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Review of *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century*

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Pinker, Steven (2014) *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century.* NY: Viking, pp. 368, $17.00, ISBN 9780143127796

Novice writers and writing instructors in academic and professional settings often pine for guides that will deliver definitive rules which offer certitude. Steven Pinker's *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century* does so – to a large extent. That *The Sense of Style* cannot find rules in reason for everything is perhaps its most important – though unintended – message. For as it demonstrates, style remains haunted by the residues of taste and authority.

With considerable social and symbolic capital at his command, Pinker can draw on many sources that give him the standing to act as arbiter of style. As an Ivy League professor, he has been involved in writing instruction at MIT and Harvard for several decades. He also chairs the Usage Panel of the *American Heritage Dictionary* (AHD); is a recognised scholar in cognitive psychology with a focus on language; has edited considerable amounts of science writing; and is a prolific author whose books have a readership beyond the academy.

For those who view style primarily as a matter of taste, such authority suffices. In an age, however, where blunt authority is challenged and calls for an evidence base are expanding across the disciplines, others require that style guides also disclose the principles that inform their advice. This Pinker does. In a companion piece on *Edge.org* he couches his fundamental commitments carefully though, in the interrogative: 'The question I'm currently asking myself is how our scientific understanding of language can be put into practice to improve the way that we communicate anything, including science? In particular, can you use linguistics, cognitive science, and psycholinguistics to come up with a better style manual' (Pinker 2014). The tentative form of the question is presumably overridden by the 359-page book, which is a *yes* of sorts. It is, however, a commitment to quite a different type of science of language than the descriptive quantitative corpus linguistics that has become increasingly influential in the training of academic writing over the last three decades.

Alas, as writing instructors and novice writers either fear or hope, science has its limits, also when it comes to style. Which is why Pinker calls upon additional principles to reasoning rooted in theoretical and empirical cognitive linguistics. These include 'the backing of data from the AHD Usage Panel'; 'historical analyses from several dictionaries'; and those elusive characters that still haunt the pages of style guides – elegance and grace – and which operate behind the scenes of a suggestion that a specific formulation just 'sounds better' (224). With such an assortment of principles, clashes can be expected. At times a stylistic suggestion is justified with historical precedent from centuries ago, at other times the same fact makes it jaded, stuffy and outdated. When writers waver between the conflicting choices enshrined in style manuals, Pinker leads them out of the panic with 'a pinch of my own judgment' (263) or advice to respond to sticklers and mavens with quips such as, 'tell them that Jane Austen and I think it's fine' (261).

As this jocular reference to prescriptive guides underlines, Pinker can only become a trusted guide though, because he displays two virtues Richard Rorty (1989) associates with late modernity: irreverence towards authority and self-irony. A proponent of floating dangerous ideas, Pinker encourages writers to flout convention, and to flaunt it – albeit tongue in cheek. Endorsing, for example, the change brought about by the now common gender neutral use of the singular *they*, he calls for a similar revolt against the imprecision that results in American English because of the positioning of punctuation marks when citing. But Pinker is no style anarchist: rejecting some rules should not be confused with rejecting rules as such. On the contrary, even though Pinker claims that he seeks to sidestep the false prescriptivist–descriptivist dichotomy, *The Sense of Style* is 'avowedly prescriptive' (192). Rejecting prissy writing is, for him, not a licence for lazy writing. Rather, he strives for the classy classicism which does not come naturally but requires the trained analytic application that good writing instruction offers.

As many writing instructors do, Pinker starts with a first chapter in which he urges writers to keep readers in mind. Likening writing to conversation (without dwelling on the relevant differences), he urges writers to employ mental images that turn the reader's gaze towards the world. 'Good writing,' he contends, 'is understood with the mind's eye' (16).

In chapter two, Pinker grafts the guiding realist metaphor of directing 'the reader's gaze to something in the world' (56) onto Thomas and Turner's notion of classic style. He uses their *Clear and Simple as the Truth: Writing Classic Prose* to distinguish good from bad writing. Sparring with 'relativist academic ideologies such as postmodernism, poststructuralism, and literary Marxism', he reprimands the latter for the epistemology underlying their style, as is evident in what he calls their failure to write discernible facts about the world (35). Good writing is not the trace the author leaves of her thoughts Pinker contends; it is the way in which one mind causes another to observe something in the world. In addition, he chides impenetrable writers for disdaining the classic assumption of 'equality between writer and reader' (36), an assumption that is constitutive of the community of scholars in a democratic public sphere. Evidently, the blows have not come to an end between proponents of the classic style also propagated by *Philosophy and Literature's* former editor Denis Dutton and the defence of complex writing in Jonathan Culler and Kevin Lamb's *Just Being Difficult? Academic Writing in the Public Arena* – a debate on which novice academic writers may be well advised to reflect.

The third chapter addresses the problem of cryptic writing. A major reason behind much incomprehensible writing, Pinker contends, is that writers fail to identify and bridge the gaps between what they and their readers know. One possible solution where abstract ideas are at stake, is to offer concrete examples. This is because concreteness helps primates such as us whose brains have large parts dedicated to the senses, to make the shift from vague to clear understanding. This aids communication. Concreteness can also, Pinker insists, result in better reasoning. And clearly communicated sound reasoning, he states, is the ultimate in good writing.

Chapter four focusses on how to deal with syntax that is convoluted and ambiguous. The 'writer's goal', Pinker explains, 'is to encode a web of ideas into a string of words using a tree of phrases' (138). Writers need to understand and negotiate the dual function of syntax: as an information code with which writers seek to order ideas; and as a sequence of processing events in time in the reader's mind. Thus another main objective for writers should be to ease readers' parsing task. This is the reason for trimming unnecessary wordiness from long clauses and phrases. Hence the familiar advice repeated by Pinker that nominalisations (e.g. *make an appearance* and *put on a performance*) be replaced with shorter verbs (i.e. *appear* and *perform*). It also means guarding against garden paths that interrupt smooth reading (e.g. *The old man the boat*) and syntactic ambiguities that cause misunderstanding (e.g. *I enthusiastically recommend this candidate with no qualifications whatsoever*).

The fifth chapter centres on the precept that our 'hunger for coherence […] drives the entire process of understanding language' (141). Writing, for Pinker, is not primarily about the surface matter of language but about the deep structure of reasoning. And reasoning is

mainly about inference, about drawing accurate arcs that establish valid connections. Since logic has made inroads into writing instruction, much attention has been paid to the role of connectives in establishing coherence. As 'components of *reason*' more than 'components of language', connectives tie together propositions. In this regard Pinker warns that while too few connectives may leave readers puzzled about relations amongst utterances, too many can be patronizing. To assist readers in drawing correct inferences, writers should guide them in the type of connections they make. In addition, writers should protect readers against imposing connections where there are none, as in *Dog for sale. Eats anything and is fond of children*. There are various ways to enhance accuracy in arcs of coherence. One way is that writers make theirs goals evident. This includes clearly identifying both the topic and the point they want to make about the topic – 'somewhere not too far from the beginning' (149). In narrative texts, coherence means clearly identifying the protagonists of a plot and keeping them central. Another way to establish coherence is through consistency in terms. Pinker may be excused for repeating such time-worn advice, as some style guides prescribe the use of synonyms rather than the repetition of a word. But substitution only works, Pinker reminds writers, if later terms easily call to mind earlier ones. Two factors that constrain such recall are readers' retention and the limited semantic overlap between synonyms.

Chapter six – the last and the longest – is closest to a conventional style guide that writers and instructors can consult when they seek resolution about a specific quandary in usage. Here he most openly asserts his prescriptivist authority (rather than draw on evidence from psycholinguistics) on established topics in grammar; quality, quantity, and degree; diction; and punctuation. He explains why he defends innovations such as 'Think Different', contraventions of convention such as when and why it may be good to start sentences with *And* or *But*, and breaches of number such as the mentioned use of the gender neutral singular *they*.

Like other style guides, Pinker too sometimes slips into turning his specific dialect into the measure of all. Notwithstanding his professed North American focus, there are a few occasions when Pinker oversteps the lines he sets for himself. When asserting that outside England the use of *shall* for first person future sounds prissy, he is judging an enormous number of writers and readers across the globe whose socio-linguistic sensitivities he cannot all know. While some American English conventions may be fruitfully transferable to writing in other variants of English as well as other languages, this may not be true of all. In fact, it is worth considering whether more adventurous comparative style guides that overtly engage with several variants of a language may not do more to contribute to the goal of enhancing the clear communication of sound reasoning.

Despite its North American orientation, *The Sense of Style* could reach a broad audience of scholarly and professional writers as well as writing instructors. Its wit notwithstanding, its length and depth may, however, hinder it from becoming as popular as Lynne Truss's 2003 bestseller *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*. Not being a reference manual that answers all manner of questions concerning hyphens and capitals, it is not intended for students and authors who are submitting articles that must adhere to, for example, APA guidelines. Pinker does treat and actually offer explanations for some stipulations by these professional manuals. He also offers useful suggestions that writers need over and above such guidelines. Yet authors who must follow the rules of gatekeeping manuals in order to get published may have to identify and reject the 'rogue' guidelines suggested in *The Sense of Style*, no matter how convincing they may be.

The Sense of Style does not offer easy and quick fixes. Most chapters warrant rereading because no matter how good the writing, complex topics are only absorbed by rethinking. Non-fiction authors – academic and professional – who wish to give their writing a makeover will benefit from a slow read to extract concrete suggestions, some of which are mentioned above. Writing instructors, editors, and linguists will be well served by a slow second read to grasp the interconnections between the underlying psycholinguistic theory and evidence on the one hand, and the concrete suggestions that rest upon them on the other. They may feel that it is right to keep open Pinker's question, namely: To what extent does our 'scientific understanding of language' especially 'linguistics, cognitive science, and psycholinguistics'

actually produce 'a better style manual'? Keeping open this question may stimulate new avenues of empirical inquiry into the relationship between cognition and style, research which could also be fruitfully related to empirical studies associated with corpus linguistics. Keeping open this question may also be a way to avoid the naturalistic fallacy of a short-circuit between what cognitive linguistics tells us is the case and how style guides tell us we ought to write.

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