyperbolic fashion. The contest for the most hyperbolic, most cliché piece of analysis was simply meant as fun encouragement for the students to produce a problematic text of their own. They had just read Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, so for the contest I had them write on a short text by Kafka as a surreptitious way of having them read another relevant text by that author. I changed the translation just a little bit to be closer to the original because one of the novels that they read later in the semester would indirectly quote this story, and I wanted them to be equipped to recognize that. In the third part, then, we went over a few possible guidelines for revising writing that had these problems. Given that they had by now produced a text that contained the very problems that we were working for, the final part of the activity asks them to take one sentence and revise according to these guidelines. The goal of this final part, then, was to help them internalize and systematize the very revision strategies that I had suggested to them in the third part. When we did the assignment, I asked for volunteers to read the "before" and "after" sentences aloud. Even though many of the revised sentences were still silly, as some of the students had had quite a bit of fun with the exercise, there was still obvious improvement in tone.

Avoiding Hyperbole and Purple Prose

Part I

Read the following excerpt from the philosopher Edmund Burke's aesthetic treatise A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful. What do you notice about the style, tone, etc.? What is Burke doing at the rhetorical level?

From *A Philosophical Enquiry*
by Edmund Burke

Observe that part of a beautiful woman where she is perhaps the most beautiful, about the neck and breasts; the smoothness; the softness; the easy and insensible swell; the variety of the surface, which is never for the smallest space the same; the deceitful maze, through which the unsteady eye slides giddily, without knowing where to fix, or whither it is carried. Is not this a demonstration of that change of surface continual and yet hardly perceptible at any point which forms one of the great constituents of beauty? (105)

Burke, Edmund. A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Part II

The Hyperbole and Purple Prose Contest

Purple prose is an expression that refers to writing that is overly and intrusively dramatic or ornate, and may border on the cliché. Think “it was a dark and stormy night.” *Hyperbole* is an excessive exaggeration for dramatic effect. The two phenomena are related, although not necessarily the same. In literary analysis, however, they can often have the same effect.

We are going to have a hyperbole and purple prose contest.

Rules: Read the following story by Franz Kafka. With your partner, write a piece of literary criticism that includes as much hyperbole and purple prose as you can include. *You can make it funny, outrageous, or downright erotic, but it must be a legitimate piece of literary criticism as we have discussed in class.*

An Imperial Message by Franz Kafka

The Emperor, so a parable runs, has sent a message to you, the humble subject, the insignificant shadow cowering in the remotest distance before the imperial sun; the Emperor from his deathbed has sent a message to you alone. He has commanded the messenger to kneel down by the bed, and has whispered the message to him; so much store did he lay on it that he ordered the messenger to whisper it back into his ear again. Then by a nod of the head he has confirmed that it is right. Yes, before the assembled spectators of his death – all the obstructing walls have been broken down, and on the spacious and lofty mounting open staircases stand in a ring the great princes of the Empire – before all these he has delivered his message. The messenger immediately sets out on his journey; a powerful, and indefatigable man; now pushing with his right arm, now with his left, he cleaves a way for himself through the throng; if he encounters resistance he points to his breast, where the symbol of the sun glitters; the way is made easier for him that it would be for any other man. But the multitudes are so vast; their numbers have no end. If he could reach the open fields how fast he would fly, and soon doubtless you would hear the welcome hammering of his fists on your door. But instead how vainly does he wear out his strength; still he is only making his way through the chambers of the innermost palace; never will he get to the end of them; and if he succeeded in that nothing would be gained; he must next fight his way down the stair; and if he succeeded in that nothing would be gained; the courts would still have to be crossed; and after the courts the second outer palace; and once more stairs and courts; and once more another palace; and so on for thousands of years; and if at least he should burst through the outermost gate – but never, never can that happen – the imperial capital would lie before him, the center of the world, crammed to bursting with its own sediment. Nobody would fight his way through here even with a message from a dead man. But you sit at your window [and dream it to yourself as evening falls].

Adapted from

Kafka, Franz. “An Imperial Message” Trans. Willa and Edwin Muir. Franz Kafka: The Complete Stories. New York: Schocken Books, 1971. 4-5

Voting: Volunteers may now read their interpretations aloud. The class will be the jury. Winners will be awarded Cornell University’s prestigious Franz Kafka Prize for Literary Criticism, to be awarded in 445 Goldwin Smith Hall (first floor) by a representative of university president David Skorton following certification of voting results by the Department of German Studies, the Knight Institute, the Office of the University President, and the Board of Trustees, and the U.S. Department of Education. Winner need only wait for the arrival of the president’s messenger.

Gerst1130: Metropolis, Modernity, and Mass Culture
Fall 2011
Style and Tone

Write your analysis here.

Part III

Guidelines for avoiding hyperbole and purple prose.

Read again the text that you wrote with your partner. What kinds of rhetorical strategies did you employ in writing this piece? What kinds of problems do you see in writing literary analysis in this way?

Consider the following sentence analyzing "An Imperial Message."

Looming high above the messenger, the walls of the palace, in all of their terrible majesty, enclose the mighty messenger in an infinitely convoluted, labyrinthine space; in "An Imperial Message" they are what separate the people from the center of power in the empire.

This sentence addresses the function of the palaces and enclosed spaces in the text, but could nevertheless warrant some improvements. The author speaks in an exaggerated tone. Writers of literary analysis sometimes do this to make clear to the reader the importance of their own analysis, but such writing can both disenchant a reader and undermine the author's own argument. Here are a few suggestions for revising such a sentence.

1. Leave out unnecessarily dramatic descriptions. The above sentence is overly descriptive in several ways. The walls' "terrible majesty," for instance, does not appear in Kafka's story, while "infinitely convoluted, labyrinthine space" is so overloaded with adjectives that it collapses into redundancy, while the phrase "looming high above the messenger" does little to enhance the analysis. We might revise the sentence thus:

The walls of the palace enclose the messenger in a labyrinthine space; in "An Imperial Message" they are what separate the people from the center of power.

2. Qualify your language. It is not *just* the palaces that separate the people from the emperor in the story. In fact, the crowd appears in the story as the main obstacle. However, if you want to focus on the walls and rooms in your analysis, you will not want to get sidetracked by other factors. Perhaps you wish to argue for the *importance* of the palaces. Phrases such as "largely," "to a great/small extent," "in a way," when used properly, will allow you to focus on certain aspects of the text without shutting down alternative points of view. Remember that if you say something is always so, one need only find that it is not so in a single instance to undo your claim. If you say something is often so, you can more easily make your claim. We might revise the sentence thus:

The walls of the palace enclose the messenger in a labyrinthine space; in "An Imperial Message" they are, to a large extent, what separate the people from the center of power.

3. Be careful to speak with the text. Drawing your analysis out of the primary and secondary texts themselves is not only good literary practice, but will help you avoid hyperbole in particular. The sentence as we have edited it so far speaks of walls, but the problem the messenger faces, as mentioned, is the presence of the crowd, along with the many layers of the palace. Secondly it is not clear that the palaces are labyrinthine, but rather make up an infinite series of concentric rings. Finally, "people" is a little vague. A possible revision might read:

The palaces make up a series of concentric rings that enclose the messenger in an infinitely extending space; in "An Imperial Message" they are, to a large extent, what separate the subject from the center of power.

Gerst1130: Metropolis, Modernity, and Mass Culture
Fall 2011
Style and Tone

Part IV: Revision

Select one sentence from your analysis and revise it according to the guidelines listed in Part III.